

Anxiety In Oral Presentation Among ESL Students: Factors and Strategies

Nur Hafezah Hussein
nhafezah@umk.edu.my
Universiti Malaysia Kelantan

ABSTRACT

Oral anxiety is one of the factors that impede students' speaking proficiency, and may create unpleasant learning experiences especially in an English as a Second Language (ESL) context. This paper is based on the pedagogical research which focuses on the factors causing ESL students' anxiety in an in-class English oral presentation. The idea is to identify factors that cause ESL students to get anxious during in-class English oral presentation and to consider oral anxiety coping strategies that are effective for the students. The research is divided in two parts. The first part is literature review and second part is survey development which could be used to find out the ESL students' oral anxiety with regards to in-class presentation. This paper will only be focusing on the first part of the research. The literature review in this paper was conducted around two research questions: 1) What are the factors that contribute to students' anxiety in in-class English oral presentation, and 2) What are the strategies students use to reduce their anxiety in in-class English oral presentation? The review is based on previous published journal articles where the findings were compared to identify the best practices. The discussion from this literature review will be used as a basis for the researchers in developing survey in order to investigate the ESL students' oral anxiety in in-class presentation.

Keywords: Oral anxiety; Factors; Strategies; In-class presentation; University students

INTRODUCTION

In present-day, oral presentation skill is essential not only for academic career¹ but also for professional success. With English emerging as one of the languages with high demand around the world, graduates require variety of skills and competencies to maintain their relevance with the global competition and the need for good English communication skills. Thus, English oral presentation is integrated into English class as one of the ways to help students with their English language learning. Oral presentations are becoming an important part of language teaching, especially in the university environment. However, despite years of learning English and various methods introduced in class to help students with their learning, there are still a number of students who failed to use the language effectively, particularly in doing English oral presentation. It is believed that language anxiety might have contributed to the students' failure to use English effectively. This literature review explores the factors that might contribute to students' anxiety in in-class oral presentation. Additionally, it illustrates the strategies students use to reduce their anxiety in in-class English oral presentation. The findings and the discussion from this literature review was used as a basis for the researchers in developing a survey in order to investigate the ESL students' oral anxiety in in-class presentation.

Reviewed Papers

The papers were searched and sourced from these databases, Science Direct (Elsevier), ERIC, EBSCO Host, PubMed, and Google Scholar, using the set key words. The key words were anxiety, language learning, oral presentation, factors contributing to language anxiety, and anxiety coping strategies. The articles which were published in the past 10 to 15 years were included in the literature review process with the exception of some landmark studies in the field. Initially 40 articles were found based on our search. After the critical appraisal process, 25 articles were included in the final literature review. All these articles' primary findings are about students' anxiety in oral presentation, factors contributing to anxiety and, students' strategies to cope with English oral presentation anxiety.

Before diving into the primary findings of the selected papers, it is worth looking briefly at the terms that are being used in these papers as well as the theoretical frameworks for language anxiety in foreign or second language classrooms.

Anxiety

Anxiety is described as “an unpleasant emotional reaction that results from the perception or appraisal of a particular situation as threatening” (Horwitz, 2010). In other words, anxiety has been shown to be an individual's feeling of nervousness, worry, stress, and tension naturally setting off his or her anxiety or fear system (Horwitz, Horwitz, & Cope, 1986). These subjective anxious feelings also carry over into the area of language. For example, linguists regard anxiety as “a state of apprehension, a vague fear” in students' language learning (Scovel, 1978).

In addition, Selvam et al. (2016) state that language anxiety has a “negative impact on the students' performance, attitudes, emotional state, and enjoyment of the language learning experience” (p.3). Moreover, students who are terribly anxious are highly likely to avoid involvement in classroom activities (Selvam et al., 2016). And one of the activities that we would like to explore is oral activity or speaking activity in the form of presentation.

In-Class Oral Presentation

Oral presentation assessments are found in almost all syllabuses, particularly in ESL or EFL subjects in higher academic institutions. There are countless benefits of oral presentations especially when preparing students for the real work situations. This type of assessment is essential in which students are required to communicate their ideas effectively to the audience. Other than presentation skills, soft skills can also be trained through this assessment. Students may involve in a better interaction and participation in class.

However, in a classroom setting, students may come from diverse backgrounds. Not every student in the class would think about doing oral presentations from the positive angle. Some students may have fears of public speaking, where stage fright becomes their utmost nightmare. The other students may have negative beliefs of doing oral presentations. As a consequence, they may not be getting the positive outcomes of the oral presentations. Students often feel stressed and apprehensive when it comes to doing oral presentations in class, be it individually or in groups.

Moreover, in an ESL or EFL classroom setting, it would be more difficult for the students of non-native speakers to speak with great confidence during oral presentations (Al Harun, Amirul Islam & Rahman, 2016). This is especially true to students who have not been exposed to English in their everyday conversations. The challenge is even more real to them when English language is part of the assessment.

But, on the other hand, if properly guided and organized, oral presentations provide a learning experience and teach lifelong skills that will be beneficial to students in all school subjects, and later in their careers (Meloni & Thompson, 1980).

Theoretical frameworks

Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope (1986) are among the earliest researchers who built theoretical frameworks for language anxiety based on foreign or second language classrooms. They created Foreign Language Class Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) to identify foreign language anxiety as a distinct variable in foreign language learning. They identified three primary factors of anxieties which are: communication apprehension, fear of negative evaluation by others, and text anxiety.

Grounded on the framework of FLCAS, a questionnaire was designed by Young (1990) to examine various sources triggering language anxiety, such as in class and speaking-oriented practices.

The theoretical framework established by Horwitz and Young built a foundation to define language anxiety as well as analyse connections between language anxieties and second language learning such as by Endler (1980) who found 3 categories of language anxiety which are; trait, situation-specific, and state anxiety.

Pappamihel (2002) then designed the English language anxiety scale (ELAS), and Saito et al. (1999) designed the foreign language reading anxiety scale (FLRAS) in order to measure the scales in the situation specific form of anxiety in the second or foreign language learning process.

These are among the theoretical frameworks that have been prominent in studying language anxiety in foreign or second language classrooms.

PRIMARY FINDINGS OF THE REVIEWED PAPERS

Factors Contributing to Anxiety in In-Class English Oral Presentation

Knowing that anxiety is detrimental to students' language proficiency and it can lead to failure, it is obvious that this question is being asked: what are the factors causing the anxiety? The following factors have been identified from the literature review:

Communication Apprehension

According to Horwitz (2010), communication apprehension is a type of shyness characterized by fear of or anxiety about communicating with people. It comes from having fear or tension when speaking with other individuals in different circumstances.

Fear of Negative Evaluation

Fear of negative evaluation is defined as an "apprehension about others' evaluations, avoidance of evaluative situations, and the expectations that others would evaluate oneself negatively" (Horwitz et al., 1986). It is worth mentioning that fear of negative evaluation is similar to test anxiety. However, while Horwitz et al. (1986) claimed that test anxiety might occur in test-taking situations, in contrast, fear of negative evaluation may happen in any social or academic evaluative situation. For example, in regular group discussions or while speaking a foreign language. Studies have suggested that students are anxious to speak in English because they fear negative evaluation. They are afraid to get negative judgments and thoughts of others and

fear of making verbal or spelling mistakes (Zhiping & Paramasivam, 2013; Aripin, Noorezam, & Rahmat, 2020). To summarize, negative judgments and thoughts of others and fear of making verbal or spelling mistakes are the sources of negative evaluation.

Test Anxiety

The next factor is test anxiety which viewed as an unpleasant experience related to an individual's worry of being evaluated (Tóth, 2010). It is the fear of failure in evaluative situations such as written or oral tests and presentations; it might occur before, during or after a test. However, it is important to note that the oral evaluation related activities provoke the most anxiety in the classroom setting (Horwitz et al., 1986). Researchers have claimed that test anxiety inhibits the students' performance in the language learning process.

Affective Factors

Emotions, self-esteem, empathy, anxiety, attitude, and motivation are affective factors that are related to L2 or foreign language learning (Shumin, 2002). Moreover, adult learners are more concerned about being judged by others, making mistakes, and losing face. Students might feel anxious when they speak in English due to their lack of self-confidence such as insecurity about their fluency and lack of encouragement from the educator. Other than that, the root of a lack of self-confidence is that they face a lack of encouragement from the educator (Brown, 2001). Some teachers or lecturers just focus on what they have to teach resulting in lack of motivation given to the learners. Therefore, the students might feel demotivated in learning English speaking. To sum up, insecurity about their fluency and lack of encouragement from educators are the causes of lack of self-confidence. Lack of confidence can make the students feel nervous and uneasy in speaking a language that they are not confident with (King, 2002).

Personality Factors

Another factor contributing to students' anxiety in in-class English oral presentation is related to personality. Some learners' personality traits such as shyness, quietness, and reticence are frequently referred as factors that provoke anxiety. The level these feelings are various from individual to individual, and from situation to situation (Tanveer, 2007). The personality factor might also related to the factors of extroversion and introversion (Brown, 2001). That is, if a speaker is extroverted, he or she tends to have a greater willingness to speak and vice versa. While, an introvert student tends to keep their own thoughts and feelings by themselves and is quiet rather than spending time with other people. Furthermore, constantly feeling anxious in speaking English can lead to serious disorders. In cases of high anxiety, people who have experienced many threatening situations in the past to be more likely to view future situations as threatening to them (Pappamihiel, 2002).

Second Or Foreign Language Proficiency

Kondo and Yang (2004) suggest that language anxiety and second or foreign language proficiency are related to each other in terms of a main factor that inhibits a learners' success in a second language. According to a previous study, when asked to speak in class, students expressed their challenge concerning their inability to articulate their thoughts and to be the object of attention (Hasibuan & Irzawati, 2020). During oral assessment, students appear to think of their grammatical structure such as singular or plural tenses. Hence, they become confused and anxious when they realise their error, affecting their presentation. Vocabulary is

another factor contributing to second or foreign language anxiety. Liu's (2007) study claimed that one of the major sources of anxiety in speaking English language was students' lack of vocabulary. In other words, research shows that language learners' competency is affected by vocabulary. Additionally, English pronunciation is another aspect of English oral proficiency, that contributes to students' foreign language anxiety. Tanveer (2007) states that pronunciation is an obstacle that makes second or foreign language learners feel stressed. He found that when participants received immediate negative feedback caused by their pronunciation from the audiences, they felt stressed.

Audience Familiarity

Another significant factor contributing to students' anxiety is related to audience familiarity (Beatty, 1988). Likewise, Ayres (1986) mentions that an individual assessment towards speakers' speaking competence might cause anxiety. In other words, a speaker might feel anxious that his or her speaking skill does not meet the expectation of the audiences. In addition, the research has shown some exceptions to the general rule of the expectation that speakers usually feel less anxiety when the audiences become more familiar or pleasant.

Teacher's Influence

Beatty (1988) and Chinpakdee (2015) claim that teacher-related factors including personalities, scoring criteria and the teacher's emotional state were found to be factors that influenced the classroom atmosphere and led to students' anxiety. Additionally, worries about scoring less than expected and failing a test decrease the confidence in using English and create considerable anxiety (Chinpakdee, 2015). Researchers have also suggested that language teachers' failure to clarify the subject, over-remedying the students' errors and bias practice can additionally trigger anxiety among the students (Kráľová & Sorádová, 2015).

Preparedness

Preparedness is one of the factors contributing to oral presentation anxiety. Chen's (2009) study indicated that one of the major sources of anxiety in English oral presentations was preparedness. Similarly, Whai and Mei (2016) found that the main cause of students facing difficulty in oral presentations was lack of practice and preparation. This is upheld by a few researchers who note that anxiety is felt even more so when learners are not prepared or have not been given enough time to prepare, thus becoming more anxious while delivering oral presentations (Imaniah, 2018; Razawi, Zulkornain, & Mohd Razlan, 2019). Learners may leave the oral presentation preparation to the last minute as they have other deadlines to meet, tests to sit and assignments to complete. This could contribute to an increase in anxiety level and learners may not perform their best in the presentation.

Topic Familiarity

Topic familiarity is revealed to be another factor that might be influencing students' anxiety in oral presentation (Kazemi & Zarei, 2015). They found that unfamiliar topics were a significant factor affecting anxiety of EFL oral presentation when they were asked to give impromptu speech – speaking without preparation. In addition, the less speakers knew about a topic, the more anxious they felt (Kazemi & Zarei, 2015).

L2 learning are affected by various cultural characteristics of a language, and this can become a factor of oral presentation anxiety (Shumin, 2002). Students might feel anxious to speak English because they think that other students may not understand what other students say. They feel anxious to speak English because they think that other students from different culture may not understand what other student says. In addition, cultural stereotypes is also attributed to the oral presentation anxiety. Some culture in Malaysia considered people who speak a foreign language as an outcast as they embraced another culture (Wong, Lee, Lee, & Azizah, 2010). This cultural aspect might hinder students' performance in oral presentation.

Strategies Coping with In-Class English Oral Presentation

With regards to the students coping strategies in regulating their anxiety, there have been several methods, techniques and solutions found in the literature to reduce anxiety. First is peer assessment. It has been used to improve presentations as effective oral activities in the classroom because students play an active role in the learning process (Widhayanti, 2018). When students are presenting in front of their peers, they seek mutual comprehension between the presenter and audiences. To achieve that mutual understanding, students would find social support, for example, asking their peers to check on them after rehearsing their speech. Some would also ask for help from their friends if their minds went blank during a group presentation (Widhayanti, 2018).

Secondly, there is proof that classroom atmosphere rather than specific activities may decrease students' anxiety (Horwitz, 2010). Tanveer (2007) argued that the most general idea to reduce anxiety was to make the language classroom environment less formal and more pleasant, where students can make faults without looking or sounding unskilled. The use of visual aids can be proposed as a coping strategy to assist students to reduce in-class oral presentation anxiety as it can create a powerful effect, help keep students' attention and illustrate main ideas of the presentation. Furthermore, creating a supportive classroom environment is an effective tool to reduce anxiety.

Another coping strategy to reduce in-class oral presentation anxiety is avoidance. Although it can be used as a coping strategy, it might not be regarded as an optimal strategy since learners' active engagement with English learning would be impeded. Hammad (2020) mentions that using friends as intermediaries in class; e.g., asking friends to speak out the answer in English, and pretending that there was no one else around are the examples of avoidance coping strategy. This is commonly identified among learners who experience anxiety so as to hide the feeling of nervousness and awkwardness when standing in front of others such as in an oral presentation situation (Hammad, 2020). Based on experience dealing with such learners, among the common avoidance strategies used include gazing at one point only, such as the wall at the back of the room and looking at notes most of the time.

Kondo and Yang (2004) organized Five-Cluster Solution including: Preparation, Relaxation, Positive Thinking, Peer Seeking, and Resignation to overcome students' anxiety in in-class English oral presentation. The first solution, preparation, attempts at controlling the impending threat by improving learning and applying some study strategies such as studying hard, and trying to obtain good summaries of lecture notes. These strategies would be expected to increase students' subjectively estimated mastery of the subject matter, and hence reduce the anxiety associated with the language class. The second solution, relaxation, involves tactics that aim at reducing somatic anxiety symptoms. In overcoming students' anxiety in speaking, the students try to be calm, take a deep breath, and the students pretended to play with the hand. Positive thinking is the third solution that the students used in overcoming their anxiety in

speaking English after relaxation and preparation strategy. The students always think positively that the students are able to speak English, the students try to be confident when the students speak English, and the students imagine that they can give a great performance when the students speak English in the classroom. These strategies are intended to divert attention from the stressful situation to positive and pleasant cues, and bring relief to the anxious student. The fourth solution, peer seeking is distinguished by students' willingness to look for other students who seem to have trouble understanding the class and/or controlling their anxiety. For the anxious student, the realization that others are having the same problem may serve as a source of emotional regulation by social comparison. The fifth solution, resignation is characterized by students' reluctance to do anything to reduce their language anxiety. Examples of resignation strategies are giving up, being quiet in class, not participating or sleeping in class. Students applying the resignation strategy seem intent on minimizing the impact of anxiety by refusing to face the problem.

In addition, students' anxiety can be overcome by the implementation of roleplay and simulation in class. Roleplay encourages students to develop their interpersonal skills by interacting with their group members, sharing their ideas, and discussing the given character. This will indirectly help them to be more comfortable with each other which could lead them to speak in the English language without feeling hesitant (Tipmontree & Tasanameelarp, 2018). Therefore, roleplay could give an interesting environment of learning as it can be handled either in drama, games, or real-life demonstration.

CONCLUSION

An increased focus has been placed on research that surround factors and coping strategies relating to anxiety in in-class English oral presentation. Despite the growing body of research, these issues remain prominent, especially among university students. This paper thus reviews the existing evidence to unfold the complexities of factors and strategies that students experienced in dealing with the anxiety of oral English presentation. This review, therefore, provides an insight to the survey development in the second phase of this project. By using the survey we would be able to discover the factors contributing students' language anxiety and their coping strategies if any, particularly in the Malaysian context and in the current time. Finally, the ultimate outcome of the project is to provide some practical suggestions for further developments in employing oral presentation skills in English language class. It is also beneficial for language instructors to gain further insights into the weaknesses of their students' language variants that can be used to develop their teaching programs and instruction to better support students' oral presentation improvement.

REFERENCE

- Al Harun, M. O. F., Amirul Islam, K. M., & Rahman, M. A. (2016). Challenges in oral presentation in English for the freshers at tertiary level. *Green University Review of Social Sciences*, 3(1), 137-157.
- Aripin, N., Noorezam, M., & Rahmat, N. H. (2020). Kinesics in oral presentation: Exploring speaking anxiety through narrative enquiry. *European Journal of English Language Teaching*, 6(2), 72-84.
- Ayres, J. 1986. Perceptions of speaking ability: An explanation for stage fright. *Communication Education*, 35, 275-287.
- Chen. L. (2009). A study of EFL graduate students' oral presentation anxiety. Unpublished master's thesis. National Chung Cheng University, Chiayi. Taiwan.

- Chinpakdee, M. (2015). Thai EFL university students' perspectives on foreign language anxiety. *Silpakorn University Journal of Social Sciences Humanities, and Arts*, 15(3), 61–90.
- Endler, N. S. (1980). Person-situation interaction and anxiety. In Kutash, I. L. (ed.) *Handbook on stress and anxiety*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Hammad, E.A. (2020). The impact of oral presentations on Al-Aqsa university EFL students' speaking performance, speaking anxiety and achievement in ELT Methodology. *Journal of Second and Multiple Language Acquisition*, 8(1), 1-27.
- Hasibuan, A.R. & Irzawati, L. (2010). Students' speaking anxiety on their speaking performance: A study of EFL learners. *Advances in Social Science, Education and Humanities Research*, 394, 101-106.
- Horwitz, E. K. (2010). Foreign and second language anxiety. *Language Teaching*, 43, 154-167. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/S026144480999036X>
- Horwitz, E. K., Horwitz, M. B., & Cope, J. A. (1986). Foreign language classroom anxiety. *The Modern Language Journal*, 70(2), 125-132. <http://dx.doi.org/10.2307/327317>
- Imaniah, I. (2018). The students' difficulties in presenting the academic speaking presentation. *Globish*, 6(1), 44-52.
- Kazemi, S. A., & Zarei, L. (2015). The efficacy of topic familiarity on oral presentation: extensive speaking assessment task of Iranian EFL learners in TBLT. *International Journal of Applied Linguistics and English Literature*, 4(3), 93-97.
- King, J. (2002). Preparing EFL learners for oral presentations preparing. *Journal of Humanistic Studies*, 4, 401-418.
- Kráľová, Z., & Sorádová, D. (2015). *Foreign language learning anxiety*. S. Pokrivčáková et al. (Hrsgl.), *Teaching Foreign Languages to Learners with Special Educational Needs*, 91-100.
- Kondo, D.S. & Yang, Y. (2004). Strategies for coping with language anxiety: The case of students of English in Japan. *ELT Journal*, 58, 258-265.
- Liu, M. (2007). Chinese students' motivation to learn English at the tertiary level. *Asian EFL Journal*, 9(1), 126-146.
- Meloni, C., & Thompson, S. (1980). Oral reports in the intermediate ESL classroom. *TESOL Quarterly*, 14 (4), 503-510.
- Pappamihiel, N. E. (2002). English as a second language students and English language anxiety: Issues in the mainstream classroom. *Research in the Teaching of English*, 327-355.
- Razawi, N.A., Zulkornain, L.H. & Mohd Razlan, R. (2019). Anxiety oral presentations among ESL students. *Journal of Academia UiTM Negeri Sembilan*, 7(1), 31-36.
- Saito, Y., Horwitz, E. K., & Garza, T. J. (1999). Foreign language reading anxiety. *Modern Language Journal*, 83, 202–218.
- Scovel, T. (1978). The effect of affect on foreign language learning: A review of the anxiety research. *Language Learning*, 28(1), 129-142. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-1770.1978.tb00309.x>
- Selvam, P., Kamal, E. S. B. M., Swaminathan, V. N. G., & Baskaran, S. (2016). *Effects of Debilitative and Facilitative Anxiety on Speaking in Second Language Among Malaysian ESL Learners*.
- Shumin, K. (2002). Factors to consider: Developing adult EFL students' speaking abilities. *Methodology in language teaching: An anthology of current practice*, 12, 204-211.
- Tanveer, M. 2007. Investigation of the factors that cause language anxiety for ESL/EFL learners in learning skills and the influence it casts on communication in the target language. Unpublished Master's thesis, University of Glasgow, Scotland.

- Tipmontree, S., & Tasanameelarp, A. (2018). The effects of role-playing simulation activities on the improvement of efl students' business english oral communication. *The Journal of Asia TEFL*, 15 (3), 735-749. <http://dx.doi.org/10.18823/asiatefl.2018.15.3.11.73>
- Tóth, Z. (2011). Foreign language anxiety and advanced EFL learners: An interview study. *WoPaLP*, 5, 43.
- Whai, M. K. G., & Mei, L. L. (2016). Causes of academic oral presentation difficulties faced by students at a polytechnic in Sarawak. *THE ENGLISH TEACHER*, (3), 1.
- Widhayanti, Z. (2018). English department students' learning strategies to overcome speaking anxiety. *RETAIN*, 6(2), 60–67.
- Wong F.F., Lee K.S., Lee S.K., & Azizah, Y. (2012). English use as an identity marker among Malaysian undergraduates. *3L: The Southeast Asian Journal of English Language Studies*. 18 (1), 145-155.
- Young, D. J. (1990). An investigation of students' perspectives on anxiety and speaking. *Foreign Language Annals*, 23, 539-553.
- Zhiping, D., & Paramasivam, S. (2013). Anxiety of speaking English in class among international students in a Malaysian university. *International Journal of Education and Research*, 1(11), 1 – 16.

About the author

Nur Hafezah Hussein is an English lecturer in the General Studies Department at the Faculty of Language Studies and Human Development, University Malaysia Kelantan. She has taught a number of courses on English language proficiency over the years, as well as Academic Reading and Writing course, to students at university level. Her research and publication interests include second language teaching and learning, motivation and attitudes in language learning, 21st century learning, gamification in language learning and technology-integrated language teaching and learning. Currently, she is a member of MELTA (the Malaysian English Language Teaching Association), an organisation devoted to promote English language teaching and professional development of English language instructors in Malaysia.