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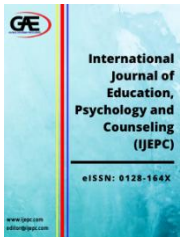

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EVALUATING A TASK-COMPLEXITY SPEAKING INTERVENTION FOR MUET CANDIDATES: INSTRUCTOR PERSPECTIVES AND CLASSROOM REALITIES

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Abstract:

The speaking component of the Malaysian University English Test (MUET) is a communicative challenge to tertiary undergraduates, due to the complicated interaction between linguistic deficits and psychological barriers. The current study examined the pedagogical effectiveness and implementation dynamics of a task-complexity-based speaking intervention module designed to systematically address these oral production challenges. The assessment phase of the instructional intervention involved 149 secondary school students and six experienced MUET instructors who tested the prototype module, Speak Up: Mastering MUET Speaking in 10 Lessons, utilising a Design and Development Research (DDR) approach. Quantitative analysis using paired-samples t-tests revealed the effectiveness of the module in terms of substantial improvements in the performance of solo speaking activities (Mpre = 2.73, Mpost = 3.16) and group discussions (Mpre = 2.88, Mpost = 3.18). Qualitative data on the implementation of the modules were thematically analysed to identify five main themes: (a) perceived effectiveness, (b) pedagogical strengths, (c) classroom problems, (d) suitability for mixed-ability groups, and (e) professional recommendations. Instructors found macro-level response layout structuring with the Sequential Move Analysis Framework (SMAF) to be an effective cognitive heuristic that decreased cognitive load and

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voice hesitation in timed scenarios. However, while individual work performance improved overall, there were difficulties with structural planning support interactive group discussion activities due to the needs of real-time communication. The study points to the necessity for some balance between structural task design, explicit linguistic scaffolding and affective aid in high-stakes language exam preparation.
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Keywords:

Design and Development Research (DDR); MUET Speaking; Sequential Move Analysis Framework (SMAF); Task Complexity

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Introduction

In order to evaluate an educational module's pedagogical performance, it is crucial to look beyond test results and consider the teachers' real-world classroom experiences (Sabitha, 2006). The article details the implementation and qualitative assessment of a 10-lesson speaking intervention program called Speak Up: Mastering MUET Speaking in 10 Lessons (Nasir et al., 2025), which was created to help candidates for the Malaysian University English Test (MUET) overcome their ingrained oral communication difficulties.

In order to create a baseline framework of student needs, 320 MUET applicants from various secondary schools in Kelantan participated in a comprehensive diagnostic survey as part of the preparatory stage. There are significant and widespread obstacles to oral communication, according to the report. It was discovered that candidates had severe speaking anxiety, structural grammatical errors, and limited vocabulary recollection. These major baseline deficits directly drove the design and development of the Speak Up module as a targeted educational intervention to comprehensively address these empirical needs. The module provides an explicitly scaffolded, step-by-step instructional sequence grounded in theoretical frameworks of Task Complexity Hypothesis (Robinson, 2001) and Cognitive Load Theory (Sweller, 1988) to systematically develop oral fluency, interactive competence and exam readiness through 10 structured lessons.

Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) is an important aspect of current language pedagogy. However, secondary school MUET speaking preparation rarely provides a structured cognitive scaffolding to help learners cope with the high working memory load required by timed exercises. Candidates often suffer from cognitive overload, fast failures in vocabulary retrieval and structural disorganisation which increase foreign language anxiety and breakdowns in

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performance in individual presentations and real time group talk. In addition, while move-based scaffolding is embedded in instructional tools such as the 'Speak Up' module to automate macro-level speech layouts based on the Sequential Move Analysis Framework (SMAF), there has been relatively little research on how such interventions of task complexity play out in real, mixed-ability classroom contexts from the view of the teachers implementing them.

To fill this empirical vacuum, the evaluation phase of this instructional intervention focused on a sub-sample of 149 students from six secondary schools who got targeted training through the Sequential Move Analysis Framework (SMAF). The 'Speak Up' module is delivered over a 5-week period and consists of example answers, explicit vocabulary development and timed exam-simulation tasks. In this module, SMAF is a structured cognitive schema that breaks down scheduled oral activities into explicit and predictable communication steps to help learners organise their thoughts logically and cope with situational anxiety (Nasir et al., 2025).

In the evaluation phase of this instructional intervention, a sub-sample of 149 students from six secondary schools got tailored training through the Sequential Move Analysis Framework (SMAF). The Speak Up module is built as a practical guide delivered over 5 weeks, with 10 thorough lessons that offer applicants example responses, clear vocabulary enrichment and timed exam-simulation activities. SMAF serves as a cognitive schema that categorises scheduled oral activities into distinct and predictable communicative actions. It assists learners in systematically organising their thoughts and managing anxiety in these scenarios (Nasir et al., 2025).

The current study was based on the professional observations and direct comments of teachers who implemented the intervention, to understand how this module impacts the classroom dynamics. The study involved semi-structured interviews with six experienced MUET instructors (anonymised as T1 to T6) who dealt with their daily implementation, timing boundaries and mixed-ability of students over the 5-week instructional session (Nasir et al., 2025). Instead of the general test scores, the main goal of this paper is to analyse these interviews of instructors to investigate the intervention in a real classroom context (Sabitha, 2006).

The paper presents authentic voice and pedagogical insights of teachers to demonstrate that the module can be used to enhance students' oral proficiency in practice with 15.65% increase in performance in individual presentations and 10.48% improvement in group interactions (Nasir et al., 2025). Furthermore, the findings indicate that the module improved the teaching practices of the instructors by providing a systematic and time-efficient lesson structure and by automating the macro-level response structures, which reduced the cognitive load of the learners and supported structured speech production (Sweller, 1988).

Research Objectives

The primary objectives of this study are:

1. To study instructors' perceptions of the pedagogical efficacy, structural usability and instructional benefits of 'Speak Up: Mastering MUET Speaking in 10 Lessons' module in real classroom contexts.
2. To explore the challenges teachers faced in the actual implementation of the intervention about the complexity of the work, time limitations and the dynamics of students with mixed abilities.

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3. To investigate how the integration of the Sequential Move Analysis Framework (SMAF) into a DDR framework scaffolds candidates' speech layouts, lessens cognitive processing stress and minimises oral communication fear during timed individual and group activities.

Research Questions

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

1. How do the experienced MUET teachers view the pedagogical effectiveness and the instructional strengths of the "Speak Up" module in the implementation in the classroom?
2. What are the operational challenges experienced by instructors in administering the task-complexity intervention in mixed-ability secondary ESL classrooms?
3. How does the Sequential Move Analysis Framework (SMAF) moderate student cognitive load, speech organization and task performance in timed MUET test conditions?

Literature Review

Nasir et al. (2025) integrated cognitive task design and psychological variables in the theoretical framework of this study to explain oral language creation. Oral communication in high-stakes assessment contexts, is an interactive meaning-making process that entails considerable cognitive processing on the part of language learners (Brown, 2001; Farabi et al., 2017). Understanding how pedagogical frameworks structure these processes is important for boosting instructional efficiency in second language classrooms (Nasir et al., 2025).

Factors Affecting Speaking Performance

When dealing with a second language (L2) oral output, there is a dynamic interaction between linguistic proficiency and non-linguistic or psychological barriers (Chand, 2021; Shintasiwi & Anwar, 2021). Linguistic competence highly depends on structural accuracy. It not only involves the use of a wide range of vocabulary but also knowledge of grammatical rules (Nation, 2001; Richards & Renandya, 2002). Lack of vocabulary size or grammatical competency (Karnine et al., 2022) limits candidates' capacity to form cohesive sentences and find acceptable lexical items within the tight time limits of the examination. Therefore, these inborn language weaknesses are generally considered as the main cause of the foreign language anxiety and failures in operational performance in spontaneous speaking circumstances (Horwitz et al., 1986; MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991).

These language deficiencies are significantly related to psychological characteristics such as speaking fear, shyness, and low learner motivation (Nasir et al., 2025). Foreign language anxiety causes subjective sensations of tension and worries that may prevent spontaneous communication and hinder oral delivery (Pamungkas, 2018; Spielberger, 1983). Likewise, students who are timid are likely to refrain from classroom participation or provide little output to avoid negative evaluation or peer criticism (Chand, 2021; Tian, 2022). In contrast, a high level of intrinsic desire can be a major impetus to reduce hesitancy and encourage active engagement in speaking activities (Martina et al., 2021; Nunan, 1999). This suggests a reciprocal relationship, whereby language deficits increase psychological barriers and

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excessive anxiety causes a cognitive load that further impacts fluent language output (Lee & Park, 2022).

Task Complexity and Cognitive Load

To meet these growing challenges in oral output, Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) uses objective-based, purpose-driven activities as the primary unit in syllabus design and instructional delivery (Prabhu, 1987; Wang, 2020). In this environment, the complexity of the challenge is vital for the production of the communicative products. Robinson's (2001, 2011) Cognition Hypothesis conceives task complexity as the cognitive demands of a task that may either deplete or strategically allocate a learner's limited attentional resources. According to Robinson (2001), the methodical structuring of task circumstances with planning guidance helps learners to utilise their mental resources more efficiently, and consequently, improve their oral fluency and structural accuracy.

However, if the instructional materials are not structurally organised explicitly, increasing the task demands may cognitively overload and lead to performance failure, particularly for extremely worried or lower-proficiency learners (Zaim & Refnaldi, 2020). This operational difficulty is consistent with Cognitive Load Theory (CLT), which proposes that the capacity of human working memory is severely limited when it is required to simultaneously process linguistic, interactive, and task-structure demands (Sweller, 1988, 2011). When there is too much external cognitive load on a speaking activity, learners experience mental friction which leads to failures in discourse coherence and linguistic accuracy (Abd Rahman, 2024; Paas & van Merriënboer, 1994). Thus, it is imperative that clear pedagogical scaffolding are provided to facilitate the cognitive processing requirements in high-stakes oral assessments (Nasir et al., 2025).

The Sequential Move Analysis Framework

The use of a guide at the discourse level is a powerful cognitive heuristic to reduce task disorganisation and speech hesitations (Zaidon et al., 2022). Sequential move analysis is based on genre studies and discourse analysis that deconstruct communication into a sequence of functionally defined "moves" with distinct communicative aims (Chen, 2023; Leki, 1995). The Sequential Move Analysis Framework (SMAF) explicitly directs a predictable rhetorical structure in an ordered fashion to equip candidates with a mental map in the spoken responses (Baba & Nitta, 2014; Brigham et al., 1972).

Such move-based scaffolding lessens the working memory load by automating the macro-level structure of a speech, thus enabling learners to devote more cognitive resources to the micro-level language production tasks of lexical choice and sentence construction (Paas & van Merriënboer, 1994; Sweller, 2011). The effect of syntactic priming also facilitates the repeated repetition of patterned, organised motions. Repeated exposure to specific structural patterns primes the automatic retrieval of words in subsequent communication tasks (Gries & Kootstra, 2017; Vandergriff, 2021). This scaffolded instruction is directly tied to Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory, which indicates that providing explicit structural support reduces ambiguity in performance and allows learners to do complex tasks that they could not accomplish on their own.

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Methodology

The implementation of instructional intervention (Richey & Klein, 2007) was systematically investigated through the application of a Design and Development Research (DDR) project design (Type 1 product and tool assessment). Aligned with this framework, the project focused on empirical validation in the design, development, and evaluation stages to determine the overall effectiveness of the instructional tool (Richey & Klein, 2007). The quantitative phase includes gathering baseline data of candidates through questionnaires and monitoring improvements in performance using standardised test scores (Sabitha, 2006). This was followed immediately by a qualitative phase of semi-structured interviews with instructors to obtain in-depth contextualised explanations of classroom implementation dynamics (Sabitha, 2006). Both data streams together allowed the strengths of one method to compensate for the weaknesses of the other, providing a full assessment of the structural intervention within a rigorous DDR framework (Richey & Klein, 2007).

Research Instrument

Three main research tools were used in data collecting to meet the specific aims of the study. The first instrument was a structured student questionnaire adapted from the current research to explore the perceived linguistic and psychological barriers in oral output (Verapornvanichkul, 2011; Rizki et al., 2020). The first sample stage was the administration of this questionnaire to the 320 MUET candidates. The survey consisted of 32 items on a five-point Likert scale to measure seven different components namely vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation, anxiety, shyness, lack of confidence and lack of motivation (Verapornvanichkul, 2011; Rizki et al., 2020). The instrument was administered with a bilingual English and Bahasa Malaysia format to maximise clarity and had high internal consistency in a previous pilot study (N = 50) with a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of .87 and construct validity confirmed by exploratory factor analysis (Rizki et al., 2020).

The second instrument was a standardised MUET speaking mock exam to measure the change of oral performance before and after the intervention module among the active sub-sample of 149 students. The speaking tasks were constructed to enable students to generate ideas, formulate language and respond within a strict time limit at varying levels of task complexity, adhering strictly to the standardised format, task structure and assessment criteria of the official Malaysian Examinations Council (MEC) Speaking Test. Performance was assessed on vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation, fluency and coherence (Malaysian Examinations Council [MEC], 2021).

The standardised MUET speaking mock test procedure was rigidly divided into two separate assignments timed sequentially as per the official MEC examination syllabus. Part 1 was an individual presentation exercise, in which each candidate was given 2 minutes to look at a given theme problem and prepare an argument, and then give a tight 2-minute individual oral presentation. Part 2 was a group discussion exercise with between two and four candidates. Candidates were provided 3 minutes to collaboratively assess a centralised stimulus with various associated prompts followed by an 8-to-12-minute interactive conversation to negotiate opinions and reach a consensus choice. The operational design, in two halves, allowed for the evaluation of individual language production and collaborative interactive communication skills under high-stakes settings.

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The final instrument was a semi-structured interview protocol with open-ended questions to lead focus-group discussions with the six implementing teachers. This procedure also allowed pedagogical flexibility, and the instructors were free to exercise their professional judgement on student involvement, module efficacy and classroom limits (Sabitha, 2006).

Participants And Sampling

The study employed purposive sampling technique to select participants from six secondary schools in Kelantan. These participants were legally registered for the high-stakes examination (Krejcie & Morgan, 1970). The baseline quantitative survey involved the selection of a sample size of 320 candidates from a total registered population of 1911 candidates to assure statistical representativeness (Krejcie & Morgan, 1970). A sub-sample of 149 students from this group was recruited to directly participate in the instructional intervention phase. In the qualitative phase, six experienced MUET teachers, who teach the training module in their classrooms, were selected. To maintain the anonymity of the participants, these teachers were assigned anonymous numbers ranging from T1 to T6 (Sabitha, 2006).

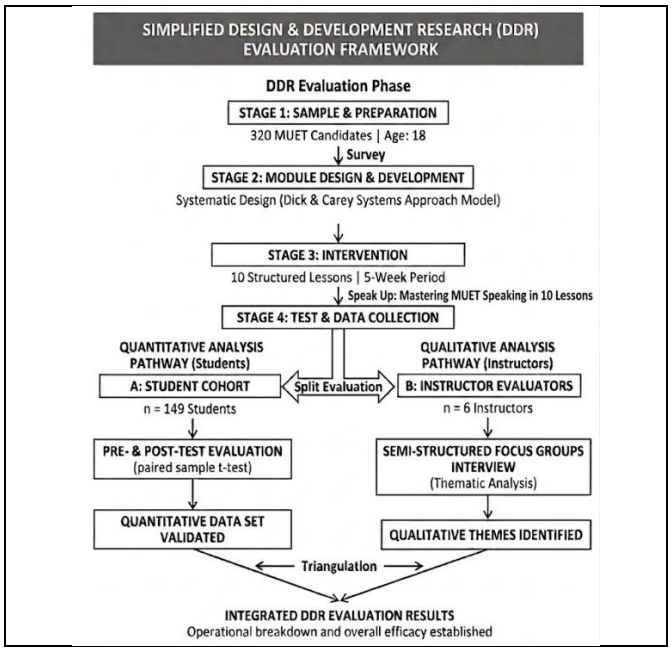

Figure 1: Simplified DDR Evaluation Process Flow

Instructional Intervention

The pedagogical approach was a specially designed 10-lesson speaking curriculum titled Speak Up: Mastering MUET Speaking in 10 Lessons (Nasir et al., 2025). Each standardised session was 60-90 minutes long and included explicit instruction, collaborative rehearsals and timed simulations and was delivered over a 5-week duration. The intervention systematically used the Sequential Move Analysis Framework (SMAF) throughout all 10 lessons to lead children from basic task awareness to independent oral production (Nasir et al., 2025).

SMAF is a progressive scaffolding approach that breaks down oral output into four main moves. Move 1 is Introduction, Move 2 is Main Argument, Move 3 is Supporting Reason,

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Example, and Effect, and Move 4 is Conclusion. The early stages were given over to orientation on formatting, useful formulaic phrases and guided sentence creation, whereas the higher levels demanded that pupils work with the SMAF template on their own under strict exam conditions. Teachers were provided extensive training with a standardised implementation guide to ensure high levels of instructional homogeneity across institutions (Nasir et al., 2025).

Data Analysis Procedure

To evaluate student score improvements across participating schools, we ran paired-samples t-tests in SPSS using inferential statistics (Alias, 1997). For the qualitative component, audio recordings from the instructor interviews were transcribed verbatim to capture every detail. To keep the qualitative analysis robust and methodologically sound, we analyzed these transcripts manually following Braun and Clarke's (2006; see also Ahmed et al., 2025; Lincoln & Guba, 1985) six-phase thematic analysis framework:

Phase 1: Familiarization with the Data

Research assistants transcribed all interview recordings verbatim to guarantee textual accuracy (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Before starting any formal coding, our team of qualitative analysts read through the transcripts repeatedly to fully immerse themselves in the context and nuance of the teachers' responses.

Phase 2: Generating Initial

Four analysts worked together using a hybrid deductive-inductive approach. They combined pre-established codes from existing research with new codes that emerged directly from the data, continuing this iterative coding process until no new insights arose and data saturation was reached (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Phase 3: Searching for Themes

After categorising all transcripts, the analysts grouped comparable codes into higher level cohesive categories. They categorised and synthesised these clusters into prospective primary themes that directly reflected instructors' experiences and perceptions of the module's implementation in their classrooms.

Phase 4: Reviewing Themes

The study team re-verified potential themes with the original transcripts to retain context and data integrity (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Where necessary, themes were divided, combined or improved to make sure that the final patterns really reflected the collective voice of the implementing teachers.

Phase 5: Defining and Naming Themes

Once the core themes were established, they were sorted, tabulated, and classified into five major areas: (a) perceived efficacy, (b) pedagogical strengths, (c) implementation issues, (d) mixed ability suitability, and (e) professional recommendations. Each subject was explicitly defined and designated to describe the scope of the qualitative evaluation.

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Phase 6: Producing the Report

We synthesised the final themes into a coherent narrative, backing up each insight with direct quotes from interviews. We used investigator triangulation and rich, thick descriptive detail throughout the report to establish credibility, transferability, and general trustworthiness (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Findings

To see how the task-complexity speaking module worked in practice, we interviewed the six MUET instructors involved. Through their own experiences and reflections, they identified five core themes describing the educational effect of the program and realities of the classroom. In compliance with ethical study norms, all teacher identities (T1-T6) have been anonymised.

Theme 1: Perceived Effectiveness of the Intervention Module

Overall, instructors felt that the module was a useful tool that helped students arrange their thoughts and feel less lost in timed speaking challenges. The clear scaffolding across the classes enabled the applicants to gain a better understanding of what was required and to structure their responses coherently. As Instructor T1 explained, the activities and structural requirements "helped students understand what to say and how to organise their ideas".

Teachers saw a big gain in student confidence and a decline in concern about public speaking, as well as support with structuring. The instructor, T2, said "many students said they felt more confident after doing the practice tasks". The courage was bolstered by the move-based design. As instructor T3 stated, the framework helped learners "generate ideas faster" and "stay within the 2-minute limit," which immediately "gives them confidence in their presentation."

Theme 2: Pedagogical Strengths of the Module Design

The design of the module worked well for both students and teachers, promoting active involvement and simplifying class preparation. Teachers always reported that active, participatory activities were considerably more productive than passive learning. Instructor T4, in this respect, pointed out that "students learn best when they experience activity like role-play and acting".

The module relieved a lot of pressure for the teachers themselves, giving complete, plug-and-play teaching resources. The model structures and pre-built language aids made it easy to deliver targeted sessions without any additional prep work. Instructor T1 highlighted this benefit, explaining that the examples "gave students a structure on how to begin or respond," while also "saved my time because I didn't have to come up with examples from scratch.""

Theme 3: Challenges in Classroom Implementation

Although positively received, teachers found translating the curriculum into real classrooms to be practically challenging. A main issue was the high level of vocabulary utilised in some of the more difficult exercises which was difficult for the less able students to go through independently. "The advanced vocabulary usage was very high, which made it a bit tough for

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my students," Instructor T5 said, adding that teachers often had to step in and explain words before students could even attempt the assignments.

School times were tight, too, and it was hard to cover everything in depth. Instructor T2 said it was difficult to get through all the activities they had planned as they had an allowance of "around 1 hour and 30 minutes a week". The tight timeframe made it difficult for teachers to provide one-on-one support. Instructor T6 reported how challenging it was to "give full attention to each group during the speaking practice because of time limits in class."

Theme 4: Suitability of the Module for Mixed-Ability Learners

Teachers had differing views on how well the module was modified for classrooms with students of varied competency levels. Some thought that the more difficult assignments were more appropriate for the more capable students who already felt at home with the language. Instructor T3 stated specifically that "this module is more effective for students with a high level of understanding" whereas Instructor T5 remarked that the lower-proficiency learners needed frequent hands-on coaching from the teacher.

However, several teachers said that the module's predictable, structured design actually gave an equal starting position that helped relieve exam anxiety for problematic children. The move-based system provided a clear progression for learners of any ability level. As Instructor T4 explained, this design means that "weaker students feel less lost, and stronger students can add more depth and sophistication". Consequently, Instructor T1 singled out the program as a dependable "baseline for mixed ability students".

Theme 5: Suggestions for Improvement and Professional Recommendation

The focus is about concrete recommendations from teachers to improve the module for future student groups. Instructors suggested providing more supported brainstorming prompts and less complex task variations to better serve lower-proficiency learners. For example, to assist students comprehend ideas more rapidly under time pressure, Instructor T6 advised that "WHY and HOW questions" can be used in addition to clearer visual aids and reduced assignment layouts.

Nevertheless, despite these suggestions for more differentiation, the teachers showed strong positive professional support for the program as a whole. They said the material was a "ready-made, step-by-step guide" that made students "feel more confident and exam ready." All the participating instructors said they would happily suggest the module for MUET, however Instructor T5 said, "Newer teachers might find the module overwhelming at first.

Table 1: Summary of Instructor Perspectives on Module Implementation, Challenges, and Recommendations

THEME	KEY ASPECT HIGHLIGHTED	GROUNDED INTERVIEW EXCERPT
PERCEIVED EFFECTIVENESS OF THE INTERVENTION MODULE	Streamlined idea organization during timed speaking tasks	"The tasks and examples made it easier for students to understand what to say and how to organise their ideas" (T1)

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	Increased confidence and lower speaking anxiety	"…many students felt more confident after doing the practice tasks" (T2) / "After several practices, students were more confident and less afraid to speak." (T2)
	Accelerated idea-generation via move analysis within time limits	"The move analysis framework enabled students to generate ideas faster and remain within the two-minute speaking limit, which gives them confidence in their presentation" (T3)
PEDAGOGICAL STRENGTHS OF THE MODULE DESIGN	Clear, step-by-step task structure	"The step-by-step format made it easier for students to follow the speaking tasks." (T1)
	Time-saving, ready-made teaching resources and model examples.	"The examples gave students a structure on how to begin or respond and saved my time because I didn't have to come up with examples from scratch" (T1)
	Interactive and experiential learning activities.	"..students learn best when they experience activity like role-play and acting" (T4) / "Role-play activities encouraged students to participate more actively." (T4)
CHALLENGES IN CLASSROOM IMPLEMENTATION	Advanced task vocabulary hurdles for lower-proficiency students.	"The high usage of advanced vocabulary made it a bit tough for my students" (T5) / "Some of the vocabulary was difficult for weaker students." (T5)
	Tight timetable schedules restricting lesson completion.	"..having about 1 hour and 30 minutes per week made it difficult to complete all planned activities" (T2) / "The lesson time was sometimes not enough to complete all activities." (T2)
	Limited individualized attention due to time constraints and class size	"challenging to provide full attention to each group during the speaking practice because of time limits in class" (T6)
SUITABILITY OF THE MODULE FOR MIXED-ABILITY LEARNERS	Higher benefit for intermediate and advanced learners	"..this module is more effective for students with a high level of understanding" (T3) / "Students with stronger English benefited more from the module." (T3)
	Need for hands-on guidance for lower-proficiency learners	"weaker students feel less lost, while stronger students can add more depth and sophistication"

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		(T4) / "Weaker students still needed guidance, but they did not feel completely lost." (T4)
	Acts as an adaptable, structural baseline tool	"The module serves as a baseline for mixed ability students." (T1)
RECOMMENDATIONS AND PROFESSIONAL JUDGEMENT	Need for task simplification and structured idea-generation prompts	"Simpler tasks would help weaker students participate better" (T6) / "proposed using WHY and HOW questions to help students generate ideas more efficiently" (T6)
	Strong willingness to recommend based on exam-oriented design	"I would recommend this module because it is structured and exam-oriented" (T2) / "ready-made, step-by-step guide that helps students feel more confident and exam-ready" (T2)
	Initial adjustment curve for novice teachers	"Newer instructors might initially find the module overwhelming." (T5)

Operational Breakdown of the Framework (SMAF)

Teachers used the Sequential Move Analysis Framework (SMAF) process diagram to understand how the intervention achieved these classroom outcomes. The framework serves as a cognitive conceptual blueprint by decomposing scheduled oral tasks into four distinct sequential processes that automate the high-level structure of a speech. Teachers found that when students learned these predictable techniques, they had a clear mental structure that considerably reduced speech reluctance and helped them logically organise their thoughts.

Move 1 (Introduction) is the initiation of the operational flow. Applicants learn how to introduce the material formally and how to deal with examiners, which helps to ease test anxiety.

Then the discourse moves into **Move 2 (core Points)**, the core cyclical engine of the delivery. At this stage students develop their ideas by following a sub-move sequence step by step: stating the basic idea, giving a clear justification for it **(Sub-move 2.1)**, giving an example to support it **(Sub-move 2.2)** and detailing the larger practical consequences **(Sub-move 2.3)**. Instructor T2 said that these structured sub-moves "helped weaker students to follow and try. This guided approach has been extremely helpful to teachers. The subject requires students to repeat this Move 2 process twice to ensure sufficient depth.

Students then synthesise their primary ideas to examine supporting details in **Move 3** which serves as a transitional bridge. This is the last wrap-up to ensure the presentation ends logically and cleanly within the two minutes allowed for the exam. This move is decomposed in two concentrated sub-moves for achieving strong closing. To improve overall discourse coherence, candidates first use **Sub-move 3.1 (Recap main reasons)** to briefly synthesise and recap the important arguments they presented over the Move 2 cycles. Finally, the players give formal sign-off and mark end of their turn with a concluding **Sub-move 3.2 (Closing statement)**.

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The speech then moves to **Move 4 (Conclusion)**, when candidates are required to offer a brief overview of their main ideas **(Sub-move 4.1)** and a strong closing remark **(Sub-move 4.2)** in the two minutes available. To put it simply, the instructor assessment verified that the automation of this hierarchical structure significantly reduced cognitive load, so students could focus on memorising language and forming appropriate sentences under pressure.

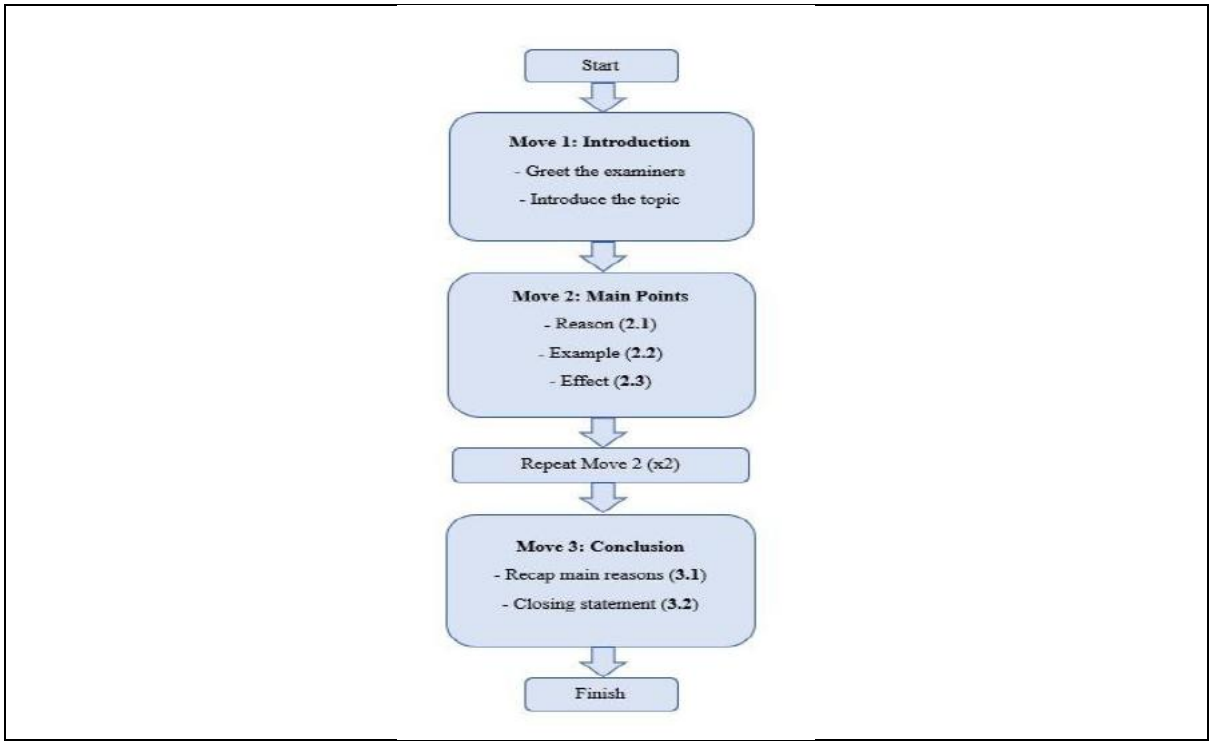

Figure 2: Sequential Move Analysis Framework (SMAF)
(Nasir et. al., 2025)

Discussion

The talk covers how the qualitative observations of the instructors clarify and elaborate the quantitative findings from the student instruments and the mock speaking examinations. The pre-intervention data from student surveys indicated that the most salient impediments to oral performance were structural grammatical mistakes (M= 2.90) and productive vocabulary retrieval deficiencies (M = 2.87) (Nasir et al., 2025). These linguistic barriers aggravated non-linguistic issues directly, notably by causing increased speaking anxiety (M = 2.74) and by diminishing motivation (M = 2.82). The study combines the instructors' experiential input with these baseline parameters to determine the particular cognitive and psychological mechanics via which a module focused on task complexity works within the high-stakes environment of MUET evaluation.

One of the important findings of this study is the huge difference between the statistically significant 15.65% increase in individual presentations (Individual Task Band) and the much smaller 10.48% increase in collaborative speaking activities (Group Task Band). The empirical divergence provides substantial support for the Cognition Hypothesis of Robinson (2001, 2011) which proposes that under task conditions, explicit planning help and structural templates enable learners to manage their finite attentional and cognitive resources more efficiently. The

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Sequential Move Analysis Framework (SMAF) was a successful cognitive heuristic for automation of macro-level speech layout in individual oral actions. The framework guided candidates through a predictable, specified sequence of four major acts, reducing reluctance and cognitive stress during high-stakes, timed individual presentations. This clear scaffolding was observed by instructors to reduce students' initial hesitation to communicate. This provides clear support to Skehan's (1998) claim that reducing structural task complexity may decrease the demands of language processing during real time speech output.

However, the group discussion tasks were interactive and real-time and so put a far higher cognitive load on the candidates. The sheer nature of group work requires that learners deal with a lot of cognitive demands at the same time. Learners have to balance the speed of ideas and accuracy of language production with the need to take turns and respond to peers in real time. The less impressive gains in the Group Task Band component are consistent with Skehan's (1998) trade-off hypothesis, which predicts that learners under intense interactive pressure tend to pay more attention to basic conversational meaning than to grammatical form or strategic accuracy. Instructors' accounts described this operational reality, as they reported that while students were very well equipped to construct individual replies, maintaining meaningful contact remained a challenge owing to mixed-ability classroom dynamics and restrictions of classroom time. Interactional competence involves much exposure and repeated opportunities to negotiate meaning. Given the 5-week intervention duration, the sophisticated collaborative methods were not fully internalised and proceduralized at all proficiency levels.

For oral assessment, there is a close and two-way connection between basic linguistic skill and psychological/affective effects. The survey data revealed that poor grammar control and small vocabulary were among the main causes of communication fear which led to a vicious circle of hesitation and lack of fluency (Nasir et. al, 2025). This pattern is consistent with prior research in second language acquisition (SLA), which posits that a perceived lack of linguistic resources directly increases situational anxiety by heightening a learner's fear of negative evaluation or public failure (Horwitz et al., 1986; MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991). Instructors remarked that candidates with lesser competence levels initially struggled to communicate with the advanced vocabulary used in the tasks. However, the addition of explicit linguistic scaffolding (functional formulaic phrases, sentence starters, and model responses) helped break this negative cycle by giving readily available language resources during active tasks.

The affective shift provided considerable support for Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory in high-stakes language training. The module helped to reduce the cognitive load involved in the interpretation of conceptual task by providing an explicit organisational step via the SMAF to allow students to direct their focused attention to the construction of meaning and words retrieval. Teachers noticed that when task structures were highly predictable and language support was readily available, candidates felt "less lost", which immediately lowered Krashen's (1982) affective filter. Therefore, the reduction in performance uncertainty and task complexity indirectly affected the psychological barriers, turning the reduced anxiety into increased speaking confidence and readiness to take an active part in the oral communication activities.

Conclusion

The present study reveals that the instructional implementation of a task-complexity-based oral intervention can successfully balance the cognitive, structural and psychological demands met by university English as a Second Language (ESL) learners. The qualitative data from the

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interviews with the instructors suggest that the designed module served as a dependable cognitive heuristic. This structured module reduces cognitive load by breaking complicated timed communication activities into predictable and repetitive steps which allow candidates to effectively manage processing resources in high-stakes assessments. This systematic design addresses the concerns of public performance; resulting to lower situational anxiety, increased confidence in speaking and active involvement in the classroom.

The pedagogical realities observed by teachers, however, indicate significant diversity in performance on different kinds of activities. The module led to notable enhancements in individual presentations, as the move-based framework directly supports structural planning, but its impact on collaborative group tasks was less significant, owing to the interactive processing needs of talks involving several parties. Furthermore, teachers' difficulties with the sophisticated vocabulary of the tasks imply that the design of the module needs to be combined with flexible tailored teaching support to avoid linguistic overload for learners with lower language levels. To summarise, these findings imply that effective oral preparation for high-stakes tests like the MUET can best be delivered through a balanced curriculum that incorporates systematic task design, explicit language scaffolding, and practical classroom concerns.

Future research should investigate how this oral intervention module might be further developed to add dynamic, real-time scaffolding customised for collaborative group interaction and multi-party debates based on these results. Further, it is recommended to conduct long-term longitudinal research to examine the transfer of move-based tactics to spontaneous communicative contexts other than the exam in the long term.

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