

FROM ANXIETY TO EXPRESSION: CHALLENGES FACED BY BEAP (BASICS OF ENGLISH FOR ACADEMIC PURPOSES) STUDENTS IN THE IGCSE (INTERNATIONAL GENERAL CERTIFICATE OF SECONDARY EDUCATION) SPEAKING EXAM AT WESTMINSTER PRE-FOUNDATION COURSES

ОТ СОСТОЯНИЯ ТРЕВОЖНОСТИ К РЕЧЕВОЙ ЭКСПРЕССИИ: ТРУДНОСТИ, С КОТОРЫМИ СТАЛКИВАЮТСЯ СТУДЕНТЫ ПРОГРАММЫ БЕАР (БАЗОВЫЙ КУРС АКАДЕМИЧЕСКОГО АНГЛИЙСКОГО ЯЗЫКА) НА УСТНОМ ЭКЗАМЕНЕ IGCSE (МЕЖДУНАРОДНЫЙ СЕРТИФИКАТ О СРЕДНЕМ ОБЩЕМ ОБРАЗОВАНИИ) НА ПОДГОТОВИТЕЛЬНЫХ КУРСАХ WESTMINSTER

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Abstract: Speaking assessments, such as the IGCSE oral exam, pose notable challenges for learners in the Basics of English for Academic Purposes (BEAP) course, particularly when students must transition quickly to effective spoken communication. This study investigates the factors contributing to anxiety and limited performance among BEAP students at Westminster Pre-Foundation Courses. Using a mixed-methods approach, data were collected through students' speaking performance recordings and classroom observations. The findings reveal that speaking anxiety, fear of negative evaluation and lack of spontaneous speaking practice are key barriers affecting student performance. Additionally, time pressure and unfamiliar exam formats further intensify these challenges. The study also identifies that structured speaking activities, peer collaboration, and continuous formative feedback can significantly enhance students' confidence and fluency. Overall, the research emphasises the importance of addressing emotional states of students and their effect on their performance and suggests pedagogical adjustments within BEAP programmes to better support learners' transition from anxiety to confident expression.

Keywords: BEAP, IGCSE speaking exam, speaking anxiety, oral proficiency, oral formative feedback, language assessment.

Introduction

The development of oral communication skills remains a central objective in English for Academic Purposes (EAP) programmes, particularly in a pre-foundation context where learners must quickly adapt to academic discourse and assessment demands. Among these, the IGCSE speaking exam, administered by Cambridge Assessment International Education, is a high-stakes assessment that requires not only linguistic competence but also the ability to perform under pressure. For students enrolled in Bridging English for Academic Purposes (BEAP) programmes, the transition from guided classroom interaction to a formal oral examination often presents a range of challenges that affect both performance and confidence.

Recent research has increasingly emphasised the role of affective factors, particularly foreign language anxiety, in shaping learners' speaking performance. Foreign language anxiety is now understood as a complex, multidimensional construct that directly influences learners'

ability to process and produce language in real time (Yu, 2024). Empirical studies demonstrate that anxiety is especially prominent in speaking tasks, where learners must manage linguistic, cognitive, and social demands simultaneously. For instance, Lee and Ye (2021) found that anxiety in integrated speaking tasks is closely linked to time pressure, topic familiarity, and the need to process input while producing output. These findings are particularly relevant to IGCSE-style assessments, which require spontaneous responses and sustained interaction.

Moreover, recent studies highlight the strong relationship between speaking anxiety and oral proficiency. Chen (2024) shows that higher levels of speaking anxiety are negatively correlated with learners' spoken English performance, suggesting that anxiety can significantly hinder fluency and accuracy in oral production. Similarly, Šifrar Kalan and Pavlič (2024) found that learners across different educational levels experience varying degrees of anxiety in oral tasks, with less proficient learners demonstrating higher anxiety levels and lower performance outcomes. These findings reinforce the idea that anxiety is not merely an emotional response but a critical factor influencing measurable academic outcomes.

In addition to affective constraints, recent literature also points to the importance of classroom practices in shaping learners' speaking development. Studies on L2 classroom interaction emphasise that structured speaking tasks and opportunities for meaningful communication can help regulate emotions and improve performance (Bielak & Mystkowska-Wiertelak, 2024). Furthermore, longitudinal research on EAP learners indicates that motivation and anxiety are closely interconnected in oral presentations, with supportive pedagogical environments contributing to reduced anxiety and improved speaking competence (Wu, 2024).

Despite these insights, there remains a gap in research focusing specifically on pre-foundation contexts such as BEAP programmes, where students are in a transitional stage between general English learning and academic assessment. In such contexts, limited exposure to authentic speaking practice, combined with high performance expectations, can intensify both linguistic and psychological challenges.

Therefore, this study aims to investigate the key challenges faced by BEAP students in the IGCSE speaking exam at Westminster Pre-Foundation Courses, with particular attention to the interaction between anxiety and oral proficiency. By drawing on recent developments in language anxiety research and EAP pedagogy, the study seeks to provide practical insights into how instructional strategies can better support learners in moving from anxiety to confident expression.

Literature Review

Recent research in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) and English for Academic Purposes (EAP) contexts has increasingly focused on the role of speaking anxiety as a critical factor influencing learners' oral performance. Foreign language anxiety is now widely recognised as a multidimensional construct encompassing cognitive, emotional, and social dimensions that interact to affect learners' ability to communicate effectively (Yu, 2024). Contemporary studies suggest that anxiety is not merely a psychological reaction but a dynamic variable that shapes language processing, particularly in real-time speaking tasks.

A substantial body of post-2020 research has confirmed the negative relationship between speaking anxiety and oral proficiency. For example, Yu, Lee, and Shin (2021) found that higher levels of speaking anxiety were associated with lower performance in oral English tests, highlighting the direct impact of anxiety on language output. Similarly, Malik, Oteir, and Alotaibi (2024) demonstrated that individual learner factors—such as perceived competence, exposure to English, and attitudes toward learning—significantly influence levels of speaking

anxiety, which, in turn, affect communicative performance. These findings suggest that anxiety is closely intertwined with both internal learner variables and external learning environments.

In the context of speaking assessment, recent studies have explored the specific sources of anxiety in oral tasks. Lee and Ye (2021) identified key contributing factors in integrated speaking assessments, including time pressure, unfamiliarity with the topic, and the cognitive demands of processing input while producing output. These elements are particularly relevant to high-stakes exams such as IGCSE speaking, where students are required to respond spontaneously and coherently within limited time constraints. Furthermore, Alamri and Qasem (2024) emphasise that fear of negative evaluation and social judgment remains one of the most prominent triggers of speaking anxiety across different learner groups.

Recent literature has also highlighted the contextual and modality-related dimensions of speaking anxiety. For instance, Tutton and Cohen (2024) found that students in online learning environments often experience increased anxiety due to reduced opportunities for natural interaction and peer support. This suggests that the instructional mode and interactional context can significantly influence learners' emotional responses and speaking performance. In addition, Yadamjav and Tserendulam (2023) argue that anxiety, alongside motivation and self-esteem, constitutes one of the primary psychological barriers to successful language learning, particularly in speaking-focused activities.

Importantly, recent pedagogical research has explored strategies to reduce speaking anxiety and enhance oral proficiency. Öztürk and Öztürk (2021) demonstrated that structured speaking interventions—such as mini-presentations, scaffolded tasks, and continuous feedback—can significantly reduce anxiety levels while improving learners' confidence and fluency. Likewise, Nababan and Lestariningsih (2024) emphasise the role of teacher support and classroom environment in mitigating anxiety, noting that students benefit from interactive, low-stress speaking activities that encourage gradual participation. These findings align with broader trends in EAP pedagogy that advocate for learner-centred approaches and formative assessment practices.

Despite the growing body of research, there remains a noticeable gap in studies focusing specifically on pre-foundation or bridging programmes such as BEAP. Most existing research has been conducted in university-level EFL contexts, leaving transitional programmes underexplored. Given that BEAP students are often required to develop both linguistic competence and academic communication skills rapidly, they may experience heightened levels of anxiety compared to more advanced learners.

In summary, recent literature demonstrates that speaking anxiety is a significant and multifaceted barrier to oral performance in EFL and EAP contexts. It is influenced by individual, contextual, and task-related factors, and it can be mitigated through targeted pedagogical interventions. However, further research is needed to understand how these dynamics operate within BEAP programmes and high-stakes assessments such as the IGCSE speaking exam.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative-dominant mixed-methods design to investigate the challenges faced by BEAP students in the IGCSE speaking exam at Westminster Pre-Foundation Courses. The research integrates analysis of recorded speaking performances with classroom observations in order to capture both assessed outcomes and the instructional context in which speaking skills are developed.

Research Design

A convergent mixed-methods approach was employed, combining qualitative discourse analysis with descriptive quantitative measures. This design enables a comprehensive understanding of students' speaking performance by examining both observable linguistic features and classroom context. The study is exploratory, aiming to identify patterns of difficulty rather than establish causal relationships.

Participants and Context

The participants were BEAP students enrolled in the Westminster Pre-Foundation Courses. A total of 66 students participated in the study, representing a range of English proficiency levels typical of pre-foundation programmes. All participants were preparing for or had recently completed the IGCSE speaking exam. The institutional context is characterised by an EAP-oriented curriculum designed to bridge the gap between secondary education and university-level study.

Data Collection

Two primary data sources were utilised:

1. IGCSE Speaking Exam Recordings:

A corpus of 66 audio recordings of students' IGCSE speaking exams was collected. These recordings served as the main dataset for analysing students' oral performance under exam conditions. The recordings included various components of the speaking test, including individual presentations and interactive discussions with the examiner.

2. Classroom Observations:

In addition to exam data, non-participant classroom observations were conducted during BEAP speaking lessons. The observations focused on teaching strategies, student participation, types of speaking activities, and the overall classroom environment. Field notes were systematically taken to document recurring patterns in student engagement, anxiety indicators (e.g., hesitation, avoidance), and instructional practices.

Data Analysis

The analysis was conducted in two stages. First, the speaking exam recordings were transcribed and analysed using qualitative discourse analysis. Key features examined included fluency (pauses, hesitations), lexical range, grammatical accuracy, and interactional competence. Instances of communication breakdown, repetition, and reliance on fillers were also identified as indicators of difficulty.

Second, a thematic analysis was applied to the classroom observation data. Field notes were coded to identify recurring themes in teaching methods, student behaviour, and opportunities for speaking practice. These themes were then compared with patterns identified in the exam recordings to explore potential relationships between classroom practices and exam performance.

Basic descriptive statistics (e.g., pause frequency and common error types) were also used to support the qualitative findings and highlight prevalent challenges across the dataset.

Ethical Considerations

All data were collected in accordance with ethical research standards. Students' recordings were anonymised, and no identifying information was included in the analysis. Participation was voluntary, and necessary permissions were obtained from the institution. The data were used solely for research purposes, ensuring the confidentiality and privacy of all participants.

Limitations

While the study provides valuable insights, it is limited by its focus on a single institutional context and a relatively small sample size. Additionally, the absence of direct student interviews may restrict the depth of understanding regarding learners' subjective experiences of anxiety. Future research could incorporate learner perspectives to complement performance-based data.

Results and Discussion

This section presents findings from the analysis of 66 IGCSE speaking exam recordings and classroom observations, followed by a discussion of how these results relate to the existing literature on speaking anxiety and oral proficiency in EAP contexts.

Results

1. Speaking Anxiety Indicators in Exam Performance

The analysis of speaking recordings revealed consistent behavioural and linguistic indicators of anxiety among BEAP students. The most frequently observed features included long, frequent pauses; hesitation markers (e.g., "um," "uh"); repetition of words or phrases; and abrupt sentence termination. Many students struggled to initiate responses, particularly in Part 2 of the speaking exam, where spontaneous production was required.

In approximately two-thirds of the recordings, students showed reduced fluency when transitioning from prepared responses (e.g., introductory tasks) to interactive discussion segments. This suggests that anxiety increased when cognitive demands became less predictable and required immediate language processing.

2. Limited Lexical Range and Simplification of Language

A common pattern identified across the dataset was lexical simplification. Students frequently relied on basic vocabulary and repetitive structures, avoiding more complex grammatical constructions. Even higher-proficiency students demonstrated a tendency to simplify responses under pressure, suggesting that anxiety constrained access to their full linguistic repertoire.

3. Communication Breakdowns and Repair Strategies

Several instances of communication breakdown were observed, particularly when students attempted to elaborate on unfamiliar topics. In such cases, learners often resorted to topic avoidance, short answers, or direct requests for repetition from the examiner. Repair strategies such as self-correction were present but limited, indicating insufficient automatization of speaking skills.

4. Classroom Observation Findings

Classroom observations revealed that speaking practice was often structured and teacher-led, with limited opportunities for spontaneous interaction. Activities such as scripted dialogues and controlled discussions were common, while less emphasis was placed on improvisational speaking tasks similar to exam conditions.

Additionally, student participation varied significantly across task types. Learners were more confident during pair work and prepared presentations, but showed visible hesitation during unplanned speaking activities. Signs of anxiety included avoiding eye contact, long response delays, and reliance on peers for support.

Discussion

The findings of this study confirm that speaking anxiety is a significant barrier to oral performance among BEAP students, particularly in high-stakes assessment contexts such as the

IGCSE speaking exam. The presence of hesitation, reduced fluency, and lexical simplification aligns with previous research indicating that anxiety consumes cognitive resources needed for language processing (Chen, 2024; Yu, 2024). When learners experience anxiety, working memory capacity is reduced, limiting their ability to retrieve vocabulary and construct complex sentences in real time.

The observed decline in performance during interactive sections of the exam supports Lee and Ye's (2021) findings that integrated speaking tasks increase cognitive load due to simultaneous listening, processing, and responding. This is particularly relevant for BEAP students, who are still developing automaticity in English production. The results suggest that task unpredictability intensifies anxiety, leading to reduced fluency and increased reliance on basic structures.

The lexical simplification observed in the recordings is consistent with Malik, Oteir, and Alotaibi (2024), who argue that learners under anxiety tend to revert to familiar language patterns to minimise the risk of error. While this strategy may support communication continuity, it limits linguistic development and reduces overall assessment performance quality.

Classroom observations further highlight a mismatch between instructional practice and exam demands. The predominance of controlled speaking activities suggests that students may not receive sufficient exposure to spontaneous, exam-like speaking conditions. This finding aligns with Öztürk and Öztürk (2021), who emphasise that gradual exposure to communicative pressure through scaffolded, yet progressively open-ended, tasks is essential for reducing anxiety and improving fluency.

Moreover, the variability in student confidence across different task types indicates that familiarity and preparation significantly influence anxiety levels. Students performed better in structured tasks, supporting Tutton and Cohen's (2024) argument that reduced unpredictability lowers affective pressure. However, this also suggests that current pedagogical practices may not fully prepare students for the spontaneous nature of IGCSE speaking assessments.

Overall, the results demonstrate a strong interaction between affective factors (anxiety), instructional design, and linguistic performance. While students possess varying degrees of underlying competence, their ability to demonstrate this competence is often constrained by psychological pressure and limited practice in authentic speaking conditions.

Conclusion

This study set out to explore the challenges faced by BEAP students in the IGCSE speaking exam at Westminster Pre-Foundation Courses, with particular attention to the role of speaking anxiety and its impact on oral performance. Drawing on 66 recorded speaking exams and classroom observations, the research provides a detailed picture of how affective, linguistic, and pedagogical factors interact in shaping students' speaking outcomes.

The findings reveal that speaking anxiety is a pervasive issue among BEAP learners, manifesting through hesitation, frequent pauses, lexical simplification, and communication breakdowns during the exam. Students demonstrated a noticeable reduction in fluency in the spontaneous and interactive parts of the assessment, suggesting that increased cognitive load and time pressure significantly hindered performance. In addition, the analysis showed that many learners relied on limited vocabulary and basic sentence structures when under pressure, even when higher-level language knowledge was likely available.

Classroom observations further indicated that while students are given opportunities for structured speaking practice, there is limited exposure to authentic, exam-like speaking conditions that require spontaneity and rapid response. This mismatch between classroom practice and assessment demands appears to contribute to heightened anxiety during the IGCSE speaking exam.

Overall, the study confirms that speaking performance is not solely determined by linguistic competence but is strongly influenced by psychological and instructional factors. Speaking anxiety, combined with insufficient practice in spontaneous communication, restricts students' ability to demonstrate their language abilities in high-stakes settings fully.

These findings highlight the need for pedagogical interventions that explicitly target anxiety reduction and promote more authentic speaking practice. Incorporating more interactive, unpredictable, and exam-relevant speaking tasks, alongside supportive feedback strategies, may help learners gradually build confidence and improve fluency. Strengthening the link between classroom preparation and assessment demands is essential to helping BEAP students transition from anxiety to confident, effective spoken expression in the IGCSE speaking exam.

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