

ORAL PRESENTATION ANXIETY IN THE ENGLISH FOR ACADEMIC WRITING CLASSROOM: A THEMATIC ANALYSIS

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ABSTRACT

Most undergraduates are expected to go through oral presentations and public speaking at their universities. Oral presentations are conducted as a method of assessment in most university courses which emphasise students' performance. Based on previous research, there is a significant number of students who struggle during oral presentations. Hence, this qualitative study aimed to identify the causes of speaking anxiety among undergraduates at the International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM) and to explore strategies to mitigate this issue. Five students who enrolled in the English for Academic Writing (EAW) course at IIUM's Gombak Campus were selected for this study. A qualitative research method was employed, which included face-to-face interviews and thematic analysis was used to gather data and identify recurring themes. Through these interviews, the study highlighted specific fears that students relate to oral presentations and strategies to minimise their anxieties. The findings paved the way to reduce negative effects on students' higher education experiences. This study is significant as the issue of public speaking fear among students needs to be addressed, and students need adequate support to overcome these challenges. The insights derived from this study provided valuable guidance for alleviating speaking anxiety, ultimately improving students' academic and professional communication skills to meet the demands of their universities and future careers.

Keywords: Public speaking; speaking anxiety; presentations.

INTRODUCTION

English is accepted as a global language to communicate with people around the world. English speaking skill is one of the essential skills that students need to master. However, some students experience speaking anxiety during oral communication and presentations. These emotions hinder their language acquisition and ability to perform well. According to Wan Mustapha et al. (2010), despite English being the medium of instruction at the tertiary level, many students still struggle to communicate in English. Speaking anxiety is considered a negative factor in learning a second language, as it can affect university students' participation and interaction in English classes (Zhiping & Paramasivam 2013). These second language learners often feel anxious when presenting in class due to shyness and fear of embarrassment in front of their peers, leading to a lack of confidence and ease in using the target language.

Speaking is considered as a lifelong skill that can benefit learners in planning their future careers and lives (Kurniawanti 2017). However, many graduates continue to feel anxious about communicating in English (Sim et al., 2020). This anxiety stems from speaking English as a second language. Second language learners in higher education often experience speaking anxiety, which negatively impacts their performance both in formal classroom settings and beyond (Ahmed et al., 2017). Fear and anxiety are connected to real communication and oral presentations and can be triggered merely by thinking about having to communicate and present. A recent study by Porhola et al. (2019) gathered research evidence, including findings from their own prior studies and others. They claimed that some students encounter significant levels of social anxiety in university learning environments.

This study focuses on speaking anxiety among English for Academic Writing (EAW) students as even though numerous studies have examined speaking anxiety, there is a lack of research that specifically focused on speaking anxiety among this group of students. Besides, public speaking and oral assessments are frequently used in higher education to evaluate a student's ability to develop and present an engaging, informed, and persuasive argument (Nash et al. 2016). So, it is imperative that measures are taken to find out about the problems students face when they conduct presentations.

LEED 1301, an EAW course is offered at the Centre of Languages and Pre-University Development (CELPAD) at the International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM). This course is mandatory for IIUM students to equip them with necessary skills to use English effectively in an academic context where English is the medium of instruction. As part of the course, students are required to produce a mini research paper and present it orally at the end of the semester. Students are also expected to improve their lexical density, develop higher-level grammatical constructions, expand vocabulary, engage in extensive reading activities as well as incorporate research skills through the course. Thus, this study aims to identify the types of problems faced by EAW students in IIUM during oral presentations in the classroom and explore ways to overcome the problems faced. Two research questions were formulated for this study:

1. What are the problems faced by students during oral presentations in the EAW classroom?
2. What strategies are employed by EAW students to overcome their speaking anxiety?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Numerous studies have been conducted to explore the factors contributing to speaking anxiety. Researchers have identified a range of causes responsible for this anxiety, including linguistic, psychological, physiological, and cultural aspects. These factors can significantly influence and trigger anxiety when speaking a second language. Additionally, learners' performance may be influenced by situational factors or specific conditions during the speaking task.

According to Sutarsyah (2017), those who experience speaking anxiety finds it difficult to cope with second language learning. This will demoralize them as they lose their trust in their personal abilities which will then lead to a decline in participation in the classroom. In relation to this, Ansari (2015) found that students' who fear being judged by their course mates while presenting publicly are reluctant to partake in classroom activities and not because they are disinterested in learning the language. This negatively impacts their language learning experience. Aziz et al. (2022) identified problems such as lack of confidence, proficiency level,

and inadequate preparation among students when presenting orally which hindered them from presenting effectively.

Meanwhile, Al Harun et al. (2016) found that students who have anxiety during presentations experience more personal characteristics as they fear being judged by their peers, are unsure about their delivery techniques and fail in managing time. Mardiningrum and Ramadhani (2022) highlighted specific challenges related to oral presentation skills. Being dependent on notes, being stiff and feeling nervous due to the demand of the content and high self-expectations caused anxiety during presentations. This shows that even minor problems can lead to significant difficulties for students which leads to anxiety and communication apprehension.

METHODOLOGY

Five EAW students, two male and three female students from three different EAW sections contributed to the collection of the data in this study. Purposive sampling was employed to recruit participants with the most relevant knowledge about the research topic. All the students are Malaysians, ranging from year 3 and 4 from different Kulliyahs. Face-to-face interview sessions were conducted within three weeks to gain feedback from each participant. The participants responded to open-ended questions during the interview sessions.

Each interview session took about an hour in the classroom after lecture hours. The students were given a brief explanation before the interview sessions and prompts related to the interview questions were given to them to prepare for the interview. To analyse their responses to open-ended questions about their fears and strategies, a qualitative analysis was conducted based on Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis method. The six stages of the analysis included familiarising with the data; generating initial codes; searching for themes; reviewing themes; defining and naming themes; and producing the report. Patterns and themes were identified manually after the interview data was collected.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

After a thematic analysis of the interviews and discussion between the researchers, four main themes were identified: The themes were fear of making mistakes, apprehension of evaluation, physiological symptoms and personal characteristics.

Fear of Making Mistakes

This theme emerged prominently in response to the primary question regarding students' main issues and fears in public speaking and oral presentations. It reflects an internal anxiety about the subject matter, intertwined with external concerns about audience reactions. Some of the feedback from the students included prevalent fears like making mistakes, fear of being watched during presentations, forgetting important parts of the presentation, demonstrating ignorance or unpreparedness, making any kind of error and conveying information incorrectly.

"I am always worried about doing the wrong thing or saying the wrong thing during any of my presentations ..."

Another student also said that making mistakes during presentations is her main concern.

"I am so afraid of making mistakes as everyone is watching me ..."

“I do not like to be watched...”

Fear of making mistakes during presentations may occur because students are not prepared to present. Some students tend to prepare their presentations at the last minute. This will make them more nervous and cannot focus on their presentation. They do not know where to start or how to start as they lack time to prepare.

“Sometimes, I prepare my slides for my presentation a day before and this makes me crazy...”

“This happens because I was busy with other assignments...”

Being unprepared for presentations can cause anxiety among students. This happens when students do not manage their time wisely to finish all their assignments, causing them to rush through their work. These students feel pressured to meet deadlines while delivering quality work. They feel overwhelmed, ultimately affecting their confidence and performance during the presentation. Proper planning and time management among students can reduce this stress, enabling students to approach their tasks more efficiently.

Unsuresness about the topic of presentation is highly chained to the fear of receiving negative perceptions from the audience, stemming from a perceived lack of expertise. When students make errors in grammar and fail to deliver perfect presentations, they encounter stress and anxiety.

“I always feel speaking in English during presentations is difficult as I tend to make many grammar mistakes ...”

“I am always afraid of not doing a perfect presentation.... making mistakes in English makes me feel stupid among my other friends...”

What needs to be stressed here is that students should pay attention to the content and preparation of the presentation and not on producing a perfect presentation. The participants said that to be more realistic, they need to change their own high expectations during oral presentations. These strategies are crucial in mitigating these fears. This type of mindset will help students to focus on competence rather than perfection during oral presentations, thus decreasing their anxiety level.

Apprehension of Evaluation

The participants stressed that they are apprehensive when they are scrutinised and assessed by their lecturers. They feel uncomfortable during their presentations and dread unfavourable opinions and critiques from listeners. This fear includes anxiety over negative judgments, criticism, concerns about perceived inadequacy or incompetence and fear of being indiscriminately assessed or evaluated by their assessor.

“During my presentation, I always look at my lecturer.....I am afraid of my lecturer failing me...”

Another student said that:

“I wish my lecturer was not there during my presentation...”

The fear of being judged in public speaking contexts emphasises the psychological pressure to achieve perceived performance and competence to a certain standard. It can exhibit a maximum

level of stress and self-consciousness during presentations. In this case, some students believe that they should boost their self-confidence, accept audience comments as constructive, and focus on delivering valuable content rather than seeking external validation.

"I agree that comments from lecturers and friends can help us to improve our presentations.... but not all students can accept these comments..."

Teachers play a role here by providing support and make students feel comfortable while presenting. However, the participants agreed that even though their instructors are understanding and supportive, they still have the fear during oral presentations.

Physiological Symptoms

Some students experience bodily reactions in public speaking situations. These reactions are also called physiological symptoms. Heightened anxiety or nervousness can occur among students during presentations which leads to a range of physical symptoms such as increasing heart rate, sweating, trembling or shaking, stomach discomfort and shortness of breath. Such reactions can disrupt a student's ability to speak publicly, hindering their learning experience. These visible signs tie back to the fear of being judged, making the anxiety even more apparent to others. The feeling of uneasiness or anxiety during presentations causes these physical symptoms which is an indication of body stress response.

One student said that:

"I always feel uneasy and nauseous before presentations..."

Another student also said:

"I cannot sleep a day before my presentation because I worry, I might not do well in my presentation..."

"Normally, I will try not to think about my presentation.... usually I will just pray..."

Some techniques employed by students to manage these symptoms are like deep breathing, progressive muscle relaxation, and mindfulness practices to induce calmness and reduce physical stress. Positive coping strategies and strong determination among students can lessen the impact of these symptoms on students during oral presentations.

Personal Characteristics

Students have different personal qualities and attributes, and these characteristics can influence their attitude, communication and challenges they face in oral presentations. To develop effective communication strategies and public speaking ability among students, it is essential that their personality traits are identified and studied. The students reported that some of them are introverted, and they lack self-confidence. Meanwhile, others said they are very self-conscious, and this affects their presentations.

All students agreed that their personality traits affect their presentations. Two of them said that they prefer to work alone and do not like to talk or mix around with many people. The others said that they always feel uncomfortable when they need to present in front of their friends and lecturers.

“I prefer to be alone and not interfere in other people’s affairs probably I am a low confident person...”

“I have always liked to be alone since I was small I love to do things or work on my own ...”

“Being with people makes me feel insecure especially when I need to talk in front of my friends”

“I love watching YouTube videos, especially the ones that are recommended by my lecturers on oral presentations...”

Thus, the students shared that they need to build their strengths and confidence to be more optimistic and successful in their presentations which can be done by watching YouTube videos and carrying out practices. It is apparent that oral presentations in general have negative effects on most students which could affect their mental well-being. Speaking anxiety can significantly lead to feelings of stress, self-doubt, and social withdrawal. Supportive environments and coping strategies can improve students’ confidence and overall well-being.

CONCLUSION

It is important to study the causes of students’ anxiety during oral presentations and identify effective strategies to overcome this problem among undergraduates in all universities. Grieve et al. (2021) stated that collaborative measures should be taken by all universities and academic support units to help students with speaking anxiety. Thus, more practice opportunities, facilitation of peer feedback, and an emphasis on improving fluency through targeted courses and teaching techniques should be taken to elevate the confidence of students and to eliminate anxiety during oral presentations. Adequate student support in public speaking is needed to help students experiencing anxiety to face any obstacles in their oral presentations.

For future research, teachers’ views also can be taken into consideration in studying the problem of speaking anxiety among students. Classroom observations could also be carried out to identify ways to reduce anxiety among students during presentations. Additionally, the samples could be expanded to include both categories of students who have and do not have public speaking fear. Meanwhile, including international students would provide a more exhaustive understanding of this issue and promote inclusivity in research efforts.

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