

From Anxiety to Confidence: Strategies to Overcome Speaking Anxiety among ESL Learners in Online Oral Presentations

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Received: 29 Dec 2024	<p>Speaking anxiety is a persistent problem among English as a Second Language (ESL) learners, often impairing effective communication during oral presentations. While extensive research has examined language anxiety, there remains a critical gap in understanding how anxiety manifests in both verbal and non-verbal communication, particularly in the context of online presentations. This gap is compounded by the limited understanding of the underlying strategies employed by ESL learners to mitigate their anxiety during online presentations. This study employed a qualitative methodology that included in-depth interviews with ten ESL learners and three expert educators. Thematic coding of the interview data was conducted using Atlas Ti 22 to capture the perspectives on coping mechanisms. The findings from the interviews highlighted that ESL learners employed seven strategies to cope with anxiety, which were categorized into one internal and six external approaches, indicating a preference for externally oriented coping mechanisms. This study provides new theoretical and practical insights into the complex dynamics of speaking anxiety in online presentations and offers valuable guidance to educators and policymakers in developing interventions tailored to the specific needs of ESL learners in Malaysia. By enhancing our understanding of anxiety triggers and effective strategies, this study aimed to support the development of targeted pedagogical practices that promote greater confidence and communication efficacy among ESL learners.</p> <p>Keywords: English as a Second Language (ESL), speaking anxiety, online platform, oral presentations, strategies to overcome speaking anxiety.</p>
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INTRODUCTION

Anxiety has sparked much attention in English as a Second Language (ESL) speaking activities. Speaking is one of the most anxiety-provoking situations for most students [1]. Most ESL learners say that speaking English is difficult, and that it is the most obvious source of anxiety in language classrooms, where students avoid talking because they are unprepared, uninterested, or unable to express themselves. Much of students' anxiety stems from their feelings of alienation in the classroom, their lack of confidence or their fear of communication. Sometimes, when their teacher asks them a question, students remain silent. Many students still cannot master the English language and feel anxious when dealing with it [2]. Communicating in English is utterly worrying, and it can be even more stressful when students are expected to speak English as a second language (L2) before they have achieved fluency [3]. Speaking anxiety could lead to L2 inhibition, especially in English learning, and affect students' speaking ability, which could harm their L2 acquisition and performance [4]. Addressing the current difficulties in ESL learning is not enough to ensure that ESL learners develop good English language skills and speak comfortably in English after leaving university, and teachers must understand that they need to concentrate more on this ability when training students for jobs to help them connect with others and perform well in the workplace [5].

Even though ESL learners' speaking anxiety is an urgent issue, there is still limited information on how Malaysian ESL learners deal with it because few studies have investigated this topic [6–11]. Three pedagogical aspects were identified: teachers' voices and involvement, their sensitivity to learners' psychological needs and the approaches used by teachers to inhibit negative learning emotions [10]. There is a pedagogical gap in terms of strategies for reducing L2 learners' speaking anxiety, and the effectiveness and applicability of the highlighted strategies to online oral presentations among ESL learners might not have been thoroughly examined and did not improve learners' performance [10–13]. In academic settings, oral presentations are crucial because they require complex decision-making at various stages. The presenting stage can be anxiety-provoking because of the need for abrupt decision-making [14]. Having explored the findings of the abovementioned studies, the current study on ESL learners' speaking anxiety experiences was conducted. Exploring ESL learners' experiences in coping with speaking anxiety is significant in providing information that will contribute to the success of the teaching-learning process. Therefore, the current study intended to specify the strategies adopted by ESL learners to overcome their speaking anxiety during oral presentations in an online setting to minimize the anxiety-provoking factors, thereby enhancing their oral communication skills and increasing their confidence in their academic performance in a virtual learning environment.

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Speaking anxiety in English language learning

L2 or foreign language speaking anxiety has sparked much interest in the literature [15] [16]. Most students have problems speaking an L2, especially English [10]. Speaking fluently in a foreign language is not always easy [28] because anxiety is a major factor affecting speaking performance. Researchers have recently noted that concerns over speaking anxiety among L2 and foreign language learners may trigger high levels of speaking anxiety. The results of a study that sought to address this problem indicated that negative evaluation of speaking performance was caused by a lack of adequate preparation, an inferiority complex, fear of derision and needless comparisons between students [17]. Past qualitative studies that examined factors contributing to speaking anxiety in students' presentations in an English learning environment [18] [19] found that overthinking, lack of preparation, bad experiences, low proficiency and low self-confidence were among such factors [18]. Meanwhile, Japanese English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners show higher foreign language acquisition rates as a result of teacher's age, friendliness, tone of voice and self-presentation, as demonstrated by their obedience to the dress code, peer roles, familiarity and laughter, and by the fact that the classes are quiet [19]. In terms of psycholinguistic factors, fear of making mistakes, shyness, anxiety, lack of confidence and lack of motivation make it difficult for students to speak English in class [20]. Meanwhile, in terms of linguistic factors, the distance between students' first language and L2 may shape their L2 learning. In Far Eastern countries, students experience high levels of anxiety when learning an L2 because their linguistic structures are dissimilar to Western linguistic structures, making it difficult for them to engage in ESL-speaking activities [21].

Previous studies have found that learners' speaking anxiety stems from their fear of being negatively evaluated by their teachers and peers, a lack of preparation, communication apprehension, linguistic difficulties related to language structures, low self-esteem and cultural differences. However, most of these studies focused on language learners in general L2 and foreign language contexts. They overlooked some important factors contributing to speaking anxiety related to cognitive and social psychology, instructional techniques and the roles of peers and teachers in addressing speaking anxiety among ESL learners, particularly during online oral presentations, which the current researcher believes should be comprehensively studied. Thus, the current study examined the strategies used by ESL learners to overcome speaking anxiety during online oral presentations.

2.2 Strategies for addressing ESL learners' speaking anxiety

Several strategies are used to address ESL learners' speaking anxiety, including sociological, pedagogical, linguistic, technological, psychological, and skills training, and strategies related to online learning [10–13] [31] [34–38].

Three pedagogical factors concerning how tertiary EFL teachers deal with students' potential learning anxiety in the classroom were found: teachers' voices and involvement, teachers' sensitivity to learners' psychological needs, and the methods teachers use to inhibit negative learning emotions [10]. Pedagogical, technological and skills training have also been found [12].

The use of paralinguistic features in EFL speaking classes considerably decreases foreign language acquisition due to communication apprehension and fear of negative evaluation, while increasing test anxiety [38]. In addition, the use of paralinguistic features prevents panic, confusion, and physical symptoms of anxiety.

In terms of technology, a qualitative case study found that students viewed videoconferencing negatively and that their main concern during online assessments was anxiety [37]. The study's results demonstrated that although the preservice teacher participants employed a variety of technological tools, they regularly used Google Forms, YouTube, and WhatsApp as the main online resources for classroom management and speaking instruction in fully online courses during the COVID-19 pandemic. They also adapted these technological tools to facilitate appropriate online speaking activities for their students [36].

In an online environment, where technology was utilized during classroom interaction, positive results in reducing students' speaking anxiety were revealed. Five students with speaking anxiety were discovered through classroom observation, and the teacher was shown to have had a positive impact on reducing their speaking anxiety in classroom interaction during Zoom meetings, when students felt more confident and found it easier to reduce their anxiety in classroom interaction [13].

In terms of entertainment, cartoons were especially helpful in minimizing anxiety and motivating EFL learners to enhance their oral production [34]. Approximately 75% of educators said that cartoons were a useful tool for raising student motivation and engagement. The use of music and songs in language instruction can serve as a backup because they help with anxiety reduction, memory retention and language practice. Songs can help students practice speaking in a more casual setting and make the classroom less daunting [35].

The studies discussed above found similarities and differences in the approaches used to address ESL learners' speaking anxiety across various themes. This highlights the need for individualized educational approaches. Therefore, the current study examined the speaking anxiety coping strategies used by ESL learners in an online setting and hoped that this innovative method would have the potential to contribute significantly to the literature.

METHODS AND METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research design

A qualitative research approach was adopted in the current study because it was deemed most suitable for describing the strategies adopted by ESL learners to overcome their speaking anxiety during online oral presentations. This approach was utilized by combining a single-case study design with an embedded and interpretive design [22]. Semi-structured interviews appeared to be the most appropriate for eliciting ESL learners' feelings of speaking anxiety and expert educators' views on strategies adopted to overcome students' anxiety while delivering a speech on an online platform. Semi-structured interviews with ESL learners were conducted via an online platform and interviews with expert educators were conducted over the phone.

3.2 Participants

The participants in the current study were ten ESL learners from a private higher learning institution in Selangor and three expert educators. Convenience sampling was used to select the experts to be interviewed [23]. The researcher selected a sample of subjects in the population who were easy for the researcher to access as classroom instructors for the content subject. The chosen participants had the same characteristics (students who took up Teaching English as a Second Language [TESL]) for more in-depth and accurate data collection. The participants were ten ESL learners, two males and two females, ranging in age from 21 to 23 years old, taking up the Bachelor of Education (Hons) TESL course, and were in their fourth and fifth years. They were from one of the two main ethnic groups: the Malays and Indians. The other participants were three expert educators with more than 15 years of teaching experience in schools, universities, or teacher training centers (i.e., English Language Panitia teachers, Excellent English Language teachers, or English language lecturers from universities or teacher training centers).

3.3 Instruments and data collection

The researcher developed a semi-structured interview protocol to obtain the data. To ensure compliance with the health protocols in place during the COVID-19 pandemic, interviews were conducted through phone calls as face-to-face interviews were prohibited because they elevated the risk of contracting the virus. The researcher recorded the

responses, which the participants allowed for data analysis purposes only. The semi-structured interviews were aligned with the study's research questions, which the participants were asked about during the interview.

3.4 Data analysis

The interviews were recorded using a digital voice recorder, and the data obtained were analyzed based on thematic analysis. Before the analysis (in the early part of the data collection stage), the data obtained from the interviews and observations were transcribed verbatim (i.e., the texts from the interviews and observational notes were typed into word-processing documents). The transcripts were then analyzed either manually or using ATLAS.ti 22. Thematic analysis was applied as a data analysis method to identify and report patterns. Pre-determined themes identified in literature can be used based on theory, or themes can be generated and emerge from raw data [24].

RESULTS

This section presents the themes developed from the data that were analyzed with the main research question about the categorization of strategies used to overcome speaking anxiety among ESL learners during oral presentations, which included internal and external approaches. The internal approach was the psychological approach [25][26][27], while the external approaches included the educational, pedagogical, linguistic, technological, entertainment, and facilities [25][26][27]. The most representative quotes from the responses were presented to support the themes developed. The themes discussed in this section provide answers to the current study's research questions.

DISCUSSION

Strategies for coping with anxiety among preservice ESL student teachers can be divided into two approaches: external and internal. The sole internal approach is the psychological one, which touches on the factors of motivation, anxiety, aptitude, lack of confidence, shyness, and fear of making mistakes [28]. The themes that emerged under the psychological approach were cognitive function, practising a relaxation approach, building a positive self-representation/attitude, and being well prepared. Meanwhile, the themes that emerged under the external approaches, which were found through the interviews, were educational, pedagogical, linguistic, technological, entertainment, and facilities approaches.

5.1 Internal Approach

The internal approach to addressing ESL learners' speaking anxiety during online oral presentations found through the interviews was the psychological approach. This approach touches on factors such as motivation, anxiety, aptitude, lack of confidence, shyness, and fear of making mistakes [28]. The themes that emerged under this approach were cognitive function, practising a relaxation approach, building a positive self-representation/attitude, and being well prepared to help ESL learners overcome their speaking anxiety. In cognitive function, ESL learners apply techniques to calm themselves. They maintain silence for a moment to recall and focus on the content of their presentation if they lose track of it or feel nervous. There is nothing to worry about taking a moment of silence [29]. The participants would probably not mind pausing to take in what the other speakers have said if they start to become anxious or lose track of what they are saying. Second, the relaxation technique helps mitigate ESL learners' anxiety. Relaxation techniques are one way to cope with language anxiety [9]. This finding supports that of another study [31] that relaxation exercises applied by the instructor can help ESL learners overcome their anxiety. In particular, taking a deep breath helped to reduce ESL learners' speaking anxiety [31]. They can also take a moment of silence if they lose track of what they are saying or begin to feel nervous [29]. Building a positive self-representation/attitude, such as being creative and proactive with regard to their studies, also helps to reduce ESL learners' anxiety. They need to make an effort to cope with their current situation, such as meeting their instructors for advice before they give a presentation. Having good rapport with their instructors will help decrease students' anxiety levels and boost their confidence. Finally, being well prepared and practising before delivering an oral presentation helps reduce students' speaking anxiety [29]. The use of these strategies is expected to increase students' subjectively estimated mastery of subject matter and, hence, reduce their speaking anxiety in the classroom. Better preparation and comprehension of the topic can reduce the chances of making a mistake or getting off track during a public speaking task. It also helps speakers recover quickly if they get off-topic or confused [29].

5.2 External Approaches

External approaches to reduce ESL learners' speaking anxiety during oral presentations were also found through the interviews, which included educational, pedagogical, linguistic, technological, entertainment and facilities approaches.

5.2.1 Educational Approach

The educational approach is used by ESL learners to reduce speaking anxiety during oral presentations. Some strategies under the educational approach include receiving positive feedback from the instructor, participating in a co-curricular activity, building a good instructor–student rapport, and obtaining peer support. Receiving positive feedback from instructors can reduce ESL learners' fear and anxiety when delivering oral presentations. The instructor needs to convince students that stress is natural [29]. Next, participating in a co-curricular activity is a good way to boost ESL learners' confidence while giving oral presentations. Practising communicating extensively during a co-curricular activity, such as in an English club, will help minimize anxiety. Active participation in public-speaking forums will also benefit them. Once students manage to become comfortable when speaking in public in an unfamiliar environment, their anxiety gradually disappears, and they feel at ease [29]. Building a good instructor–student rapport can also minimize ESL learners' anxiety. Instructors need to be helpful, empathetic, encouraging, and friendly to have good rapport with their students and help them manage their students' anxiety [33]. Instructors' positive attitudes can also increase their self-esteem and confidence. Finally, ESL learners' speaking anxiety can be reduced by peer support, such as talking to their peers and hearing supportive words from them [31].

5.2.2 Pedagogical Approach

The pedagogical approach was identified as an external approach under which some of the strategies used by ESL learners to reduce their speaking anxiety during oral presentations fell. The strategies under this approach include doing group work, practising oral speech, developing productive skills, carrying out instructor-assigned roles, obtaining gradual presentation exposure, observing experienced teachers, presenting in an authentic environment, being well versed with the topic and content of the presentation, curriculum, and conducting a program.

5.2.3 Linguistic Approach

The linguistic approach has been identified as an external approach that helps reduce ESL learners' speaking anxiety during oral presentations. This approach includes the use of simple language and grammar. Classroom speaking activities should be conducted using plain and easy language so that the students can practice speaking without difficulty and minimize their speaking anxiety [32].

5.2.4 Technological Approach

The technological approach was identified as a new approach used by ESL learners to reduce speaking anxiety during oral presentations, which has not been highlighted in [1]. It includes utilizing modern technology, providing emotional support, and conducting a short course.

5.2.5 Entertainment Approach

The participants revealed that watching entertainment programs (e.g., comedies and cartoons) and engaging in hobbies (e.g., listening to and composing music, painting, and consuming one's favorite foods and drinks) could help ESL learners overcome their speaking anxiety during online presentations. In particular, cartoons are an efficient means of reducing anxiety and motivating EFL beginners to develop oral presentations [34].

5.2.6 Facilities Approach

The facilities approach, which includes the use of a support facility (e.g., a stable internet connection, language lab, or micro-teaching room) at a higher learning institution, can help ESL learners to improve their speaking skills. Instructors should also teach oral skills courses in laboratories to ensure a meaningful learning experience for preservice ESL teachers while they undergo training [12].

CONCLUSION

The qualitative data obtained in the current study showed that ESL learners' coping strategies for overcoming speaking anxiety during oral presentations fall under two types of approaches: internal and external. The internal

approach is the psychological approach, which includes cognitive function, practising a relaxation approach, building a positive self-representation/attitude, and being well prepared, which were the coping strategies applied by the students when they delivered oral presentations. Meanwhile, six external approaches also emerged: educational, pedagogical, linguistic, technological, entertainment, and facilities.

This study is of tremendous importance because of its theoretical and pedagogical contributions. It contributes to theoretical areas in terms of the implications of its findings for future research, and bridges the theoretical gap in the evaluation of strategies that ESL learners employ to overcome their speaking anxiety during online oral presentations. This study aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of how various strategies can be optimized or newly developed to better support ESL learners in learning in less anxiety-provoking environments, fostering greater confidence and competence in online oral presentations. The findings of this study also provide valuable insights to ESL instructors with regard to theory, implementation of speaking activities specifically in oral presentations, and effective strategies that they can use to update their teaching methods, better understand their roles in ESL teaching, assimilate and disseminate important elements suggested in speaking practice to improve their teaching effects, and help promote students' overall development. In addition, the findings of this study will serve as a resource for future studies in the area of foreign language learning anxiety.

In the field of pedagogy and classroom teaching, the findings of this study will raise ESL instructors' awareness of the effect of speaking anxiety on students' learning and the strategies they can use to help students overcome their speaking anxiety in online environments. The study findings are also expected to raise the faculty's awareness of the need to train undergraduate students or preservice teachers in such a way as to equip them with skills to help the current generation of students attain language proficiency levels that are aligned with international standards, which are the benchmarks used by CEFR 2018 for attaining language proficiency, specifically in English. The main and direct beneficiaries of the current study's findings are ESL instructors, who will help determine strategies to be adopted by ESL learners to overcome their speaking anxiety during oral presentations.

The generalization of the current study's findings is expected to improve the speaking confidence and skills of ESL learners to prepare them to become professional educators in the future.

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The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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