

## Learning to speak in public: Student challenges and coping strategies in higher education

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### ABSTRACT

Public speaking competence is a critical skill in higher education, yet many students experience significant anxiety when required to speak in front of an audience. This study explores the challenges students face in a Public Speaking course and the coping strategies they employ to overcome them. The course integrates theoretical foundations with practical experiences, focusing on verbal and non-verbal communication, audience awareness, and structured presentation techniques. Through regular practice and guided reflection on emotional responses such as nervousness and anxiety, students learn to manage their apprehension, prepare systematically, and deliver persuasive messages effectively. The findings indicate that participation in the course not only enhances students' communication competence but also strengthens their self-confidence and readiness for academic and professional communication contexts. By bridging theory and practice, the Public Speaking course provides a supportive learning environment that equips students with essential skills to navigate real-world communication challenges.

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### INTRODUCTION

Speaking is a fundamental component of language mastery and an essential tool for social interaction. As Wardani (2018) explains, speaking allows individuals to express ideas, build relationships, and participate actively in social contexts. In academic settings, speaking skills become even more important, as students are frequently required to participate in discussions, debates, and presentations. Among these speaking activities, public speaking stands out as a critical skill that students must develop to succeed both academically and professionally.

Public speaking is not an innate ability possessed by only a few individuals; rather, it is a skill that must be learned and practiced. Students today are increasingly expected to deliver presentations in front of an audience, whether in classrooms, seminars, or professional settings. The ability to speak publicly enables students to communicate ideas clearly, present arguments effectively, and contribute meaningfully to academic discourse. As noted by Lestari et al. (2021), public speaking skills support students' ability to express opinions and suggestions, making them essential for academic achievement and future career success. However, despite its importance, public speaking remains a challenging task for many students. For a significant number of learners, public speaking is associated with feelings of anxiety, nervousness, and discomfort. When students are placed in situations where they must speak in front of others and become the focus of attention, they often experience physical and emotional responses such as sweating, tension, and fear of negative evaluation. Tuan and Mai (2015) identify several factors that influence students' public speaking performance, including motivation, confidence,

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anxiety, preparation, time constraints, and the level of support they receive. Among these factors, confidence and anxiety play particularly important roles, as emotional readiness strongly affects students' ability to deliver effective presentations.

Many students respond to public speaking anxiety by avoiding speaking opportunities altogether. Gumartifa and Syahri (2021) report that university students learning English often experience fear related to speaking tasks, particularly fear of making grammatical mistakes. This fear can lead to embarrassment in front of peers and lecturers, causing students to limit their participation, avoid using new vocabulary, and hesitate to speak. Such avoidance behaviors hinder the development of speaking skills and prevent students from gaining confidence. Over time, these challenges may negatively affect students' academic engagement and overall communication competence.

Confidence, however, is not a fixed personal trait. It can be developed through learning experiences, practice, and supportive environments. Arsyva et al. (2024) emphasize that confidence grows through interaction and exposure to communication tasks. Perkins (2018) further highlights that self-confidence is closely related to personal well-being, academic success, and life satisfaction. In the context of public speaking, confidence serves as a key factor that enables students to perform effectively. Grieve et al. (2021) argue that confidence mediates the relationship between speaking practice and successful communication outcomes, suggesting that students who feel confident are more likely to engage actively and perform well in public speaking tasks.

Public speaking involves more than verbal expression alone. Effective communication also depends on non-verbal elements such as body language, facial expressions, gestures, and eye contact. These non-verbal cues often convey meaning as powerfully as spoken words. Adha (2016) explains that the purpose of public speaking is not merely to transmit information, but also to influence audience reactions and emotions. Similarly, Esenwein et al. (2007) note that public speaking has the potential to inspire action, shape attitudes, and evoke emotional responses. As a result, successful public speakers must develop both verbal and non-verbal communication skills to deliver messages effectively.

Recognizing the importance of public speaking, many English departments have included Public Speaking as a core course in their curriculum. This course is designed to help students develop confidence while equipping them with practical communication skills. Through structured instruction and guided practice, students are encouraged to prepare speeches, organize ideas, and deliver presentations in supportive learning environments. Eттner and Utterback (1951) emphasize that public speaking instruction should integrate theory and practice, allowing students to apply communication principles in real-life contexts. Such an approach enables learners to gain both conceptual understanding and practical experience.

Public speaking also plays an important role in shaping students' personal and academic development. According to Mufanti et al. (2016), public speaking consists of two essential components: speaking skills and the ability to convey ideas effectively. This process requires speakers to consider not only what they say but also how their message will be received by the audience. Asriandhini et al. (2020) further argue that effective communication depends on understanding audience needs, responses, and expectations. Through public speaking activities, students learn to adjust their communication strategies, enhance audience engagement, and deliver messages more persuasively.

Beyond academic contexts, public speaking offers long-term benefits for students' social and professional lives. Yee (2014) notes that frequent speaking practice helps students gain confidence and develop the ability to express ideas clearly and assertively. These skills are valuable in group discussions, teamwork, leadership roles, and workplace communication. By participating in public speaking tasks, students not only improve their language proficiency but also strengthen critical thinking, emotional regulation, and interpersonal skills.

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## LITERATURE REVIEW

Public speaking refers to the process of designing and delivering messages to an audience through the integration of verbal and non-verbal elements to achieve communicative impact. In recent years, public speaking has increasingly been recognized as an essential soft skill, particularly in response to technological advancements that require individuals to communicate ideas effectively in both face-to-face and virtual environments. The ability to articulate ideas clearly and engage audiences has become a critical competence in academic and professional contexts (Prambadi, 2021).

Communication is a central component of public speaking and is commonly categorized into verbal and non-verbal forms. Verbal communication involves spoken language, tone, and clarity in message delivery. Kurniadi and Mahaputra (2021) describe communication as a fundamental element of human interaction that supports knowledge exchange and social development. Alongside verbal communication, non-verbal cues such as facial expressions, gestures, posture, and eye contact play a significant role in reinforcing meaning and sustaining audience attention. Hall et al. (2019) define non-verbal communication as encompassing behaviors such as facial expressions, body movements, posture, and vocal intonation, while excluding linguistic content. Non-verbal communication is embedded in social interaction and influences interpersonal relationships, group dynamics, and cultural communication patterns. In public speaking contexts, the integration of verbal clarity and effective non-verbal expression contributes to message credibility and audience engagement.

Within educational settings, communication skills are emphasized from early stages of learning. Khoiriah et al. (2023) highlight the importance of developing communication abilities from primary education to promote active participation and interaction. Adapting communication strategies to learners' preferences has been shown to increase engagement and support more meaningful learning experiences. Similarly, Saxena et al. (2022) underline the importance of the sender message receiver model, emphasizing that successful communication depends on effective encoding and decoding processes.

Teachers play a crucial role in fostering students' communication skills. Wahyuni (2018) emphasizes that educators rely on both verbal and non-verbal communication to motivate students, manage classroom interaction, and resolve learning-related issues. Skills such as active listening, appropriate gestures, and expressive body language contribute to the creation of supportive and responsive learning environments. Despite its importance, public speaking often triggers anxiety among students. Public speaking anxiety has been widely documented and is associated with factors such as low self-confidence, inadequate preparation, and limited language proficiency. Lestari (2021) examined communicative anxiety in second-language learning contexts and found that students with low self-perception are more susceptible to anxiety during formal speaking activities, particularly when speaking in front of peers. Such anxiety can restrict participation and hinder the development of oral communication skills.

Self-confidence is frequently identified as a key factor in managing public speaking anxiety. Indrawati (2018) describes self-confidence as a positive attitude that enables individuals to face academic and social challenges. Lauster conceptualizes self-confidence as belief in one's own abilities, which is essential for successful public speaking performance. A lack of self-confidence may result in hesitation, avoidance of speaking opportunities, and reduced communicative effectiveness.

Nadiyah et al. (2019) identify several contributing factors to students' anxiety during presentations, including insufficient practice, limited mastery of content, fear of negative evaluation, and restricted vocabulary. These challenges often intensify anxiety and undermine students' confidence. Their study suggests that increased speaking practice and positive reinforcement can help students manage anxiety and strengthen their confidence. The role of non-verbal communication in managing public speaking anxiety is further emphasized by Astuti and Anindita (2023). They argue that effective body language, consistent eye contact, and open gestures can project confidence even when speakers feel nervous. Creating supportive classroom environments that encourage constructive feedback and peer collaboration can help students feel safer and more willing to engage in public speaking activities.

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## METHOD

This study employs a narrative-based approach (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) to examine student anxiety in public speaking and the strategies used to manage it. Secondary data were obtained from relevant scholarly articles, while primary data were collected through semi-structured interviews with 8 undergraduate EFL students aged between 19–25 years old. Purposive sampling was applied to select participants who had direct experience with public speaking, ensuring an in-depth exploration of authentic challenges and coping strategies associated with speaking anxiety.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted to gather participants' narrative accounts of public speaking anxiety and the strategies they employed to manage it. Some sample interview questions included: "What makes you feel anxious when speaking in public?" "Can you describe your experience when presenting in front of others?", and "What strategies do you use to reduce your anxiety?"

The data were analyzed using thematic analysis, involving processes of coding, categorizing, and interpreting the data to identify recurring patterns, causes of anxiety, and management strategies. Particular attention was given to factors such as self-confidence, language ability, preparation, and practice. This combined approach allows the study to integrate theoretical insights with participants' lived experiences, offering a comprehensive understanding of public speaking anxiety among university students.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Problems faced by the students

This section presents the students' feelings related to the problems they experienced during the public speaking class. Several participants expressed negative feelings. This can be found in the following statements.

*"I was scared and worried because of the task of making a PPT with whatever we like by taking a theme. I got my turn to present last week, and my friends watched happily, but I felt nervous and afraid when delivering" (Layla, 2024).*

In this context, the participant is faced with two situations. The participant feels nervous and fearful when delivering the material. As stated by Wibawa et al. (2013), most people are afraid of public speaking. In fact, the most common fear is the fear of heights. The situation shows that public speaking is a skill that, if left untrained, can cause significant psychological symptoms. The participant expressed her disappointment and feeling dissatisfied with the results she got when doing public speaking through the following narrative data.

*"When it was my first turn to give a presentation in public, I felt worried, anxious, and not confident, resulting in less than successful results" (Leah, 2024).*

The participant explained that she felt worried and anxious when she got the first turn for a public speaking presentation. As James McCroskey, a well-known researcher in the field, describes, it is a broad term of an individual's fear or anxiety related to something real or communication done with others, as cited by Colbeck, 2011. There are several types of communication apprehension, according to McCroskey, one of which is CA in a generalized context. Public speaking anxiety is a type of CA in a generalized context where individuals experience speaking anxiety when they are in particular situations, whereas when in other situations, they don't. According to Beaty, public speaking anxiety is a kind of real feelings of fear or anxiety when speaking in front of people as a result of the social learning process. A public speaker should consider whether or not they are "infected" with the inferiority virus. A public speaker can seek to recover by knowing whether or not he or she is insecure. To know whether someone is inferior or not, you can use some of the following criteria. Like a virus that disrupts physical health, feelings of inferiority can negatively affect an individual's personality

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To achieve this, everyone must know the symptoms of minder. According to Elshabrina in Fitria Zelfis (2016: 155), symptoms of insecurity include stage fright, difficulty getting along, not daring to start, feeling inferior, tense or nervous, sensitive, and feeling troubled about their appearance.

*"In the unstructured sentences, it makes the words messy" (Habib, 2024).*

When presenting the material, Habib said that he felt his sentence structure had become irregular and did not function properly. Unstructured sentences can significantly detract from the effectiveness of public speaking, leading to a messy delivery that confuses the audience. Unstructured sentences can lead to confusion and detract from effective communication by making ideas unclear and disorganized. The importance of word order in sentence construction is well-documented in linguistic studies. For instance, a fixed word order is often necessary for successful communication, as it helps convey the intended meaning clearly. When sentences lack structure, the arrangement of words can become jumbled, making it difficult for listeners or readers to grasp the message being conveyed. Research indicates that deviations from expected word order can complicate comprehension, particularly in complex sentences. This complexity can arise from various factors, including the absence of clear syntactic markers that typically guide understanding. As a result, unstructured or poorly ordered sentences may hinder effective communication and lead to misunderstandings (Cheng & Mayberry, 2021).

*"For me, when I started public speaking, I was definitely nervous, even when I was on stage at the beginning, I was still nervous, and the way I overcame my nervousness was that I didn't stand somewhere, but I mastered the stage until I felt that I had mastered the stage" (Juna, WhatsApp Interview, 2024).*

The data indicate that participants feel comfortable and do not feel nervous when they can interact directly with their audience by mastering the stage when speaking in public. According to Martiningsih et al. (2024), overcoming public speaking anxiety is a common challenge faced by many people, including professional speakers. A narrative study focusing on public speakers highlighted that nervousness is a common problem, even among experienced individuals. The research identifies various strategies for overcoming this anxiety, emphasizing the importance of mastering the stage as a key technique for building confidence. By actively engaging with the space and practicing extensively, speakers can gradually reduce their nervousness and improve their performance.

*"Oh yes, there are often problems. First, English is not my first language. So I still have a struggle in choosing the words that should come out. Secondly, sometimes the confidence before and when being in front of many people is different. That's what makes the problem" (Raden, WhatsApp Interview 2024).*

According to Tati et al. (2016), learners generally experience nervousness when speaking English. They are hesitant, afraid of speaking in front of others, worried about speaking properly, and lack self-confidence when speaking English. This is because the English language is not their second or primary language. They all share an anxiety, including a lack of knowledge of English, a fear that they will misunderstand English, an inability to understand English, a fear of making wrong sentences in English, a fear that their peers will laugh, a fear that they will make grammar mistakes while speaking English. In essence, students have shown low English skills, which could contribute to their anxiety. In addition, they expressed reactions during class sessions when making mistakes. The results of the study also showed that these students are mainly anxious about communication concerns and fears of a negative view. They have similar causes of anxiety, such as apprehension in public, shyness, and speaking inaccurately. They also use common coping strategies such as remaining silent and avoiding eye contact. It is not possible to conclude from the observations that students' cultural backgrounds provide them with different reasons for speaking anxiety and different strategies for overcoming it.

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## Students' strategies

In this section, we can find the students' feelings related to the management they experienced during the public speaking class. Several participants expressed their experiences, as shown in the following statements.

*"For the 1st problem, I think practicing a lot and memorizing a lot of vocabulary can help. It's a long process, but it works. For the second one, you need to talk to a lot of people. It might be a bit awkward at first, but over time it becomes a habit". (Raden, WhatsApp interview 2024)*

Practicing and memorizing vocabulary are essential strategies for effective language learning. Research shows that memorization plays a significant role in enhancing language acquisition, particularly in vocabulary retention. A study highlighted that effective memorization strategies can lead to improved confidence and proficiency in language skills, especially when learners actively engage with the material rather than relying solely on rote memorization.

To address the challenges in learning English as a foreign language, the authors have proposed the Memory language learning strategy as an effective technique. Previous research has shown that Memory language learning strategies can be an effective strategy for improving English language proficiency among English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners. For example, Alzaidi and Al-Fallay (2018) found that memory language learning strategies significantly improved EFL learners' vocabulary knowledge and reading comprehension. Nation (2013) also highlighted the effectiveness of MLS in improving vocabulary learning in an EFL context. Wang and Li (2019) stated that "memory strategies are essential for EFL learners to learn and use vocabulary, especially for low-level learners".

Regarding the second aspect of language learning, engaging in conversation, it's crucial to interact with various speakers. This practice may initially feel awkward, but it becomes a natural part of the learning process over time. Engaging in conversations helps learners apply their vocabulary in real contexts, reinforcing their memory and fluency. The Memorize-Speak Up-Habituation (MSH) method emphasizes this approach by integrating memorization with speaking practice, allowing learners to internalize new vocabulary through repeated use in dialogue (Wahid et al., 2021).

*"Public speaking is about mastering the material, understanding, and being confident". (Anggrek, WhatsApp Interview 2024)*

Thorough preparation is essential to help students reduce anxiety and gain control over themselves by familiarizing themselves with the material and practicing thoroughly. The data shows that students go through various ways to prepare, such as taking extra rehearsals, studying the material they will deliver, and praying before public speaking. Kondo and Ling (2004) emphasize that preparation, which includes making a thorough summary of lecture notes and studying diligently, allows students to exercise self-control by improving their study and study techniques. Therefore, this strategy is expected to improve students' mastery of public speaking, hence reducing their fear of public speaking.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, public speaking is an important skill that requires learning and conscious practice, as it is not an inborn ability for most people. Students face various challenges in public speaking, including nervousness, fear of judgment, lack of confidence, and linguistic barriers, especially when English is not their first language. These issues often manifest in psychological symptoms such as anxiety, stage fright, and difficulty maintaining sentence structure, all of which can negatively impact performance. The participants' experiences showed that public speaking anxiety stems from a variety of sources, including personal insecurity, limited exposure, and inadequate preparation, consistent with the findings of McCroskey, Beaty, and other scholars.

To address these issues, the students employed a variety of management strategies. Practice and preparation were emphasized as key approaches to overcoming anxiety and improving public speaking skills. Techniques such as practicing in front of a mirror, memorizing vocabulary, and exposure to public speaking scenarios gradually help build confidence. In addition, mastering the material, interacting with

the audience, and seeking constructive feedback also contribute to improved performance and reduced anxiety. These findings underscore the importance of creating a supportive learning environment, encouraging thorough preparation, and promoting gradual skill development. Ultimately, with the right training and consistent practice, students can develop the confidence and competence needed to excel in public speaking.

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