



Exploring EFL Students' Public Speaking Anxiety in Tertiary Level

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Abstract

This study aims to find out the causes and strategies of English as a foreign language (EFL) students when they feel anxious to speak in public in certain situations. This research focuses on exploring EFL students from the English Education Study Program of Universitas Muhammadiyah Kendari in the academic year 2023/2024. The sample of this study was taken by using purposive sampling technique, which was five students. The research instrument consisted of interview. After identifying the results of the interview, the researcher found two causes of student anxiety: Fear of negative evaluation and fear of communication specifically, three factors contributing to the fear of negative evaluation include fear of rejection, fear of answering questions, and feeling embarrassed. In addition, five factors associated with communication fear include mother tongue interference, the lack of preparation, language impairment, and the fear of comparison. Researcher also found several strategies used by students to reduce anxiety; Positive thinking, calming the mind and regulating breathing, practicing in front of a mirror, practicing talking with friends, preparing material can be concluded from the results of the five strategies is a lack of preparation.

Keywords: *Anxiety Public Speaking, PSA.*

Introduction

Foreign language anxiety (FLA) is a concept that has attracted the attention of educators and researchers for decades (Dewaele, 2017). Speaking in front of an audience is a fundamental talent that everyone should have. Getting practice with public speaking is critical for strengthening communication skills. Beebe (2013) defines public speaking as the act of conveying ideas on a daily or small-scale basis

through speeches and group debates. By enhancing current communication abilities and putting new strategies into practice, it is comparable to the large-scale communication process used in seminars and presentations.

Public Speaking Anxiety (PSA), or public speaking anxiety, is one of the most common forms of anxiety experienced by individuals, especially by students learning English as a Foreign Language (EFL) at the tertiary level. PSA in the EFL context is often a significant barrier to academic success and the development of students' communication skills.

In situations like these, public speaking anxiety can be a significant obstacle for EFL students in achieving their academic goals. This research aims to explore the factors that contribute to public speaking anxiety in EFL learners, as well as strategies to help overcome this anxiety. With a better understanding of this issue, it is hoped that more effective learning approaches and support can be developed for EFL learners in addressing the challenges of public speaking.

Based on preliminary findings, the researcher distributed a mini-survey to students of the English Education Study Program at Universitas Muhammadiyah Kendari in February 2024 to find out the anxiety of public speaking in students. A total of 20 students filled out the mini-survey. From the results of the mini-survey, there are 5 students that researcher will focus on in this study because they have high anxiety or always feel anxiety during public speaking. Some English education students experience anxiety when speaking in public, which can have a negative impact on their academic and professional development. Therefore, this research is considered important to investigate.

Public Speaking

Speaking in front of an audience is a fundamental talent that everyone should have. Getting practice with public speaking is critical for strengthening communication skills. Beebe (2013) defines public speaking as the act of conveying ideas on a daily or small-scale basis through speeches and group debates. By enhancing current communication abilities and putting new strategies into practice, it is comparable to the large-scale communication process used in seminars and presentations. The three most obvious differences between everyday conversation and public speaking are the degree of preparation, the formality, and the significant role that the speaker and audience play, as explained by Beebe (2013).

Public Speaking Anxiety (PSA)

In general, anxiety is a natural phenomenon dealing with emotions, and can be considered “healthy” (Felman, 2020). Public speaking is one of the most anxiety-inducing forms of communication and is commonly expressed as one of humankind's most widespread trepidations (Dwyer & Davidson, 2012). However, a further factor identified is situational anxiety, which occurs in certain situations such as when one is required to speak in class or in public (Bodie, 2010; Woodrow, 2006). PSA is regarded as a specific subtype of communication anxiety defined as “a situation specific social anxiety that arises from the real or anticipated enactment of an oral presentation” (Bodie, 2010; p. 72).

Anxiety

Anxiety is a natural response to stress or perceived threats, characterized by feelings of worry, fear, or unease. It manifests both psychologically and physiologically, affecting thoughts, emotions, and behaviors. While mild anxiety can be normal and even beneficial in motivating individuals to perform well, excessive or persistent anxiety can be debilitating and interfere with daily life. Chiang (2012) defined anxiety as a synonym of worry, uneasiness, disquiet, disquietude and inquietude. Another definition by Suleimenova (2012) is that „anxiety is distress or uneasiness of mind caused by fear of danger or misfortune“ (p.1776).

Furthermore, Horwitz et al., (1986), proposed foundation of foreign language anxiety. Based on them, foreign language anxiety appears in the form of anxiety such as: Communication Apprehension, test anxiety, and fear negative evaluation.

a) Communication Apprehension

Communication Apprehension (CA) is defined as anxiety to communicate with people, to speak before others, also known as "stage fright," and to speak in groups. For example, I never feel quite sure of myself when I am speaking in my English class". Anxiety occurs when a person wishes to give the audience a specific impression but lacks self-confidence in his or her own capabilities. The individual may actually lack the lexicon L2, weak pronunciation skills, or grammar. McCroskey (2015) revealed that there is a direct connection between lack of confidence in one's abilities and unwillingness to participate in contact with other people as it exposes a person directly to be assessed by others.

Anxious learners will therefore underestimate their own abilities even though they possess sufficient knowledge that they may not be able to speak well because of their own belief that they are unable to do it.

b) Test Anxiety

The second category, named test anxiety (TA), arises out of the fear of failing to perform. It can be explained through the high demands that students put on themselves to be perfect speakers of the foreign language. For example, I am usually at ease during tests in my language class. Test anxiety is based on Sarason, as quoted in Oxford (1999), "the propensity to be disturbed by the effects of poor results on a test or other assessment." It means that this kind of anxiety may have an unpleasant experience on their previous tests which makes them worry that the upcoming test will fail. Some students may also have doubts about studying the foreign language. We put unrealistic demands that we believe a loss is nothing more than a flawless test.

c) Fear of Negative Evaluation

Fear of negative evaluation (FNE) is associated with anxiety testing. Nevertheless, it is different from TA because it refers to the general evaluation done in any situation by other people, while TA refers specifically only to a test situation. For example, I get nervous when the language teacher asks questions which I haven't prepared in advanced'. Gregersen and Horwitz (2002) mentioned that FNE directly influences learners' behavior during communication-oriented situations as they tend to limit their participation in any type of tasks that would expose them to peer or teacher assessment. The manner in which a learner performs spoken conversation in L2 may be the basis for other people to develop a general negative opinion of specific learner whether he or she may be competent in other language elements or abilities.

Language Learning Strategies

Kondo and Ying (2004) also suggested 5 strategies to reduce students' speaking anxiety (Kondo & Ying-Ling, 2004):

1. Preparation, this is very important to prevent threats that may occur during speaking performance, this can be done by studying, and taking notes.
2. Relaxation, this is done to overcome the symptoms of anxiety that occur, can be done by taking a deep breath, holding hands, and trying to calm down, and control yourself.

3. Positive thinking, this is quite effective to relieve anxiety that may occur. By thinking positive students can divert thoughts and feelings of stress that cause anxious. This can be done by imagining good things about yourself.

Method

This research is qualitative research using qualitative descriptive methods. Moleong (2013) state that qualitative research procedures produce descriptive data in the form of written or spoken words from people and observable behavior. This research instrument consists of interviews which aim to determine the causes and strategies of EFL students' public speaking anxiety.

Five students from the English Department at Muhammadiyah University of Kendari in the 2023/2024 academic year were taken as the participants. The participants selected in this research were those who had previously communicated in public and experienced anxiety, fear and failure in communicating in public.

Semi-structured interviews were used by the researcher to collect data in this study. Semi-structured interviews occur when the interviewer or researcher asks students pre-prepared questions.

This study uses an interactive model of analysis as its method of data analysis. The selection of this method was based on its capacity to provide a complete understanding of the phenomenon, including student strategies for overcoming nervousness. Sugiyono, (2016) interactive analysis is the process of systematically searching and compiling data obtained from interviews, notes and documentation by organizing the data into categories and describing it in units as well as compiling and making conclusions so that it is easily understood by researchers and other people. According to B. Milles and Huberman (2014), analysis in this perspective consists of three activity streams: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drafting.



Results

Causes of Anxiety Public Speaking Student

Fear of Negative Evaluation

Fear of receiving a poor rating for their speaking ability causes people to often imagine that they are seen negatively, which inhibits them from speaking as often. The author discovered that four of the five students who subject in interviews had a predominate fear of negative evaluation. The following are the results of interviews related to fear of negative evaluation:

1. Being Fear of rejection

- *" I feel anxious because I am afraid of negative responses from the evaluation of my presentation because I think that the ideas or ideas in explaining the presentation material that I convey are not good enough to be accepted by classmates or lecturers. Like when the evaluation or feedback from the lecturer said that the material, I presented did not connect with the theme I was given to present. That is one of my experiences when presenting papers in class. and for negative evaluation responses from friends such as furrowed brow as if the material I presented was not understood or did not reach their understanding." (WH)*
- *"I feel insecure because I often look at my notes when presenting in front of the class as well as presentation slides which should be when looking at notes or presentation slides occasionally but I look at notes incessantly and only once look at the audience. all of this can make me look insecure which makes me afraid that my friends will judge my abilities negatively such as not being able to master the material". (NJ)*
- *"I felt very stressed before the presentation because I was worried that the lecturer would not be satisfied with the quality of my presentation. The thought of the lecturer judging me as incompetent or not mastering the material even though I had prepared it thoroughly beforehand but when I was in front to do the presentation it immediately broke down and I was confused about what to say, and even more so when using*

English made me feel very insecure. I felt like the outcome of this presentation would greatly affect my academic judgment, and that added pressure to the situation." (ADS)

2. Fear to answer questions

- *"I feel afraid and nervous when I am about to answer questions in the question and answer session after the presentation. I am afraid that my answer will not satisfy the questioner so that he will give a rebuttal to me such as "Your answer does not answer my question, please give another answer". I have experienced this several times during presentations so that it makes me even more nervous to think what other answers I will give and of course the audience and lecturers will doubt my ability to understand the material that I have presented". (RD)*

3. Feel of Embarrassment

- *"I vividly remember one time when I had to do a presentation in class at the time it was a proposal seminar course presentation. I felt very embarrassed for several reasons. Firstly, I was worried about my lack of fluency in English. I was afraid of mispronouncing words or using the wrong grammar, which could make me look incapable of doing the presentation. So that my friends would judge me negatively, in other words, stupid. In addition, I also felt very anxious because I did not really master the topic that I had to present. Although I had tried to prepare myself, I still felt that I did not understand the material well enough. This made me afraid that there would be questions from the lecturer or friends that I couldn't answer well. When I started presenting, I could feel my hands shaking. I often lost words and ended up reading a lot from the slides, which made my presentation less interesting. After finishing, I felt very embarrassed because I felt that I didn't give a good performance." (NH)*

Communication Apprehension

Communication Apprehension (CA) is defined as anxiety about communicating with others, speaking in front of others or what is also known as "stage distress", and speaking publicly. Based on interviews with 5 students. The results of the interviews showed that students were embarrassed to speak in front of other students because of a lack of confidence.

1. Mother Tongue Interference

- *"I feel excessive anxiety because I am afraid of being laughed at because of my regional language accent "Buton" which I often use during presentations because it must be strange if we speak English and then unconsciously use the accent or intonation of the voice typical of my regional language which makes my friends laugh". (WH)*

2. The Lack of Preparation

- *"I feel anxious when I am unconsciously appointed by the lecturer to present in front of the class without any preparation which will make the results of my presentation less than optimal due to lack of preparation such as the content of the material that I have not learned. and if given time to prepare it as during the proposal seminar exam I prepare myself by understanding the contents of my proposal so that when I present it is quite smooth when explaining the contents of my proposal even though other anxieties arise such as nervousness because of the large audience. Even though the audience is only silent but their eyes are very attentive to me and focus when I speak". (NH)*

3. Limited Vocabulary knowledge

- *"If the anxiety is certainly there and the anxiety I feel at the beginning of the presentation alone the rest of my anxiety decreases my anxiety is shyness, I think about whether I can speak fluently using English in front of my friends because I still have minimal vocabulary in English when I speak I have to remember the vocabulary I know to speak it makes my anxiety high". (RD)*

4. Stuttering in Speaking

- *“I felt anxious when I made a presentation in front of the class that seemed to stammer in explaining because honestly I was still very lacking in English vocabulary and also still lacking in articulation or how to mention vocabulary that was not in accordance with the actual mention when speaking using English so that I stammered in explaining the matari, the anxiety I felt this happened during the presentation process from beginning to end”. (NJ)*

5. The Fear of Comparison

- *“I realized that in a presentation situation in front of the class, there is a fear of comparison with the presentation skills of classmates such as fluency in speaking English, where I have a vocabulary that is still lacking. I feel that my speaking skills are low and I also rarely practice, what else if I face a friend whose skills are better than mine whether it's from the material or, vocabulary that he already understands a lot. I immediately feel inferior so worried about the point. then also my grammar is also bad so I'm afraid that what I explain is not correct and I want to speak afraid of being wrong so mostly negative thoughts because they will automatically compare”. (ADS)*

Strategies students employ to reduce nervousness when speaking in front of a public

Five strategies that students used to overcome their fear while speaking English in class were found based on the results of data analysis, it was found that some students used these strategies to reduce anxiety.

The interview results state that the first strategy is to assume that other people are not in the class. as from the statement of one of the respondents as follows:

- *"I cope with anxiety when I am presenting in class by thinking positively, I assume no one else is in the class except myself and do not look my friends in the eye."* **(NH)**
- *"What I usually do to overcome the anxiety I feel is to calm myself and breathe slowly until I feel comfortable".* **(RD)**
- *"I practice speaking a lot, so when I feel that my speaking is good, I feel confident enough to speak during the presentation. So, my anxiety is also reduced. I usually practice in front of the mirror".* **(N)**
- *"To overcome anxiety, I do this by practicing speaking with my classmates, to reduce nervousness when going to the front of the class".* **(WH)**
- *"I overcome anxiety when going forward with a presentation by preparing the material well and understanding the content of the material that will be presented by reading it continuously, not forgetting to pray and be confident".* **(ADs)**

The involvement of informants in solving anxiety problems in presentations in front of the classroom was quite varied according to the circumstances perceived by the students. Each student has the methods and methods of learning that suit them in developing the abilities and performance of each student. According to Dick et al., (2015), teaching learning strategy includes a whole learning component that aims to create a form of learning with certain conditions to help the learning process of the student.

Discussion

This study aims to determine the causes of student anxiety, and strategies to overcome student speaking anxiety. In this section, the researcher will discuss the overall results of the research data obtained to answer the research questions in this study. students when speaking in public, and strategies to overcome them. The first case discussed in these findings is the causes of student anxiety.

The results showed that there are two causes that make students experience anxiety. There are five that qualify as communication apprehension and three from fear of negative evaluation. The researcher found that from fear of negative evaluation at Being Fear of rejection, Fear to answer questions, Feel of Embarrassment and then from communication apprehension, the first is Fear of ridicule, the second is A sense of shame, the third is The lack of preparation, the fourth is Stuttering in speaking and the fifth is The fear of comparison.

1. *Being Fear of rejection*

The first cause of anxiety is the next cause is the fear of rejection. According to Panda & Jain, (2018), anxiety in social interaction is the main cause that makes people vulnerable to rejection. This makes some students lack social interaction making them tend to be unhappy because they are afraid of their opinions being rejected.

2. *Fear to answer questions*

The next cause of anxiety is the fear of answering questions. According to Rothwell, (2013) in his book suggests forms of anxiety in communicating in public is the fear of answering. According to the above view, "questioning and answering anxiety" is a form of anxiety related to the question-answer phase in public speaking situations. Anxiety about not being able to answer questions correctly, fear of appearing incompetent, or fear of negative judgment from the audience can be the cause.

3. *Feel of Embarrassment*

Experienced by the subject felt embarrassed. Insecure and quiet people are more likely to experience FNE. A shy individual has trouble adapting to new situations. This circumstance frequently causes a shy person to have distorted thoughts since they struggle to be accepted by their surroundings. This scenario leads to FNE in shy people (Watson, 2009).

4. *Mother Tongue Interference*

Mother Tongue Interference. The following is one of the subjects felt anxious because he was afraid of being laughed at by the audience when making presentations because his accent or regional accent was still often carried over. According to listyani, (2022), in his research, Indonesian students who speak English suffer from mother tongue interference with English. This is due to the

difficulty Indonesian students have had using past tense and present tense because of the absence of past tenses in Indonesia.

5. The lack of preparation

Another cause is the lack of preparation of students, lack of preparation will cause students to be weak both in terms of material and mental. This factor was also found by a previous researcher named Vera Abdillah in her research on the factors that cause speaking anxiety. She found that some students admitted that they found it difficult to speak when they did not have good preparation (Abdillah, 2018).

6. Language impairment

The next perceived cause of anxiety Language impairment Language impairment refers to a difficulty or disorder in understanding, using, or processing language. Language impairment can affect various aspects of a person's language skills, including comprehension of words, sentence formation, pronunciation of sounds, and the ability to communicate effectively. From this subtheme found two causes from two subjects namely limited vocabulary knowledge and stuttering in speaking. Language disorders refer to difficulties in expressing ideas, understanding speech, and using language effectively. It can result from a variety of causes, including genetic disorders such as deletion syndrome (Norbury & Paul, 2015).

Next, Bishop (2017) Developmental Language Disorder (DLD) is a common condition characterized by persistent language difficulties with no apparent cause, impacting reading ability, learning, and overall health. Sungprakul, (2016) measured the vocabulary size of Thai university students and found that the first-year students' vocabulary knowledge was around 5,800-5,900 words from the 10,000 most frequent word list. Adunyarittigun, (2002) investigated factors affecting English language reading success of a Thai EFL college reader and found that inadequate knowledge of language structure and vocabulary was the main cause of the participant's failure in predicting the meaning of unknown words in context. In addition, (Cobb & Horst, 2012) reported that a lack of vocabulary knowledge can inhibit students' success in their academic programmers.

7. Fear of comparison

The last cause of anxiety is the fear of comparison. According to Brown & Stopa, (2007) explains that the condition of fear of individual comparison tends to exaggerate the individual's attention to himself so as to trigger anxiety in public comparison situations. The fear of comparison is a psychological condition of students who feel anxious that their performance or abilities will be compared with others in a negative context. This leads to increased anxiety because students feel that the audience is not only judging their presentation, but also comparing it to other students who are more competent or interesting.

This study is consistent with the findings of Abdillah (2018), identified seven factors that contribute to student anxiety: speaking in front of the class, fear of being laughed at for mistakes, unintelligible input, teacher influence, student self-confidence, a lack of preparation, and environmental factors. (Abdullah, 2018). The researchers discovered three parallels between these studies: fear of being laughed at, students' poor self-confidence, and a lack of preparedness as anxiety triggers. In contrast, researchers did not notice the other four characteristics mentioned by Abdillah (2018), but rather discovered additional contributors to speaking anxiety. Furthermore, this study is consistent with Asparanita's (2020) findings, which found three elements that contribute to speaking anxiety in students: communication anxiety, text anxiety, and fear of poor evaluation. This study also found that these three factors contribute to student anxiety.

Based on the results of the interviews, each student has a strategy to use to deal with anxiety when making presentations in front of the classroom. A strategy is a systematic method that will be used to achieve a goal. Strategies used by students to deal with anxiety in speech include:

1. Positive thinking

The Opinion MacLeod & Moore, (2000) in his article explains that positive thinking as one of the methods used in reducing the level of depression against cognitive barriers. Their research supports the notion that a shift towards positive thoughts can improve mood and psychological resilience, making it a valuable strategy for managing anxiety in various contexts, including public speaking.

2. Calms the mind and regulates breathing

Calms the mind and regulates breathing It's a way that many people do in dealing with anxiety in public. This strategy is a lot done by students in calming themselves when they feel anxious about something like a presentation. According to Weil, (1996) argues that regulating breathing is a very effective way of alleviating anxiety or fear. In other opinions explained that the importance of mindfulness and meditation in calming the mind (jon Kabat-Zinn, 1992).

This technique teaches individuals to focus their attention on present experiences with a non-judgmental attitude. It helps reduce stress and anxiety by attenuating emotional responses to negative thoughts or challenging situations. According to Brown, R. P., & Gerbarg, P. L. (2005), Breathing regulation techniques have gained widespread recognition in psychological and neuroscientific research for managing anxiety. Numerous studies have demonstrated that structured breathing techniques, such as deep and slow breathing, activate the body's relaxation response, reduce autonomic nervous system activity, and improve cardiorespiratory function.

3. Practice in front of a mirror

Practice in front of a mirror is a technique that uses to give a visual touch to yourself to increase confidence, reduce anxiety. Practicing biscuits in front of the mirror as one of the strategies used to reduce the anxiety of students gives confidence in their appearance. According to Cuddy, (2015) suggested that exercising in front of a mirror, can boost hormones associated with self-confidence and reduce stress hormones. It shows that practicing in front of a mirror not only helps a person see and improve his body language but also internally affects the level of self-confidence and anxiety. In other opinions it is argued that practice in front of a mirror allows individuals to visualize themselves in social situations and to evaluate and correct anything from facial expressions to smooth speech (Hofmann & Otto, 2008).

4. Talking with friends

Talking with friends It is one of the gradual approaches to situations that generate anxiety and reduce anxieties. The results of the interviews suggested that one of the students' mistaken strategies in reducing their anxiety was to talk to classmates. This is supported by the one view to reduce anxiety is by (role playing) which is the practice of talking to friends as a way to practice social skills and reduce fear of negative judgment (Butler & Dobson, 2001).

5. Preparing materials

Preparing materials, it's a preparation prepared by someone before doing something. Based on the research results of one of the students' strategies in dealing with anxiety against themselves, the way they use one of them is to prepare the material well as they perform a presentation in front of the classroom. It supports Sinha, (2008) view that one effective way to reduce anxiety is to prepare yourself as well as possible to face challenges. Kondo and Yong (2004) also suggest a "Preparation strategy" before speaking, they argue that preparing before doing a speaking performance is very good to prevent bad things that will happen which has the potential to trigger anxiety (Kondo & Ying-Ling, 2004). According to Hoeksema, (2012) that understanding the material in depth and having a clear plan can help one in the face of questions or surprises that may arise. According to Buon, (2008) that one of the most effective ways to deal with this anxiety is by ensuring that you have prepared your material very well, including practicing delivery methods and anticipating questions that may be asked by the audience.

The strategies offered in this study are similar to the strategies proposed by Kondo and Ying (2004). Their research offers strategies to reduce student anxiety, namely preparation, relaxation, positive thinking, seeking peers, and resignation (Kondo & Ying-Ling, 2004). However, in this study, the researcher two found the same things as Kondo and Ying, namely preparation and positive thinking.

Conclusion

Based on the results found, the authors conclude that public speaking anxiety, particularly in the context of student presentations, stems from a combination of communication fear and fear of negative evaluation. Specifically, three factors contributing to the fear of negative evaluation include fear of rejection, fear of answering questions, and feeling embarrassed. In addition, five factors associated with communication fear include mother tongue interference, the lack of preparation, language impairment, and the fear of comparison.

The author also found that the strategy students use in overcoming public speaking anxiety, particularly in the context of presentations, is presentation preparation. Some of the strategies from the student interviews to overcome their anxiety included positive thinking, calming the mind and regulating

breathing, practicing in front of the mirror, talking to friends, and preparing materials.

From the results, the researcher argues that most of the public speaking anxiety comes from their negative perceptions and assumptions. As a result, beliefs about the ability to speak in public or presentations were highlighted as a major factor affecting students' anxiety levels.

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