Psychological Factors and Pedagogical Conditions Influencing Oral English Performance among Primary Esl Learners: A Mixed-Methods Study Based on the Affective Filter Hypothesis

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ABSTRACT:
Oral English performance remains a persistent challenge for primary school learners of English as a Second Language (ESL) in Malaysia, despite sustained curricular exposure from an early age. Grounded in Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis, this study examined four psychological factors — fear of making mistakes, shyness, anxiety, and lack of confidence — and their relationship with the oral performance of primary ESL learners. A sequential explanatory mixed-methods design was employed. In the quantitative phase, a five-point Likert-scale questionnaire (Cronbach's alpha = .93) was administered to 255 primary school respondents (112 boys, 143 girls); oral performance was operationalised through teachers' Pentaksiran Bilik Darjah (PBD) speaking proficiency levels (TP1–TP6). In the qualitative phase, semi-structured interviews with ten respondents and classroom observations were analysed thematically using ATLAS.ti. Descriptive statistics indicated that all four psychological factors were experienced at moderate-to-high levels. An independent-samples t-test found no statistically significant gender differences across the four factors ($p > .05$), and Spearman's rank-order correlation found no statistically significant relationship between any of the four factors and PBD-assessed oral performance ($p > .05$). However, the qualitative findings showed that these affective barriers shaped hesitation, avoidance, and willingness to communicate in ways not captured by formal performance scores, and that respondents preferred collaborative, low-pressure, and gamified speaking activities to lower their affective filter. The study concludes that psychological factors remain educationally significant even where a direct statistical link to formal assessment scores is absent, and recommends that oral English pedagogy and assessment in Malaysian primary schools give explicit attention to learners' emotional readiness alongside their linguistic competence.

Keywords: affective filter hypothesis; oral English performance; primary ESL learners; psychological factors; speaking anxiety

1. Introduction

English occupies a formally mandated but linguistically demanding position within the Malaysian education system, taught as a compulsory second language from preschool through tertiary level. On average, a Malaysian learner receives approximately 14 to 15 years of cumulative English instruction from preschool to the undergraduate level, and is expected to attain at least a Band 4 (B2, CEFR) proficiency by the end of secondary schooling (Zaki & Darmi, 2021). Despite this sustained exposure, oral proficiency, and speaking in particular, continues to lag behind other language skills. Prior national-level evidence indicates that only about half of students completing six years of primary education achieve functional literacy in English (EPU, 2016), and employer surveys have repeatedly cited weak English proficiency as one of the leading reasons for not hiring fresh graduates (JobStreet.com). Because English is not a compulsory pass subject in Malaysian schools, some learners may additionally come to view it as a lower priority within their broader schooling, even though the language remains central to employability, higher education, and global communication (Zaki & Darmi, 2021).

The problem is not confined to national statistics; it is visible at the classroom level. A school-based classroom assessment analysis conducted during the 2023/2024 academic session found that 59 pupils, representing 46.83% of the Year 4 student population examined, were classified at Levels 2, 3, and 4 for oral performance under the Pentaksiran Bilik Darjah (PBD) framework — a pattern indicating that a substantial proportion of pupils were not performing confidently in oral English tasks. In classroom practice, this difficulty is reflected not only in formal PBD ratings, but in hesitation, silence, fear of correction, reduced participation, and avoidance of public speaking. A critical gap therefore exists between formal performance indicators and pupils' actual speaking experiences: oral performance scores may show the level a learner has achieved, yet such scores do not, on their own, explain why some pupils hesitate to speak, fear making mistakes, avoid being evaluated, or remain passive during oral tasks. For primary school pupils, speaking is a particularly demanding skill precisely because it requires generating ideas in real time, responding to others, and communicating in ways that are both comprehensible and socially appropriate; this process depends not only on linguistic competence but on pupils' confidence, emotional security, and the classroom conditions under which they feel safe enough to participate (Nation & Newton, 2009; Ur, 1996).

While the causes of weak oral performance are frequently framed in linguistic terms, such as limited vocabulary, insufficient practice, or inadequate exposure, a growing body of research points to psychological and affective barriers as an equally decisive factor. Learners who possess adequate linguistic knowledge may nonetheless remain silent, hesitant, or visibly distressed when called upon to speak, a pattern consistent with Krashen's (1982, 1985) Affective Filter Hypothesis. The hypothesis proposes that the affective filter operates as an unseen mechanism regulating how much comprehensible language input a learner is able to absorb and convert into usable output: when the filter is elevated by anxiety, low self-confidence, or reduced motivation, input is prevented from reaching the learner's language acquisition system, regardless of the quality of instruction or the learner's underlying competence (Krashen, 1982; Pawlak, 2022). Because speaking is a highly interactive, spontaneous skill that draws directly on self-assurance and emotional stability, it is considered especially vulnerable to a raised affective filter; learners with high anxiety may experience a mental block during oral tasks that prevents them from retrieving vocabulary or grammar they have already acquired (Teimouri et al., 2019), whereas learners with stronger self-belief are more likely to participate actively and persist through difficulty (Namaziandost et al., 2024).

Four psychological factors are of particular concern within this framework. Fear of making mistakes reflects evaluation apprehension — a concern with how errors will be judged — that leads learners to withdraw from speaking rather

than risk visible correction, a pattern documented among both average and academically capable learners alike (Alrabai, 2022; Duplenne et al., 2024). Shyness is characterised by restlessness, discomfort, or social awkwardness in unfamiliar or public interaction, and is widely reported as a source of reluctance among ESL learners to speak in front of peers and teachers for fear of being mimicked or ridiculed (Attia & Algazo, 2025; Aziz & Kashinathan, 2021). Anxiety encompasses the apprehension learners feel toward tests, public speaking, and peer comparison, shaped jointly by their confidence and their appraisal of the risks a speaking situation poses; it remains a consistently documented obstacle to speaking-skill development, particularly under accuracy-focused teaching approaches (Alrabai, 2022; Attia & Algazo, 2025). Lack of confidence becomes apparent when learners doubt their ability to be understood and choose passivity over the risk of miscommunication, a pattern often compounded by insufficient guidance and encouragement from teachers, and more recent classroom-based evidence confirms that targeted instructional support, such as differentiated instruction, can measurably rebuild this confidence (He & Chen, 2010; Brown, 2001; Dewaele & Li, 2022). These four factors rarely operate in isolation from the broader classroom environment: inhibition and uneven opportunities to speak within large classes have long been identified as compounding conditions that further suppress oral participation, a pattern corroborated by more recent classroom-based accounts of class size and teacher-student power distance as persistent barriers to speaking participation (Littlewood, 2007; Rivers, 1968).

Most existing research on foreign-language speaking anxiety has concentrated on secondary and tertiary learners, leaving primary-level learners comparatively under-examined (Teimouri et al., 2019), even though early speaking experiences are widely understood to shape learners' longer-term confidence, participation, and willingness to communicate (Fernández-García & Fonseca-Mora, 2022). Recent evidence confirms that supportive teacher feedback and emotionally safe learning environments remain central to reducing anxiety and strengthening oral participation (Özdemir & Seçkin, 2025); however, no known study has examined how these four psychological factors, taken together, relate to teacher-assessed oral performance among Malaysian primary ESL learners specifically, or which classroom activities these learners themselves identify as lowering their affective filter. This study addresses that gap by examining fear of making mistakes, shyness, anxiety, and lack of confidence among primary ESL learners in Malaysia, asking not only how strongly these factors are experienced, but how they relate to classroom-assessed oral performance, what classroom conditions contribute to them, and which pedagogical conditions learners themselves identify as helpful in reducing them.

Accordingly, this study aims to (i) examine the level of primary ESL learners' psychological factors, namely fear of making mistakes, shyness, anxiety, and lack of confidence, that affect their oral performance; (ii) investigate the relationship between these psychological factors and learners' oral performance; (iii) identify the classroom conditions that contribute to these factors; and (iv) discover learners' preferred learning activities for mitigating them, all within the framework of Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis. In pursuing these aims, the study also examines whether the levels of these psychological factors differ by gender, given that prior evidence on this question remains mixed rather than settled.

By adopting a sequential explanatory mixed-methods design, this study contributes to the literature in three ways: it extends the empirical base of the Affective Filter Hypothesis to an under-researched population, namely primary-level ESL learners; it addresses the gap between formal performance indicators and pupils' lived classroom experience by triangulating PBD-assessed oral performance with learners' own accounts of hesitation, avoidance, and willingness to communicate; and it offers evidence-based direction for teachers, school administrators, and curriculum designers by identifying the classroom conditions and activities that learners themselves associate with a lowered affective filter.

2. Literature Review And Theoretical

Framework

Krashen's (1982, 1985) Affective Filter Hypothesis is situated within the broader Input Hypothesis model of second language acquisition (SLA), which holds that language is acquired when learners are exposed to comprehensible input slightly beyond their current level of competence. The Affective Filter Hypothesis extends this model by proposing that exposure to comprehensible input is necessary but not sufficient for acquisition: a set of affective variables, principally anxiety, self-confidence, and motivation, determine how much of that input actually reaches the learner's language acquisition mechanism. When the filter is "low," learners are relaxed and receptive, and input flows through relatively unimpeded; when the filter is "high," as it is for a learner experiencing acute anxiety or low self-confidence, input may still be understood but is effectively blocked from being processed into productive output (Krashen, 1982). The hypothesis has since been extended pedagogically to argue that classroom conditions themselves can raise or lower this filter, meaning that the affective filter is not a fixed trait of the learner but a state that is jointly produced by the learner's disposition and the emotional climate of the task at hand (Krashen, 1985).

Building on this premise, the present study adopts a conceptual framework in which fear of making mistakes, shyness, anxiety, and lack of confidence are treated not as isolated traits but as inputs that raise or lower the affective filter, which in turn shapes learners' emotional readiness, willingness to communicate, hesitation, silence, avoidance, and participation during oral English activities, as illustrated in Figure 1. Within this framework, oral performance is understood in two complementary ways: as a formal, cumulative classroom indicator (in this study, PBD speaking levels), and as a lived classroom experience reflected in learners' confidence, responsiveness, hesitation, and avoidance during actual speaking tasks. Crucially, the framework also situates pedagogical activity design, particularly collaborative, low-pressure, and gamified tasks, as a mechanism capable of feeding back to lower the affective filter and, through increased willingness to communicate, supporting more active and sustained oral participation.

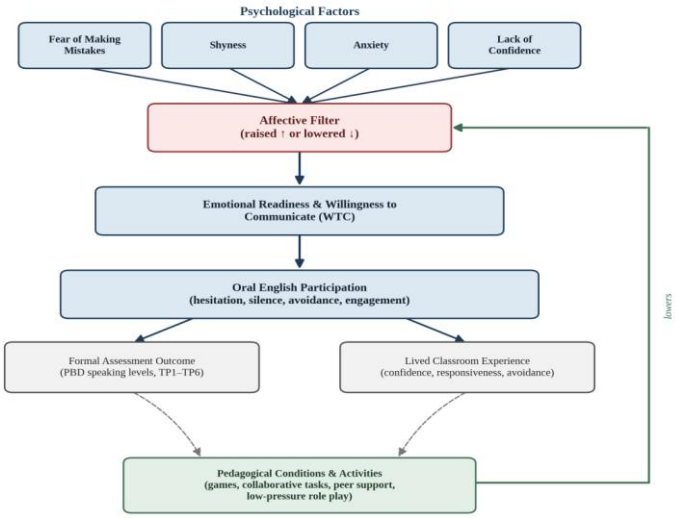

Figure 1 Conceptual Framework of Psychological Factors, the Affective Filter, and Oral English Participation among Primary ESL Learners

Note. Adapted from Krashen's (1982, 1985) Affective Filter Hypothesis.

This last point is theoretically significant for the present study. Because the affective filter is framed as a mechanism governing readiness to use language rather than a direct determinant of

formal achievement scores, the hypothesis does not require anxiety or low confidence to translate into a lower assessed proficiency level in a simple, one-to-one manner. Instead, it predicts that affective barriers should be most visible in learners' willingness to initiate speech, their hesitation, and their avoidance of speaking opportunities — behaviours that a single classroom-assessed performance indicator may not fully capture. This distinction motivates the sequential explanatory mixed-methods design adopted in this study, which pairs a quantitative test of the statistical relationship between psychological factors and formal oral performance with a qualitative account of how these factors are actually experienced and managed in the classroom.

Consistent with this theoretical premise, a substantial body of empirical research has examined the relationship between affective variables and second-language speaking performance, though findings on the strength and directness of this relationship remain mixed. Some studies report a clear negative association between anxiety and oral achievement, consistent with a straightforward reading of the Affective Filter Hypothesis, including recent evidence from primary-level learners showing that classroom anxiety correlates inversely with formal language achievement, particularly under higher-stakes assessment conditions (Hu, Zhang, & McGeown, 2024). Others, however, find that affective variables predict engagement, participation, and willingness to communicate more directly than they predict formal achievement scores (Zhao et al., 2024), suggesting that the pathway from psychological factor to assessed performance is mediated by classroom behaviour rather than direct. This distinction matters particularly for studies of primary and young ESL learners, where formal oral assessment is typically criterion-referenced and cumulative, as with Malaysia's Pentaksiran Bilik Darjah (PBD) framework, rather than based on a single high-stakes test; a cumulative, teacher-mediated indicator may therefore be comparatively insensitive to the moment-to-moment affective fluctuations that most directly shape a learner's willingness to speak in any one task.

At the construct level, fear of making mistakes and evaluation apprehension, long understood as a social-evaluative concern with how one is judged by others (Watson & Friend, 1969), have been consistently linked to withdrawal from speaking opportunities, even among academically capable learners; gifted students, for instance, have been shown to experience language anxiety at levels comparable to, or in some cases exceeding, their peers, indicating that the construct is not simply a proxy for weaker linguistic ability (Duplenne et al., 2024). In a similar vein, shyness has been linked to reduced willingness to communicate (WTC) in the second language, with recent work cautioning that speaking in front of familiar classmates can paradoxically intensify apprehension rather than ease it, owing to face-saving concerns embedded in existing peer hierarchies (MacIntyre, 2020; Pawlak, 2022), a pattern also documented among EFL learners for whom shyness functions as a defensive, avoidance-oriented response to the threat of public evaluation rather than a simple lack of ability (Cutrone, 2009). Anxiety, for its part, has increasingly been understood through a multi-mechanism lens, in which physiological arousal, cognitive interference with working memory, and negative self-appraisal jointly disrupt access to previously acquired vocabulary and grammar during real-time speech production (Teimouri et al., 2019). Lack of confidence, meanwhile, has been most closely tied to learners' self-perception of their own proficiency rather than to their proficiency as independently assessed, implying that confidence-building interventions may be as consequential as purely linguistic instruction (Dewaele & Li, 2022; Alrabai, 2022).

Taken together, a recurring theme across this literature is that affective variables appear to act on oral performance indirectly, through learners' willingness to communicate, rather than directly on assessed proficiency. WTC is understood as a situational readiness to enter into discourse at a particular moment, itself shaped by immediate emotional state as much as by underlying trait-level anxiety or confidence, consistent with the

foundational pyramid model situating WTC as the final psychological step before actual second-language use (MacIntyre, Clément, Dörnyei, & Noels, 1998; Botes et al., 2022). This construct offers a plausible explanation for a pattern reported across several recent studies: that fear of making mistakes, shyness, anxiety, and lack of confidence can be clearly present and educationally meaningful, while showing weak or non-significant statistical association with formal performance scores. Under a WTC-mediated account, these psychological factors primarily suppress the frequency and spontaneity of speech attempts rather than the quality of speech once attempted, which would not necessarily depress a cumulative, teacher-assessed proficiency rating in the way a single anxious performance might. This distinction is central to the interpretive framework adopted in the present study's later discussion of its own quantitative findings.

Complementing this evidence on individual differences, a parallel strand of research has examined which classroom conditions are associated with a lowered affective filter and increased WTC among young learners. Task design appears central: activities that redirect attention away from individual self-evaluation, such as games, collaborative quizzes, and group-based role play, are consistently associated with reduced speaking anxiety and greater willingness to communicate, a pattern broadly consistent with task-based language teaching's emphasis on meaning-focused, outcome-oriented activity over discrete-item performance (Ellis, 2003), apparently because shared goals and reduced evaluative focus buffer the fear of negative evaluation that otherwise dominates individual performance tasks (Botes et al., 2022; Dewaele & Li, 2022). Collaborative quizzing in particular has been shown to create a low-stakes speaking environment in which learners can attempt oral responses without facing isolated evaluation, a condition that supports oral readiness by reducing psychological pressure before speech even occurs; peer-supported, enjoyable activities of this kind have been found to significantly reduce speaking anxiety and enhance willingness to communicate among young learners specifically (Namaziandost et al., 2024). In line with this, gamified and low-stakes speaking interventions have shown encouraging results for young ESL learners more broadly, with several recent studies reporting reduced anxiety and improved speaking engagement following their introduction (Zhao et al., 2024; Guo et al., 2023). Complementary evidence further points to peer interaction and collaborative structuring as active mechanisms in their own right, independent of the particular game or task format used, suggesting that emotional safety, rather than any single activity type, is the operative pedagogical ingredient (Arip & Hashim, 2024).

Beyond the four core psychological constructs, the broader classroom environment in which speaking tasks are set has independently been shown to shape oral participation. Task conditions such as time pressure, the amount of preparation permitted, the level of performance expected, and the degree of assistance available to learners have each been identified as influencing how confidently learners speak, largely independent of their underlying linguistic competence, with more recent task-planning research confirming that the amount of preparation time afforded before a speaking task continues to shape learners' oral fluency and confidence (Nation & Newton, 2009; Guo et al., 2023). Related classroom-management literature similarly points to inhibition, uneven opportunities to speak within large classes, and reliance on a shared first language as recurring conditions that further suppress oral output once a learner's affective filter is already elevated, consistent with early guidance on the specific instructional practices, such as reducing error correction during fluency-focused tasks, that create a genuinely low-anxiety classroom environment (Young, 1991), a finding echoed in more recent accounts identifying class size and teacher-student power distance as persistent, cross-context barriers to speaking participation (Ur, 1996; Littlewood, 2007; Rivers, 1968). Read alongside the Affective Filter Hypothesis, this literature suggests that psychological factors and classroom task design are not competing explanations for weak oral performance but

interacting ones: a learner with a high affective filter is disproportionately affected by exactly the task conditions, such as public, unscripted, high-stakes speaking, that this literature identifies as most anxiety-provoking.

This body of pedagogical evidence also helps explain why a sequential explanatory mixed-methods design, rather than a purely quantitative one, is well suited to affective research of this kind. A quantitative instrument can establish the level of each psychological factor and test its statistical association with a formal outcome measure, but it cannot on its own explain why a given classroom condition raises or lowers a particular learner's affective filter, nor which activities learners themselves experience as safe enough to speak within. Systematic triangulation of quantitative and qualitative strands allows the statistical patterns identified in the first phase to be explained, contextualised, and, where necessary, reinterpreted through classroom-grounded evidence gathered in the second (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). This rationale is especially pertinent given long-standing methodological guidance that affective variables in language learning are best captured through a combination of measurement approaches rather than a single instrument (Gardner & MacIntyre, 1993), and given that formal, cumulative indicators such as PBD speaking levels remain comparatively rare as an outcome measure in the psychological-factors literature, most of which has relied on single-sitting speaking tests or self-report proficiency measures; pairing PBD with qualitative classroom evidence therefore extends, rather than merely replicates, the existing evidence base.

Turning to a related question, evidence on gender differences in language-learning anxiety and confidence is notably inconsistent across the literature. While earlier work sometimes reported modest gender effects, more recent studies argue that such differences are neither strong nor consistently observed once other variables are controlled, a conclusion reinforced by a meta-analysis of 48 studies finding that any tendency for higher anxiety among female learners fails to reach statistical significance once moderating variables are accounted for (Piniel & Zólyomi, 2022; Alamri & Qasem, 2024). Some scholars now suggest that the emotional climate of the classroom and learners' broader "social self" may override traditional gender-based patterns in language anxiety and confidence, positioning affective barriers as a shared classroom phenomenon rather than one distributed differently across boys and girls (Li, 2021; Dewaele & Li, 2022). This body of evidence informs the present study's expectation that, if gender differences in the four psychological factors are found, they are likely to be small and not the primary explanatory variable for differences in oral participation.

Taken as a whole, the literature reviewed above indicates four things that motivate the present study's specific design. First, the four psychological factors examined here are well documented individually, but they have rarely been examined together, within a single primary-level ESL sample, using both a validated quantitative instrument and classroom-grounded qualitative evidence. Second, the relationship between these factors and formal, teacher-assessed oral performance indicators remains empirically unsettled, with theoretical grounds, via the WTC-mediated account discussed above, to expect a weak or non-significant direct statistical relationship even where the factors are educationally meaningful. Third, while pedagogical interventions that lower the affective filter have been studied at the secondary and tertiary levels, comparatively little primary-level evidence documents which specific classroom activities young Malaysian ESL learners themselves associate with reduced anxiety and increased willingness to speak, consistent with the broader observation that this literature has largely emphasised older learners and adults rather than primary school pupils (Teimouri et al., 2019). Fourth, formal criterion-referenced assessment frameworks such as PBD remain an underused outcome measure in this literature relative to single-sitting speaking tests, leaving open the question of whether the same psychological factors relate differently to a cumulative, classroom-embedded indicator. The present study

is designed to address these four gaps directly.

3. Methodology

Building directly on the rationale established above, this study adopted a sequential explanatory mixed-methods design, comprising a quantitative phase followed by a qualitative phase. The quantitative phase addressed the first two research questions, namely the levels of the four psychological factors among respondents, whether these levels differed by gender, and whether they were statistically related to oral performance. The qualitative phase then addressed the remaining two research questions, explaining the classroom conditions underlying these psychological factors and identifying learners' preferred activities for lowering the affective filter. This design was considered the most defensible structure for the present study because it allowed the statistical patterns identified in the first phase to be explained, contextualised, and, where necessary, reinterpreted through the classroom-grounded evidence gathered in the second, consistent with the study's broader theoretical position under Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis. Figure 2 illustrates how the two phases connect and which research questions each phase addresses.

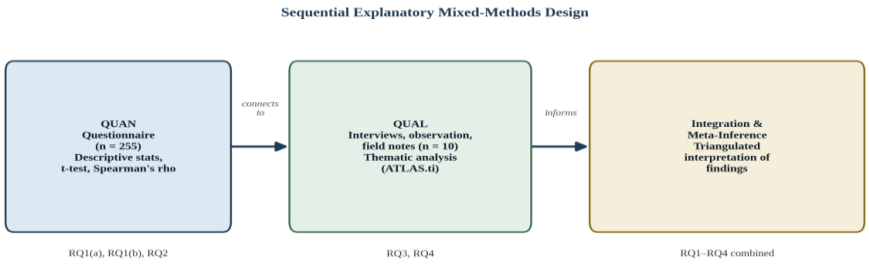

Figure 2 Sequential Explanatory Mixed-Methods Design Adopted in the Present Study

Note. QUAN = quantitative phase; QUAL = qualitative phase.

Oral performance was operationalised through the Pentaksiran Bilik Darjah (PBD) speaking proficiency levels (TP1 to TP6), a standards-based, criterion-referenced classroom assessment recorded by respondents' own English language teachers through continuous classroom-based assessment. This measure was preferred over a one-off formal speaking test because it situates oral performance within authentic, everyday classroom conditions, consistent with the Affective Filter Hypothesis's concern with observable language use under real learning conditions; because PBD levels represent ordered categories rather than continuous scores, they were treated as ordinal data throughout the quantitative analysis.

The study was conducted among upper primary pupils (Years 4 to 6) enrolled in the English Language Level 2 curriculum, in which oral proficiency is the primary assessment focus for both the PBD and the end-of-year Academic Session Final Examination, at a government school in Kangar, Perlis. For the quantitative phase, the required sample size was determined using the Raosoft sample size calculator, applied to a total school population of 770 students; this yielded a final valid sample of 255 respondents, comprising 143 girls and 112 boys aged 10 to 12. For the qualitative phase, ten respondents were purposively selected, three from Year 4, three from Year 5, and four from Year 6, chosen specifically for their varying levels of English-speaking confidence, classroom participation, and observable behaviours associated with shyness, fear of making mistakes, anxiety, and low self-esteem, so as to provide a comprehensive account of the factors underlying reluctance to speak English. Table 1 summarises the respondents across both phases.

Table 1 Summary of Respondents Across the Quantitative and Qualitative Phases

Phase	Category	n	Additional Detail
Quantitative	Girls	143	Aged 10–12
Quantitative	Boys	112	Aged 10–12
Quantitative	Total	255	Raosoft (population = 770)
Qualitative	Year 4	3	Purposive
Qualitative	Year 5	3	Purposive
Qualitative	Year 6	4	Purposive
Qualitative	Total	10	Interviews & observation

Note. Quantitative sampling used the Raosoft calculator; qualitative sampling used purposive selection to capture varying levels of speaking confidence and observable affective behaviour.

Turning to instrumentation, the quantitative instrument was a 20-item, five-point Likert-scale questionnaire administered via Google Forms and organised into four subscales of five items each, corresponding to fear of making mistakes (Items 1–5), shyness (Items 6–10), lack of confidence (Items 11–15), and anxiety (Items 16–20). These items were adapted from the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS; Horwitz, Horwitz, & Cope, 1986), a 33-item scale originally developed for older learners and widely used in applied linguistics research (Botes et al., 2021), which has demonstrated strong internal consistency in its original and subsequent adapted applications (Cronbach's alpha = .93). Because no existing scale had been validated specifically for 10- to 12-year-old ESL primary learners within Krashen's Affective Filter framework, the items were selected and adapted from this established source and reorganised into the four constructs above, consistent with the study's theoretical focus and objectives. Face and content validity of the adapted items were subsequently reviewed by an expert panel comprising a university lecturer with over 20 years of English-language teaching experience and postgraduate qualifications in Applied Linguistics, whose feedback informed refinements to item wording prior to piloting. A pilot study was then conducted prior to full data collection to assess the clarity, suitability, and feasibility of the adapted instrument; based on this pilot, a neutral midpoint ("neither agree nor disagree") and accompanying emojis were added to the response scale to improve comprehension among young respondents.

The qualitative strand combined a classroom observation checklist, adapted from the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (Rosenberg, 1965), with field notes and a semi-structured interview protocol adapted from Irudayasamy (2020) and Rosenberg (1965), allowing the researcher to capture behavioural indicators, such as hesitation, silence, avoidance, and engagement, that the self-report questionnaire alone could not fully reveal. Prior to data collection, a letter of consent was provided so that respondents could seek permission from their parents; respondents were informed of the study's goals, procedures, and potential risks and benefits, and were assured that their identities would be protected through the use of pseudonyms in the final report, consistent with standard ethical practice for research involving minors in a government school setting.

Data collection proceeded in five linked stages across the first and second quadrants of the academic session. In the first stage, respondents completed demographic items alongside the 20-item questionnaire via Google Forms. In the second stage, oral performance data were gathered through small-group talk-show presentations of three to four respondents each, following a one-week briefing and preparation period; each group was allocated six to ten minutes for their presentation and a subsequent question-and-answer segment, which the

researcher scored using the observation checklist while recording behavioural detail in field notes. In the third stage, semi-structured focus-group interviews were conducted with respondents to explore their preferred learning activities and the psychological barriers they experienced, with sessions video-recorded to support accurate transcription while minimising respondents' self-consciousness. In the fourth stage, field notes were consolidated and digitised to capture broader classroom-environment detail supporting the qualitative interpretation. In the fifth and final stage, respondents' existing PBD speaking-proficiency records were retrieved and used as the operational measure of oral performance for the quantitative analysis. This staged procedure ensured that the quantitative and qualitative data were collected in a coordinated sequence consistent with the study's sequential explanatory design.

Beyond the reliability evidence reported above for the quantitative instrument, the trustworthiness of the qualitative strand was addressed through the four criteria commonly applied to qualitative research: credibility, dependability, transferability, and confirmability (Polit & Beck, 2014). Credibility was supported through data triangulation across interviews, observation, and field notes, allowing patterns identified in one source to be corroborated against another. Dependability was addressed by documenting the coding and analytic decisions made during thematic analysis in ATLAS.ti, providing an audit trail of how categories and themes were derived. Transferability was supported through detailed description of the research context, respondents' characteristics, and classroom conditions, allowing readers to judge the applicability of the findings to comparable settings. Confirmability was addressed through the researcher's transparent documentation of each analytic step, reducing the influence of individual interpretive bias on the reported themes.

Quantitative data were analysed using IBM SPSS Statistics (Version 29). Descriptive statistics, namely means, modes, standard deviations, frequencies, and percentages, were used to address the first research question concerning the levels of the four psychological factors. An independent-samples t-test was then used to test for gender differences in these levels, and Spearman's rank-order correlation (ϱ) was used to test the relationship between the four psychological factors and PBD-assessed oral performance, consistent with the ordinal nature of the PBD scale. Qualitative data from interviews, observations, and field notes were subsequently analysed thematically using ATLAS.ti, with codes grouped into categories and integrated into overarching themes addressing the classroom conditions contributing to the four psychological factors and the pedagogical activities respondents associated with a lowered affective filter. Consistent with the sequential explanatory design, the quantitative findings were treated not as an endpoint but as an analytic entry point for the qualitative phase, with triangulation across both strands used to produce the integrated interpretation reported in the following section.

4. Findings And Discussion

4.1 Findings of the Study

Descriptive analysis was conducted first to address the levels of the four psychological factors among the 255 quantitative respondents. As shown in Table 2, all four factors were experienced at moderate-to-high levels, with consistent agreement-level modes across the 20 questionnaire items.

Table 2 Overall Descriptive Statistics of Psychological Factors Affecting Oral Performance (n = 255)

Psychological Factor	Min	Mode	SD (Range)	Interpretation
Fear of Making Mistakes	1	2	0.94–1.10	High
Shyness	1	2	1.06–1.08	Moderate–High
Anxiety	1	2	0.94–1.13	High

Psychological Factor	Min	Mode	SD (Range)	Interpretation
Lack of Confidence	1	2	0.92–1.05	High

Note. Ratings were made on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree).

Consistent with Table 2, the percentage distribution of agreement levels in Table 3 shows that a majority of respondents selected "strongly agree" or "agree" for all four factors, ranging from 61.7% combined agreement for shyness to 74.3% combined agreement for fear of making mistakes. Within the lack-of-confidence subscale specifically, the item asking whether respondents felt overshadowed when comparing their speaking to that of their peers attracted a particularly high level of agreement, and a closely related item concerning uncertainty over grammatical accuracy showed a similarly prominent pattern.

Table 3 Percentage Distribution of Agreement Levels Across Psychological Factors (n = 255)

Factor	SA (%)	A (%)	N (%)	D (%)	SD (%)
Fear of Making Mistakes	26.0	48.3	17.1	6.6	2.0
Shyness	15.9	46.7	23.7	10.5	3.2
Anxiety	13.4	49.6	22.1	11.8	3.1
Lack of Confidence	15.2	50.1	18.4	12.9	3.4

Note. SA = strongly agree; A = agree; N = neutral; D = disagree; SD = strongly disagree.

Turning to gender differences, an independent-samples t-test compared composite mean scores for boys (n = 112) and girls (n = 143) on each of the four psychological factors. As reported in Table 4, no statistically significant gender differences were found for any of the four factors, with all p-values exceeding the .05 threshold; boys recorded marginally higher mean scores for fear of making mistakes, shyness, and anxiety, while girls recorded a marginally higher mean score for lack of confidence.

Table 4 Independent-Samples t-Test Results for Gender Differences in Psychological Factors

Psychological Factor	Boys (M)	Girls (M)	t	p
Fear of Making Mistakes	2.272	2.208	0.894	.372
Shyness	2.575	2.536	0.518	.605
Lack of Confidence	2.501	2.516	-0.182	.856
Anxiety	2.333	2.284	0.592	.555

Note. Composite mean scores were calculated by averaging the relevant subscale items for each respondent.

Next, Spearman's rank-order correlation was used to test the relationship between each psychological factor and PBD-assessed oral performance, given the ordinal nature of the PBD scale. As shown in Table 5, none of the four psychological factors was significantly correlated with oral performance, with all p-values exceeding .05 and correlation coefficients close to zero.

Table 5 Spearman's rho Correlation Between Psychological Factors and Oral Performance (n = 255)

Psychological Factor	Spearman's rho	p-value	Interpretation
Fear of Making Mistakes	0.001	.982	Not significant
Shyness	-0.056	.370	Not significant

Psychological Factor	Spearman's rho	p-value	Interpretation
Lack of Confidence	-0.101	.108	Not significant
Anxiety	-0.045	.470	Not significant

Note. Oral performance was measured through Pentaksiran Bilik Darjah (PBD) speaking proficiency levels (TP1–TP6).

Moving to the qualitative findings, thematic analysis of the interview, observation, and field-note data, conducted using ATLAS.ti, produced four themes addressing the classroom conditions contributing to the four psychological factors and respondents' preferred activities for lowering the affective filter. The first theme, heightened affective filter during oral performance, captured physiological anxiety responses, such as trembling, whispered delivery, and prolonged silence at the onset of speech, alongside communication-avoidance behaviours. Illustrating this theme, one respondent (R1) explained, "Yes, teacher. I don't feel so shy sebab I like games and .. you know, I am so worry? I'm so scared I always use wrong words and my friends will look at me. But in games, I just speak and I feel more happy. My heart will not pumping so fast." The second theme, fear of making mistakes and negative evaluation, described defensive speech strategies, including rigid adherence to memorised scripts, that respondents used to minimise the risk of visible error. The third theme, low self-confidence restricting oral engagement, illustrated how respondents' beliefs about their own ability constrained the coherence and spontaneity of their speech, independent of their actual linguistic competence. The fourth theme, task conditions that implicitly raise or lower the affective filter, showed that highly public, unscripted tasks tended to intensify anxiety, whereas structured, familiar, and collaborative tasks appeared to lower it; as a second respondent (R2) put it, "Hmm, yes. Because when we do fun things, my heart doesn't go dup-dap dup-dap so fast. I don't feel like I want to cry like when you ask me to stand up alone. The anxiety goes away when we are just playing." Respondents across the qualitative sample expressed a clear preference for games, collaborative speaking tasks, peer-assisted activities, and group-based oral work, describing these as reducing performance pressure and making speaking feel safer and more manageable.

4.2 Discussion of the Findings

The finding that fear of making mistakes, shyness, anxiety, and lack of confidence were all experienced at moderate-to-high levels indicates that affective barriers were a clear and recurring part of respondents' oral English learning experience rather than isolated difficulties. In a pedagogical sense, this suggests that many respondents began speaking activities already carrying some degree of psychological barrier, which is consistent with Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis: learners may possess adequate exposure to language input, yet still struggle to use the language productively when anxiety is high and confidence is low. This pattern aligns with recent evidence that teachers frequently observe anxiety during speaking tasks and emphasise the value of supportive environments, peer support, and activities such as group discussion and role play in reducing it (Attia & Algazo, 2025), and it reinforces the educational importance of identifying these barriers early, consistent with meta-analytic evidence that targeted anxiety interventions are broadly effective in reducing foreign-language anxiety (Xiong et al., 2024). The prominence of peer comparison and grammatical uncertainty within the lack-of-confidence subscale further suggests that this factor is rooted as much in social self-evaluation as in linguistic self-doubt, a distinction with direct implications for the kind of classroom support most likely to help.

Turning to the gender comparison, the absence of statistically significant differences suggests that the affective barriers to oral performance examined in this study were shared across genders rather than concentrated in one group, redirecting the interpretation away from gender as a primary

source of oral English difficulty and toward the emotional demands of classroom speaking itself, such as fear of negative evaluation, public exposure, and uncertainty. This finding is consistent with recent work arguing that gender differences in foreign-language speaking anxiety are neither consistently strong nor universally observed (Alamri & Qasem, 2024), and it supports the position, developed in the literature review above, that interventions to lower the affective filter should be designed to support all learners rather than targeting a single gender.

The absence of a statistically significant relationship between any of the four psychological factors and PBD-assessed oral performance warrants careful interpretation. It would be inaccurate to read this null result as evidence that psychological factors are inconsequential; rather, it suggests that the relationship between affective variables and oral performance may not be direct, simple, or fully visible through a formal, cumulative classroom performance indicator alone. This interpretation is consistent with the willingness-to-communicate-mediated account developed in the literature review: because PBD reflects ongoing, teacher-assessed speaking performance, affective barriers may instead exert their influence through more immediate classroom behaviours, such as silence, hesitation, avoidance, and reduced volunteering, that shape oral development without necessarily producing a strong direct statistical relationship with formal performance levels. This reading is reinforced by recent evidence that affective variables such as enjoyment shape learners' willingness to communicate more directly than they shape achievement outcomes (Zhao et al., 2024), and by findings that speaking anxiety is closely associated with fear of making mistakes, speaking in front of others, and unwillingness to speak, for which peer- and group-based coping strategies are the most commonly recommended response (Özdemir & Seçkin, 2025). Together, these studies help explain why the present study's direct statistical relationship with PBD was weak while the classroom-level impact of these factors remained clearly evident in the qualitative data, and they are consistent with the broader observation that affective barriers may not always be fully captured through formal performance levels alone (Zhao et al., 2024).

The qualitative findings extend this interpretation by showing that the four psychological factors were not merely internal traits but were socially and pedagogically shaped within the classroom environment, consistent with Krashen's (1985) view that classroom conditions can raise or lower the affective filter. Across the four themes, the affective filter appeared to rise when speaking tasks involved public visibility, evaluation pressure, or possible embarrassment, and to fall when tasks were structured, familiar, and collaborative, a pattern directly echoed in R1's and R2's accounts above of feeling calmer and braver during games than during individual, evaluative speaking tasks. This is consistent with evidence that teachers identify unscripted, evaluative tasks such as summarising and presenting as particular anxiety triggers, and that supportive rapport, peer support, and error-tolerant classroom practices help reduce them (Attia & Algazo, 2025). It is also consistent with intervention evidence that gamified group activities are associated with improved speaking effectiveness and lower speaking anxiety (Namaziandost et al., 2024), and with broader findings that gamification in ESL classroom settings generally supports motivation, engagement, and language-learning outcomes when applied appropriately (Arip & Hashim, 2024). The recurring preference for collaborative, low-pressure activities across the qualitative sample, regardless of each respondent's specific combination of psychological factors, suggests that the four themes converge on a shared classroom mechanism rather than four independent, unrelated barriers.

Read together, the quantitative and qualitative strands converge on a single, non-linear interpretation of the data rather than two conflicting accounts. The survey data substantiate the presence of the four psychological factors at moderate-to-high levels, while the non-significant statistical relationship with PBD performance signals that these affective barriers likely operate through mediating classroom dynamics,

principally willingness to communicate, rather than as isolated, direct predictors of achievement. The qualitative component then explains how these factors nonetheless shaped respondents' speaking behaviour through hesitation, avoidance, emotional discomfort, and reduced willingness to speak. This integrated reading is compatible with recent scholarship arguing that affective variables influence communication primarily through willingness to communicate, classroom comfort, and emotional readiness rather than through direct effects on formal scores (Zhao et al., 2024; Özdemir & Seçkin, 2025). The evidence therefore does not support the claim that affective barriers directly determined respondents' PBD levels; it instead shows that these barriers shaped oral participation, uncertainty, and speaking readiness in ways that a formal assessment indicator may not fully capture on its own.

Taken together, these findings carry several practical implications for oral English pedagogy at the primary level. First, because willingness to communicate appears to mediate the relationship between affective barriers and observable performance, teachers may benefit more from interventions that directly target participation and confidence-building, such as low-stakes speaking opportunities, structured turn-taking, and positive reinforcement for attempts rather than accuracy, than from interventions aimed solely at raising PBD scores. Second, the consistent preference expressed by respondents for collaborative, low-pressure, and gamified activities suggests that classroom design choices, rather than curriculum content alone, may be a more immediately actionable lever for lowering the affective filter, a point that aligns with intervention evidence linking gamified group work to reduced speaking anxiety and improved speaking effectiveness (Namaziandost et al., 2024) and with broader findings on the motivational benefits of gamification in ESL settings (Arip & Hashim, 2024). Third, the absence of significant gender differences implies that such interventions need not be differentiated by gender, which simplifies their implementation across mixed classrooms (Alamri & Qasem, 2024). Finally, because a formal, cumulative indicator such as PBD did not fully capture the affective dimension of learners' oral development, teachers and school administrators may need to supplement formal assessment with more continuous, qualitative forms of monitoring, such as classroom observation checklists or reflective journals, to identify pupils whose oral performance is being constrained by psychological rather than linguistic factors (Zhao et al., 2024). These implications collectively suggest that addressing the affective filter is not a peripheral concern but a necessary complement to linguistic instruction in the Malaysian primary ESL classroom.

5. Conclusion

This study set out to examine four psychological factors, namely fear of making mistakes, shyness, anxiety, and lack of confidence, among primary ESL learners in Malaysia, within the framework of Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis. In relation to the study's objectives, the findings show that all four factors were present at moderate-to-high levels among respondents, that these levels did not differ significantly by gender, and that none of the four factors was significantly related to PBD-assessed oral performance. Read alongside the qualitative findings, this pattern is best explained through willingness to communicate as a mediating classroom mechanism rather than a direct, linear relationship between affective barriers and formal scores, consistent with recent evidence that affective variables shape learners' communicative engagement more directly than their achievement outcomes (Zhao et al., 2024; Özdemir & Seçkin, 2025). The qualitative findings nonetheless demonstrated that these factors meaningfully shaped respondents' emotional readiness, hesitation, and willingness to participate in oral English tasks, and that respondents consistently preferred collaborative, low-pressure, and gamified speaking activities as a means of lowering their affective filter. Taken together, these findings support the conclusion that psychological factors remain highly relevant to oral English learning at the primary level, not because they directly determine formal performance scores, but because they shape the

emotional and pedagogical conditions under which speaking occurs.

Theoretically, the study extends the Affective Filter Hypothesis into a primary-level context that has received comparatively little empirical attention, since much of the existing affective-filter literature has concentrated on older learners and adults (Teimouri et al., 2019), and shows that the hypothesis's explanatory value at this age level may lie more in classroom participation and communicative behaviour than in direct statistical prediction of formal assessment outcomes. Methodologically, it demonstrates the value of a sequential explanatory mixed-methods design for affective research of this kind: the quantitative findings alone could not fully describe the role of psychological factors in oral performance, but read together with the qualitative findings, they clarify the practical meaning of a statistically non-significant result. Pedagogically, the findings support the use of collaborative, low-pressure, and gamified speaking tasks, such as group discussion, role play, peer-supported activities, and structured games, which recent classroom-based evidence similarly links to reduced speaking anxiety and improved oral participation (Arip & Hashim, 2024; Namaziandost et al., 2024), alongside classroom norms that treat error-making as a normal part of language learning rather than something to be avoided. For curriculum and assessment policy, the findings suggest that PBD and similar criterion-referenced proficiency indicators should be interpreted alongside classroom observation and learner experience, rather than treated as a stand-alone, complete picture of a learner's oral development; school administrators and curriculum designers may accordingly consider structured, gradually intensifying speaking programmes, professional support for teachers in oral-language pedagogy and low-anxiety assessment practices, and a more explicit institutional commitment to normalising error as part of language learning.

This study is not without limitations. It was conducted within a single government school in Kangar, Perlis, which may limit the generalisability of its findings to other primary ESL populations, particularly those in different urban, rural, or socioeconomic contexts. The quantitative instrument, although adapted from an established and reliable scale, was not independently validated on a Malaysian primary-level population prior to this study, and the cross-sectional nature of the quantitative phase means that the direction of any relationship between psychological factors and classroom behaviour cannot be firmly established. Future research should therefore examine larger and more demographically varied samples, including comparisons between urban and rural school contexts, and should investigate additional mediating variables such as willingness to communicate, peer support, teacher feedback, and school climate, in order to enhance the generalisability of these findings. Future studies may also systematically evaluate digital and gamified speaking interventions, given the encouraging, if preliminary, evidence for their role in reducing speaking anxiety and improving oral participation among young ESL learners under suitable pedagogical conditions.

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