



Article submission code:  
20250507135029

Received: 07/05/2025  
Revision: 01/08/2025

Accepted: 09/08/2025  
OnlineFirst: 03/10/2025

## Identifying English Speaking Needs Among Secondary School Students

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Speaking skills in English is one of the crucial skills in language learning and have received great emphasis in Malaysian education. This is essential not only for global communication but also for higher education and career advancement. Speaking encompasses several components — pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary, fluency, appropriateness, comprehension — making it particularly challenging for ESL learners to acquire and master. This study investigates the speaking proficiency of Malaysian secondary school students and identifies their learning needs to inform improvements in speaking instruction. This study employs a mixed-methods approach by collecting data through self-assessment questionnaires completed by 90 Form 4 students and semi-structured interviews conducted with five English language teachers in the northern state of Malaysia, Kedah. Quantitative findings revealed that students perceived significant difficulties in appropriateness, grammar, fluency, and vocabulary, which were the lowest ranked components by the students. Qualitative findings from teachers supported these challenges, highlighting persistent issues in the same areas. These complementary perspectives underscore the need to improve speaking instruction that explicitly integrates grammar and vocabulary development as well as pragmatic awareness to better support students' English speaking proficiency.

**Keywords:** English speaking proficiency, ESL (English as a second language), Malaysian secondary school students, needs analysis, self-assessment, speaking skills

### INTRODUCTION

Speaking skills is one of the essential skills in second language learning (Ashfar Ahmad et al., 2021; Nunan, 1991). This is due to the fact that English is the primary means of communication at a global level since it is widely acknowledged as an international language (Rao, 2019). Consequently, the importance of mastering speaking skills in English is vital in order to build communication skills with people at an international level and convey information effectively. This is particularly relevant in today's digitalised and interconnected world where the internet and the popularity of social

**Citation:** Alpikri, Z. A., & Abdullah, A. (2026). Identifying English speaking needs among secondary school students. *International Journal of Instruction*, 19(1), 215-234.  
<https://doi.org/10.29333/iji.2026.19111a>

media provide students with the opportunities to engage in cross-cultural interactions, networking and access a wide global knowledge.

Malaysia views the importance of English proficiency as an opportunity to gain economic and academic advancement where it is reflected in the underlying ethos of the Malaysian Education Blueprint 2013-2025 (Ashfar Ahmad et al., 2021). Developing English speaking proficiency for Malaysian secondary school students is essential because it will enhance students' success in higher education (Nor et al., 2015, Abdul Manaf et al., 2025) and prepares them for future careers where effective communication in English is often required (Ahamed, 2025). Many studies on Malaysian graduate employability have shown that employers prioritise graduates who can speak English fluently, particularly in sectors where English is required for communication (Zainuddin et al., 2019; Nesaratnam et al., 2020). This demand is evident in Kedah, Malaysia as the region is undergoing a rapid economic growth in tourism, manufacturing and science and technology sectors which has created numerous employment opportunities requiring English proficiency (Bernama, 2024). This highlights the importance of equipping students with strong English speaking skills from an early age to prepare them for future academic and professional demands. However, many students face challenges in speaking English fluently and effectively (Abdul Aziz & Kashinathan, 2021).

To address these challenges, it is important for instructors to first identify students' current speaking abilities and learning needs. Understanding these needs can help instructors to design targeted and effective speaking instruction that can address the specific gaps in speaking proficiency. Previous studies have examined speaking challenges among Malaysian secondary school students (Abdul Aziz & Kashinathan, 2021; Idrus et al., 2021; M. Kaur, 2022), but few studies have focused on identifying students' learning needs to improve speaking instruction.

Therefore, this study aims to identify Malaysian secondary school students' learning needs in speaking instruction. This can provide insights for developing and designing instructional strategies that can facilitate the improvement of the students' speaking skills. This study seeks to answer the following research questions:

1. What are Malaysian secondary school students' self-assessed speaking skills?
2. What learning needs do students and teachers identify for improving speaking proficiency?

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Speaking Skills of ESL Students in Malaysia**

In Malaysia, English has become essential for communication, education, and employment prospects (Abdul Aziz & Kashinathan, 2021; Savski, 2021). Hence, the Malaysia Education Blueprint 2013-2025 highlights the goal of producing graduates who are proficient in English and able to work in English-speaking environment (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2013). To with international standards, the Ministry of Education adopted the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) and

introduced a speaking component to the Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia (SPM) examination (Abidin & Hashim, 2021). Recent initiatives, such as the English Language Education Enhancement Plan 2024-2025 (3PBI), which includes Maximising the Highly Immersive Programme (HIPMax), aim to create more opportunities for students to practice speaking English beyond the classroom (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2024).

Despite these efforts, many students still struggle to speak English effectively, particularly outside school settings (Yahaya et al., 2021, Kaur, 2022, Irene et al., 2023). Additionally, most secondary school leavers achieved only A2 to B1 of CEFR level in speaking, which is below the desired proficiency (Raman et al., 2024; Seydalavi, 2024). This lack of proficiency extends beyond the school years, which results in many graduates being unable to find employment due to their poor speaking skills in English (Hisham, 2020; Nesaratnam et al., 2020).

### **Understanding and Address Students' Learning Needs in Speaking**

Speaking is a complex skill as it is an interactive process that involves creating, receiving, and processing information to construct meaning (Bailey & Nunan, 2005). Effective speaking involves multiple components which includes grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, comprehension, and fluency (Harris, 1974). In addition to these linguistic components, appropriateness is another crucial aspect of speaking skills which represents the pragmatic dimension of language within the broader framework of communicative competence (Canale & Swain, 1980). Thus, effective speaking involves not only about linguistic accuracy (grammar, pronunciation, vocabulary) but also the ability to use language appropriately in various social and cultural contexts which adds to the complexity of speaking.

To design effective speaking instruction, it is essential to conduct a needs analysis so that students' current abilities, gaps and preferences can be identified (Grant, 2002; Sadeghi et al., 2014). Brindley (1989) categorises these needs into two main categories which are objective and subjective needs. Objective needs are externally determined based on factual information such as students' language proficiency and communication difficulties that are usually identified through assessments or tests. On the other hand, subjective needs are students-perceived needs such as motivations, preferences and learning styles for language learning, which are usually identified through self-reports, questionnaires or interviews. Hutchinson and Waters (1987) further categorises target needs into three subcategories which are "necessities" (what learners need to know), "wants" (what learners feel they need) and "lacks" (the gap between current and target proficiency).

Effective language learning often requires ongoing consultation and negotiation between teachers and students. This process enables teachers to understand students' expectations, recognise what they perceive as important, and tailor their instructions accordingly (Brindley, 1989). Understanding these dimensions enables instructors to design instructions that address the challenges faced by students. In line with this, needs analysis allows instructors to align speaking instruction with students' real-world communicative goals, academic demands and linguistic gaps, particularly in ESL

context (Menggo et al., 2019). This is especially relevant as instructors need to design speaking tasks that reflect 21<sup>st</sup>-century skills such as communication, collaboration and digital competence. Nazwa Maulani Dewi and Qamariah (2023) further emphasise its role in identifying students' language goals, proficiency levels and contextual factors which enable instructors to tailor their instructions more effectively.

Additionally, a thorough needs analysis not only informs curriculum design but also promotes learner autonomy as it helps them recognise their strengths and areas for improvement (Richards & Rodgers, 2014). Therefore, needs analysis is fundamental to developing effective speaking instruction in ESL classrooms.

### **The Role of Self-Assessment in Identifying Speaking Needs**

Assessing speaking proficiency presents its challenges in language education (Ur, 1999). Traditional assessment methods, such as standardised tests, direct observations, or interviews, often encounter issues related to reliability, subjectivity, and practicality, which results in the failure to fully capture the complexities and nuances of real-world communication (Amoah & Yeboah, 2021; Ur, 1999). Self-assessment supports both summative and formative purposes because it serves as a tool for measuring proficiency and as an intervention to promote learning (Butler, 2024).

Research highlights several benefits of self-assessment in language learning. Self-assessment fosters learner autonomy, enhances self-regulation, and promotes metacognitive awareness (Aldosari et al., 2023; Kumar et al., 2023; Winke et al., 2023). Thus, self-assessment can encourage students to set goals, monitor progress, and identify areas for improvement (Brown & Abeywickrama, 2019; Phan, 2021). All of these are valuable in the development of students' speaking skills.

However, despite these advantages, self-assessment has its limitations. Hosseini and Nimehchisalem (2021) identify concerns regarding reliability, validity, and accuracy of self-assessment. A significant challenge is that students can overestimate or underestimate their abilities when self-assessing their speaking skills (Hosseini & Nimehchisalem, 2021; Mendoza & Avila, 2022). Moreover, Sintayani and Adnyayanti (2022) note that some students may face difficulties with using self-assessment forms as they are unfamiliar with the process and may be confused doing it for the first time. This observation aligns with Hosseini and Nimehchisalem's (2021) finding that lower proficiency students tend to be less accurate in self-assessment. Despite these challenges, self-assessment remains a useful tool for needs analysis and instructional planning as it can provide critical information needed by instructors.

Recent studies demonstrate self-assessment practicality. Kumar et al. (2023) conducted a study on the impact of self-assessment and peer-assessment on Iranian EFL students' speaking-related skills. Seventy-five students were divided into three groups which are self-assessment group (SAG), peer-assessment group (PAG) and control group (CG). In over 13 sessions, the experimental groups used structured rubrics to evaluate either their own or their peers' spoken dialogues while the control group only received teacher feedbacks. The study found that both self-assessment and peer-assessment significantly

improved students' learning skills that support speaking performance, specifically self-regulation, critical thinking and problem solving.

In another study by Moncayo Mendoza and Ramirez Avila (2022), they conducted a brief action research with 34 male Ecuadorian Navy recruits in using self-assessment to self-assess their speaking based on a checklist and rubrics covering content, grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation and interaction. The students practiced conversations in pairs and evaluated their own performance while the teacher used a rubric for comparison. Results showed improvements in speaking skills and self-confidence.

Winke, Zhang and Pierce (2022) examined self-assessment as a tool for measuring speaking proficiency by using a computer-adaptive test based on "can-do" statements aligned with CEFR levels. They found that this form of self-assessment can provide a reasonably accurate estimates of students' speaking skills when compared to traditional interview-based assessments. Additionally, the study highlights several advantages of self-assessment which includes costs efficiency, accessibility, and promotion of learner reflection and metacognitive awareness.

The findings support using self-assessment as an alternative method for evaluating speaking skills with the additional benefits of improving speaking-related skills. Therefore, self-assessment can be a practical instrument in developing English language learning.

## METHOD

### Research Design

This study employed a mixed-methods approach as would provide a comprehensive understanding towards the research problem for this study (Creswell & Creswell, 2022). It combined quantitative data from a self-assessment questionnaire and qualitative data from the interviews with English teachers. This design allows for a comprehensive understanding of students' speaking abilities and learning needs from both student and teacher perspectives.

### Research Participants

This study employs purposive sampling technique where the participants were chosen based on predetermined criteria (Gay & Airasian, 2003). A total of 90 Form 4 students (aged 16) from three secondary schools in Kedah, Malaysia, participated in the study. The participants consisted of 49 males and 41 females. The English proficiency of the students varied from intermediate to advanced levels. Additionally, five English teachers from five schools participated in the qualitative phase of the study. All teachers had the teaching experience in English for more than 6 years.

Kedah was selected as the study site due to its economic growth in tourism, manufacturing, science and technology sectors, which have high demand for English proficiency among the local workforce (Bernama, 2024). In addition, Kedah ranked second nationwide in English proficiency according to the EF English Proficiency Index 2024, which highlights the state's progress and commitment to improving English

language education. Therefore, it is relevant to investigate English speaking needs among secondary school students in this context.

### **Instruments**

#### *Students' Self-assessment of Speaking Skills Questionnaire*

The self-assessment of speaking ability questionnaire was adapted from Dunifa (2023) to suit the study's contexts. The questionnaire measures six components of speaking skills which are pronunciation, grammar, and vocabulary, fluency, appropriateness, and comprehension. The questionnaire used five-point Likert scale to record the responses with the options of Strongly Disagree (SD), Disagree (D), Neutral (N), Agree (A), and Strongly Agree (SA).

A pilot test was conducted to determine the reliability of the questionnaire. The participants of the pilot study were 30 Form 4 students (16 years old) from a secondary school in Kedah. The participants shared similar characteristics with the main study's sample. Cronbach's alpha was calculated to evaluate the internal consistency of the questionnaire. The result of the Cronbach's alpha value is 0.889 which indicates high internal consistency among the 18 items measuring speaking skills.

Additionally, Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) was also conducted to assess the validity of the questionnaire. Bartlett's Test of Sphericity was significant ( $p<0.001$ ) which confirms the suitability of the data for factor analysis. The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) measure is 0.748 which indicates acceptable sampling adequacy. Overall, the questionnaire is reliable and valid for assessing speaking skills.

#### *Teacher Semi-structured Interviews*

Semi-structured interviews were conducted to gather in-depth insights into students' speaking needs and observed challenges. The interview protocol included open-ended questions that are aligned with the six speaking components assessed in student questionnaire. This allows for comparison and triangulation of findings.

### **Data Collection Procedure**

The self-assessment questionnaire was administered to the 90 selected students during their regular English class periods. The distribution was facilitated by their English teachers. The participation was voluntary and informed consent was obtained from all students.

The semi-structured interviews were conducted face-to-face in individual sessions. Each session took approximately 15 to 20 minutes. The interviews were audio-recorded with permission and subsequently transcribed for analysis.

### **Data Analysis**

The findings from the student self-assessment questionnaire were analysed using SPSS version 27. Descriptive statistics (means, standard deviation, and frequency distributions) were calculated to summarise the results. The data from the qualitative

phase were analysed thematically following Braun and Clark's (2006) proposed method. The codes and themes from the data were identified, analysed and reported.

## FINDINGS

### Quantitative Results: Students' Self-Assessment of Speaking Skills

The first research objective of this study is to investigate Malaysian secondary school students' self-assessed speaking skills. Data were collected through a self-assessment questionnaire that evaluated students' perceptions of their speaking skills across six speaking components which are pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary, fluency, appropriateness, and comprehension. The results were analysed for each component based on their mean scores, standard deviations, and levels of agreement of the 5-point Likert scale as shown in Table 1.

Students generally feel confident about their pronunciation, with an overall mean score of 3.37 ( $SD = 0.601$ ). A majority of students (70%) agreed or strongly agreed that their pronunciation was generally correct ( $M = 3.76$ ,  $SD = 0.825$ ), which suggest that they are confident in their clarity of pronunciation. However, fewer students (45.5%) believed that their pronunciation errors are minimal ( $M = 3.24$ ,  $SD = 0.812$ ). Only 31.1% students agreed or strongly agreed that their pronunciation is natural and fluent ( $M = 3.11$ ,  $SD = 0.854$ ). These findings indicate that the students perceive their pronunciation accuracy to be satisfactory, but there is room for improvement in fluency and naturalness in pronunciation.

In contrast, students are less confident regarding their grammar, with one of the lowest overall mean of 2.80 ( $SD = 0.704$ ). Only 21.1% of students agreed or strongly agreed that they use correct grammar in their sentences ( $M = 2.94$ ,  $SD = 0.784$ ) and just 12.2% of students agreed or strongly agreed that they rarely made grammatical errors that disrupt communication ( $M = 2.67$ ,  $SD = 0.887$ ). Similarly, only 20% of students agreed or strongly agreed that they use correct grammar when speaking and make few mistakes ( $M = 2.78$ ,  $SD = 0.909$ ). These results suggest that the students are aware of their difficulties in using correct grammar when speaking.

Students were moderately confident about their vocabulary, with an overall mean score of 2.93 ( $SD = 0.787$ ). 33.3% of students expressed agreement in their ability to discuss a wide range of topics using appropriate vocabulary ( $M = 3.02$ ,  $SD = 0.936$ ). Meanwhile, fewer students (26.7%) reported lower confidence in having sufficient vocabulary for basic social and professional conversations ( $M = 2.90$ ,  $SD = 0.995$ ). Only 25.5% of students agreed or strongly agreed that they are able to use vocabulary accurately and effectively ( $M = 2.88$ ,  $SD = 0.885$ ). These findings suggest that the students feel fairly capable in vocabulary use, but lack competence in using it accurately and effectively in speech.

The component of fluency received a slightly lower overall mean scores of 2.86 ( $SD = 0.726$ ). While 43.3% of students agreed or strongly agreed they could speak clearly and confidently ( $M = 3.26$ ,  $SD = 1.023$ ), only 13.3% of the students agreed or strongly agreed that they speak with pauses and hesitations ( $M = 2.36$ ,  $SD = 0.964$ ). Meanwhile, 28.9% of students felt that they were able to speak and express thoughts fluently in

various situations ( $M = 2.98$ ,  $SD = 0.887$ ). These results show that fluency can be an area for improvement, particularly in reducing pauses and hesitation during speaking.

Students have lower confidence with their appropriateness in speaking, with an overall mean score of 2.78 ( $SD = 0.527$ ). Only 14.4% of students acknowledged that they use inappropriate language at times that causes misunderstandings ( $M = 2.52$ ,  $SD = 0.915$ ). Similarly, 18.9% of students agreed or strongly agreed that their language choice is inappropriate for the context, affecting how well they communicate ( $M = 2.61$ ,  $SD = 1.002$ ). However, only 31.1% of students agreed or strongly agreed they were able to use language that suits different situational contexts ( $M = 3.27$ ,  $SD = 0.859$ ). These results indicate that students were not able to use appropriate language when speaking in different contexts and need improvements in this area. Additionally, the contrasting results might suggest that the students are unaware of the lack of pragmatic in their speech or that they lack the experience in using language in various settings.

Students perceived comprehension as the strongest component, with an overall mean score of 3.56 ( $SD = 0.736$ ). A majority of the students (60%) agreed or strongly agreed that they can understand basic conversations easily ( $M = 3.69$ ,  $SD = 1.035$ ), and 67.8% students agreed that they could understand most conversations even if they occasionally need clarification through repetition and rephrasing ( $M = 3.79$ ,  $SD = 0.828$ ). However, only 33.3% of students felt confident in understanding both formal and informal conversations ( $M = 3.20$ ,  $SD = 0.914$ ). These findings indicate that although general comprehension in conversations is strong, some students may still need support with more complex or formal conversations.

The second research objective of the study was to determine the learning needs of the Malaysian secondary school students in order to improve their speaking skills based on the self-assessment data. As shown in Table 1, the overall mean scores are as follows: comprehension (3.56), pronunciation (3.37), vocabulary (2.93), fluency (2.86), grammar (2.80), and appropriateness (2.78). These results suggest that the weakest area in speaking skills is appropriateness, followed closely by grammar and fluency. Meanwhile, comprehension represent the strongest area in speaking skills. This is followed by pronunciation and vocabulary as the next strongest areas. The findings indicate that while students are generally able to understand spoken English, they face challenges in using appropriate language, applying correct grammar, and maintaining fluency during communication. These identified areas of weakness in speaking skills should be prioritised when developing instructional interventions to improve students' speaking proficiency.

**Table 1**  
**Summary of the results of students' self-assessment of speaking skills**

Items	Mean	Std. Deviation	% SD	% D	% N	% A	% SA
<b>Pronunciation</b>							
1. My pronunciation is generally correct, though my accent may sometimes be noticeable.	3.76	.825	1.1	6.7	22.2	55.6	14.4
2. My pronunciation errors are minimal and do not hinder communication.	3.24	.812	0.0	22.2	32.2	44.4	1.1
3. I believe my pronunciation is natural and fluent, even though it may not be mistaken for that of a native speaker.	3.11	.854	2.2	20.0	46.7	26.7	4.4
Overall	3.37	.601					
<b>Grammar</b>							
4. I use correct grammar in most of my sentences.	2.94	.784	2.2	24.4	52.2	18.9	2.2
5. I rarely make grammatical errors that interfere with communication.	2.67	.887	6.7	36.7	44.4	7.8	4.4
6. I consistently use correct grammar in my speaking, making very few, if any, mistakes.	2.78	.909	7.8	28.9	43.3	17.8	2.2
Overall	2.80	.704					
<b>Vocabulary</b>							
7. I have a sufficient vocabulary to participate in basic social and professional conversations.	2.90	.995	6.7	28.9	37.8	21.1	5.6
8. I can discuss a wide range of topics using appropriate vocabulary.	3.02	.936	2.2	31.1	33.3	28.9	4.4
9. I am confident in my ability to use a wide range of vocabulary accurately and effectively.	2.88	.885	3.3	33.3	37.8	23.3	2.2
Overall	2.93	.787					
<b>Fluency</b>							
10. I can speak clearly and confidently in most conversations.	3.26	1.023	4.4	18.9	33.3	33.3	10.0
11. I speak with pauses and hesitation.	2.36	.964	18.9	41.1	26.7	12.2	1.1
12. I speak fluently and can express my thoughts with ease in various situations.	2.98	.887	4.4	24.4	42.2	26.7	2.2
Overall	2.86	.726					
<b>Appropriateness</b>							
13. I sometimes use words or phrases that are not suitable for the	2.52	.915	12.2	38.9	34.4	13.3	1.1

situation, which may cause misunderstandings.							
14. Sometimes my language choice is inappropriate for the context, affecting how well I can communicate.	2.61	1.002	12.2	36.7	32.2	15.6	3.3
15. I can generally use language that suit various social situations and complex issues.	3.27	.859	4.4	8.9	55.6	22.2	8.9
Overall	2.78	.527					
Comprehension							
16. I can understand basic conversations without much difficulty.	3.69	1.035	2.2	11.1	26.7	35.6	24.4
17. I can understand most conversations, though I might need repetition or rephrasing at times.	3.79	.828	1.1	4.4	26.7	50.0	17.8
18. I can easily follow both formal and informal conversations.	3.20	.914	2.2	17.8	46.7	24.4	8.9
Overall	3.56	.736					

### Qualitative Results: Teachers' Perspectives on Students' Speaking Proficiency

The analysis of the interview with five English Language teachers revealed their perspectives on the students' speaking proficiency, highlighting both strengths and weakness across several key dimensions of speaking skills.

#### *Strengths in Pronunciation*

The teachers identified notable strengths in pronunciation, particularly among students who have greater exposure to English outside the classroom. Teachers A, C, D and E observed that students who watch English-language media, such as English movies or YouTube videos, or spoke English at home, tend to express themselves better in the classroom. As Teacher D remarked, "Students are good at imitating the pronunciation and the fluency of certain countries." However, the teachers also noted that while strong pronunciation and accent imitation can create an impression of fluency, this does not always demonstrate the students' ability to explain ideas effectively.

#### *Vocabulary Limitations*

Vocabulary emerged as a significant challenge for many students. Teacher B and C highlighted that students usually have a limited vocabulary range, which greatly affected their ability to express ideas fluently and accurately. As a result, students often struggled to form complete sentences and always rely on fragmented phrases or one-word response. Teacher A noted that students frequently could not construct full sentences when speaking. Supporting this observation, Teacher B explained that while students could understand questions posed to them, they often could not come up with the answer and give one-word responses. She further stated, "...they don't have enough words to describe" as the reason. Teacher D emphasised that limited vocabulary hindered students' ability to convey messages clearly and elaborated on their points as

they have difficulties finding suitable vocabularies. Teacher C observed, "They only use the word that they know. They will not try to use the high-level vocabulary for speaking," adding that this limitation impacted the students' speaking fluency.

#### *Grammatical Challenges*

Grammatical accuracy was identified as another major area of concern. The teachers reported that many students were lacking in grammatical accuracy which disrupted their sentence structure, preventing the students from forming complete and coherent sentences. Teachers A, B, and C noted that students often struggled with constructing full sentences and tended to produce short or fragmented utterances. Teacher C stated, "Students are having difficulties or challenges in constructing correct sentences." As a result, many students resorted to produce minimal or one-word responses instead of elaborating on their ideas. Teacher E added that poor grammar and vocabulary negatively affect the overall speaking fluency.

#### *Issues with Appropriateness*

Another key issue identified by the teachers was the lack of appropriateness in students' speech. Teachers D and E reported that students often have difficulties to use language appropriately as they failed to adjust their tone or language to suit different communicative contexts. Teacher E provided an example where students often used overly casual language in formal settings, such as saying "Teacher, toilet," instead of more appropriate phrases. Similarly, Teacher D stated that many students used informal language when speaking in the exam-setting. Furthermore, Teacher B observed that students struggled with turn-taking and maintaining logical flow in conversations. She noted that students often relied on repetitive phrases such as "What do you think?" rather than engaging in meaningful exchanges to sustain conversations.

### **DISCUSSION**

The findings of this study highlight the challenges faced by Malaysian secondary school students face in developing effective English speaking skills which reveals both strengths and critical areas for improvement. The data from both quantitative and qualitative indicate that while students demonstrated relative strengths in comprehension and pronunciation, they struggled significantly with appropriateness, grammar, fluency and vocabulary. The combination of linguistic and pragmatic knowledge, which encompasses multiple components of speaking, may be the reason why speaking skills are difficult to master (Abdul Aziz & Kashinathan, 2021; Goh & Burns, 2012).

Students expressed the highest confidence in comprehension ( $M=3.56$ ) and pronunciation ( $M=3.37$ ), which suggest these are their strongest components. Teacher interviews corroborated these perceptions, where they noted that students generally could understand instructions and questions posed to them. This receptive skill is crucial as the students' ability to comprehend spoken input enables them to formulate suitable replies (Leong & Ahmadi, 2017). Furthermore, comprehension allows students to construct responses that are not only contextually relevant but also socioculturally appropriate (Goh & Burns, 2012). However, teachers observed that limitations in other

speaking components, particularly vocabulary, often hindered the students from responding appropriately. This indicates that comprehension alone is insufficient for effective communication.

Similarly, pronunciation was identified as a strength. This is supported by the teacher observations that students who engaged with English media had good pronunciation. This exposure may facilitate students' ability to reproduce familiar sounds and intonation patterns. Thornbury (2005) argues that pronunciation is the "lowest level of language knowledge," which may explain why it is easy for students to grasp. Nevertheless, students still need to pay attention to their pronunciation as it will help them to speak English more smoothly and effectively (Leong & Ahmadi, 2017).

In contrast, appropriateness emerged as the lowest-rated component ( $M=2.78$ ), highlighting students' difficulties in adapting language to various contexts. This finding was supported by teachers' observations about students' inability to adjust their language register and tone appropriately in different social situations. Teachers noted instances of overly casual language that students used in formal settings which indicates a lack of pragmatic awareness. This finding is critical as it suggests that pragmatic competence is often underemphasised in ESL classroom but is essential for successful communication. Burns and Joyce (1997) states that students need to understand when, why, and how to use language appropriately. This is because without exposure to sociolinguistic norms of the language, it may lead to students using inappropriate language across different communicative settings (Kasper & Rose, 2002). This thus undermines their overall communicative competence (Canale & Swain, 1980).

Grammar was the second-lowest rated component ( $M=2.80$ ), with only 21.1% of students confident in their grammatical accuracy. This aligns with the teachers' observations where they revealed that students frequently struggled to construct complete and coherent sentences. This limitation often resulting in fragmented utterances rather than fully developed expressions. Grammatical accuracy is fundamental to effective communication, as it supports the formation of questions, monitoring of speech, and interpretation of others' utterances (Florez, 1999; Goh & Burns, 2012). Therefore, grammatical weakness may represent a significant barrier to speaking proficiency.

Vocabulary emerged as another critical limitation among the students ( $M=2.93$ ). Teachers observed that students struggled to form complete sentences and often resort to short and one-word responses when speaking. The lack of lexical resources negatively impacted the way students articulate ideas and sustain conversations (N. Kaur et al., 2017). This finding is consistent with Mat Hussin et al (2016), who noted that a lack of vocabulary can be detrimental to language skills such as speaking. McCarthy (1990) emphasises that vocabulary is essential for expressing meaning and is key to effective communication. Similarly, Goh and Burns (2012) state that a wide vocabulary knowledge can help students to express their message more precisely. Thus, developing the vocabulary knowledge is important for supporting fluency (Nation, 2012).

Fluency was also identified as a challenge in both quantitative findings ( $M=2.86$ ) and teacher observations. Only 13.3% of students reported speaking without significant pauses and hesitations. The findings suggest that fluency issue largely stem from deficiencies in the other components rather than being an isolated problem. As Bygate (1998) notes, speaking is a complex mental activity as it requires simultaneous attention to multiple linguistic and pragmatic elements. Therefore, students will frequently hesitate and pause as they struggle to search for vocabulary and expressions, use correct grammar and consider the contextual appropriateness.

To further support these findings, a comparative analysis with previous studies had been conducted. The present study differs from Eslit and Valderama (2023), who examined ESL high school students in Philippines using one-minute videos assessed with Cambridge University standardised rubrics. Their participants performed strongly in grammar, vocabulary, discourse management and pronunciation. However, similar to the current findings, fluency, confidence and interaction were found to be persistent challenges for the students.

In another study, Maureen Ekpelezie (2024) conducted a needs analysis on speaking skills among Nigerian secondary school students and found low proficiency in areas such as vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation, fluency and appropriateness. Similarly, the findings align with the present study as Malaysian students had difficulties in these areas, with the exception of pronunciation.

Dunifa (2023) investigated speaking proficiency of university-level EFL students in Indonesia. The findings revealed that students generally demonstrated low speaking proficiency, with fluency, pronunciation, and grammar identified as the weakest areas, while vocabulary and comprehension were their strengths. In comparison, the present study on Malaysian secondary school ESL students also found challenges in grammar, fluency and vocabulary. However, unlike Dunifa's participants, the students in this study displayed better pronunciation. Although the two studies differ in participant level (secondary vs. university) and language context (ESL vs. EFL), both highlight persistent difficulties in developing comprehensive speaking skills, especially in fluency and grammar.

The findings have important implications for speaking instruction in Malaysian ESL classrooms. They highlight the need for integrated pedagogical approaches that address grammar, vocabulary, and pragmatic awareness within meaningful communicative contexts. Explicit instruction in these components, combined with meaningful communicative tasks such as conversational analysis, real-life simulations, and role-playing, can foster both linguistic accuracy and pragmatic competence (Ishihara & Cohen, 2021; Kasper & Rose, 2002). These activities not only promote pragmatic awareness but also enhance grammar, vocabulary and fluency (Mohd Razali & Ismail, 2017) as they encourage the use of lexical chunks and prefabricated expressions (Lewis, 1997).

## **LIMITATIONS**

This study has several limitations that should be considered when interpreting the findings. First, the sample size and geographical scope were limited. The quantitative data from student self-assessment were limited to 90 respondents from three secondary schools in the northern state of Malaysia. Furthermore, the qualitative data was gathered from a relatively small number of teachers (n=5). The restricted and small numbers of participants may not fully represent the wider student and teacher populations in Malaysia.

Second, the self-assessment report can sometimes introduce potential measurement bias. Although it can provide valuable insights into students' perception of their own speaking skills, students may provide overestimated or underestimated perception of their speaking skills based on various factors such as confidence levels or limited understanding of assessment criteria. Self-assessment approach may also not fully capture students' actual speaking abilities as perceptions can be different from objective performance.

Finally, this study focused on identifying the weaknesses and learning needs within speaking components. It did not explore the underlying causes of these challenges or test interventions to address them. Future research should address these gaps by investigating the cause of the weaknesses and testing pedagogical strategies to overcome them.

## **CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION**

This study employed a mixed-methods design to investigate Malaysian secondary school students' English speaking skills and learning needs by integrating self-assessed data from students and insights from teachers. The findings reveal that while some students show relative strengths in comprehension and pronunciation, particularly those who have greater exposure to English, significant challenges remain in appropriateness, grammar, vocabulary and fluency. Notably, the limitations in grammar and vocabulary were found to negatively impact students' overall fluency and communicative competence. The results suggest that Malaysian ESL learners require not only foundational linguistic skills but also explicit exposure in pragmatic awareness to navigate diverse communicative contexts effectively.

To address these needs, several recommendations for enhancing speaking instruction are proposed. First, instructors should integrate more explicit grammar instruction into speaking activities, where they should focus specifically on common sentence structures and functional patterns. This would enable students to form coherent utterances. Second, instructors should expand vocabulary instruction within communicative tasks to expose students to lexical items in contexts. This can be done through lexical chunking, collocational awareness, or exposure to varied input that can help students broaden their lexical range. Third, incorporating pragmatic awareness into speaking instruction could help students to understand how to use language based on various social contexts (Ishihara & Cohen, 2021). This may involve analysing authentic conversations or engaging in drama-based activities (Nguyen, 2023), which allow

students to understand and practice appropriate language use in diverse social contexts. As drama-based activities involve interactive tasks such as role-play, simulation, improvisation and script work, they provide opportunities for students to use the target language meaningfully in various contexts which in turns improve their speaking performance (Nguyen, 2023).

Additionally, integrating technology-enhanced tools in speaking instructions can offer engaging alternatives to traditional classroom settings. For example, the use of FlipGrid app (Robillos, 2023), virtual reality (VR) (Halenko, 2021; Muhammad, 2023) and artificial intelligence (AI) (Adipat, 2023; Abdul Manaf et al., 2025) has been shown to enhance students' learning engagement and speaking skills, as well as provide engaging opportunities for speaking practices. Overall, instructors should select instructional strategies that would best align with their students' specific learning needs and classroom contexts.

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