

Research Article

THE STUDY OF EFL STUDENTS' PUBLIC SPEAKING ANXIETY AND ACADEMIC ORAL PRESENTATION STRATEGIES AT A TERTIARY LEVEL IN THAILAND

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Abstract

Public speaking is challenging for EFL learners unfamiliar with presentation norms and conventions. The difficulty of an oral presentation is higher when anxiety is involved. To assist novice speakers with their speaking worries, teachers and educators must understand the types of anxiety that can influence an individual's speaking performance. Therefore, the objectives of this study were twofold: 1) to explore factors contributing to anxiety in Science major students in giving an academic English oral presentation and 2) to investigate the strategies that EFL students employ to reduce anxiety during such presentations. Four newly graduated participants majoring in Textiles participated in a focus group interview using a semi-structured interview. The research instruments consisted of the focus group interview. The qualitative data were transcribed and analyzed using thematic analysis. The results reveal that the participants were worried about their oral presentation in several ways, including their lack of language resources, subject knowledge, few opportunities to speak English, and self-perception of pronunciation competence. Furthermore, the interviewees shared their public speaking strategies and how they managed to reduce their anxiety when speaking. The outcomes of this study provide valuable techniques for teachers and educators to help students overcome their speaking anxiety and increase their confidence.

Keywords: Anxiety Reduction Strategies, EFL, English Speaking Skills, Presentation Skills, Public Speaking Anxieties

Introduction

Academic presentations can be “academic presentations, dissertations, and thesis proposals, or any event where someone has to speak for a given length of time on a topic without interruption” (Barrett & Liu, 2016, p. 1230). According to Swales (2004), academic presentation is a unique academic genre that differs from educational lectures and written papers regarding discourse structures, word choices, and delivery strategies. Crea (2019) suggests that to deliver an effective academic presentation, the presenter must consider the audience's knowledge level and needs, define the problem the work addresses, personalize the presentation with anecdotes for emotional engagement, avoid overwhelming jargon, practice diligently, and manage time effectively.

Presentation skills in English are of utmost importance, especially in academic settings, as they enable researchers to showcase their findings and exchange expertise on the covered subjects. A hallmark of an effective presentation is prioritizing the audience's needs and ensuring the information is conveyed in a way that promotes understanding. This involves presenting a clear list of crucial topics that presenters want their audience to remember and skillfully highlighting these points engagingly and enthusiastically throughout the presentation (Wallwork, 2010). Daly and Engleberg (2005) underline the value of practical presentation skills, emphasizing the importance of speakers' ability to communicate and elaborate on their expertise directly to listeners. A successful presentation goes beyond engaging the audience: it must motivate them to act on the information presented.

In an educational context, students' language proficiency and communicative competence are measured through their oral presentation abilities, which are essential for language learning. Despite the prevalence of academic presentations, non-native speakers often lack familiarity with this type of interactional activity, making it difficult for them to master (Barrett & Liu, 2016; Jenkins, 2014). In Thailand, where English is considered to be a foreign language, students' English fluency remains unsatisfactory, particularly in speaking, due to limited opportunities to practice outside the classroom, an emphasis on exam-focused skills, and the fear and anxiety associated with speaking English (Jindathai, 2016; Wilang & Singhasiri, 2017).

Anxiety has a significant effect on language learning and performance. In general, anxiety can be described as a personal experience of tension, apprehension, nervousness, and concern triggered by the activation of the automatic nervous system (Spielberger, 1983). MacIntyre (2017) classified types of anxiety into three groups, i.e., academic, cognitive, and social effects. Of these three anxiety groups, social anxiety significantly influences students' learning situation at university (Grieve et al., 2021).

Research surveying people's anxiety shows that most respondents rated 'fear of public speaking' as one of the top fears that they have encountered (Dwyer & Davidson, 2012; Ferreira Marinho et al., 2017; Russell & Topham, 2012). Sellnow (2003) classifies the causes of English language-speaking anxiety into three components: socialized patterns of thinking and feeling, preferred learning styles, and self-talk. Numerous studies have explored the causes of speaking anxiety, its connection to speaking competence, cultural factors, and techniques for reducing anxiety levels (Tsang, 2022; Grieve et al., 2021; Kurakan, 2021).

Despite existing research on obstacles in English speaking among learners, there exists a significant research gap in examining the context of students majoring in Science in an English as a Foreign Language (EFL) setting, particularly concerning oral presentations in English. While there are ample studies of EFL students' verbal presentation skills and techniques, the available literature primarily focuses on general EFL students, neglecting the difficulties and requirements specific to Science majors when delivering oral presentations in English. Addressing this research gap would enable teachers, curriculum designers, and language instructors to better understand EFL Science major students' challenges during presentations. This understanding could lead to developing targeted instructional strategies and support systems to enhance their language skills, subject integration, and overall performance in scientific English communication.

In conclusion, this study aims to investigate EFL Science students' English anxiety-related issues in an academic oral presentation and how they manage to cope with that anxiety. By addressing these research objectives and questions, valuable insights can be obtained to support Science majors' language development and presentation skills in the EFL context. Thus, this study aims to provide meaningful information on these students' difficulties with anxiety in an English speaking context and to recommend practical recommendations to improve their performance.

Research Questions

This study examines the English anxiety that EFL Science students face during academic oral presentations and their ways of dealing with it. Therefore, two main research questions were formulated as follows:

1. What are the main factors contributing to anxiety in Science major EFL students during English oral presentations?
2. What strategies do these students employ to cope with anxiety in English oral presentations?

Methodology

Research Design

This qualitative study aims to investigate the anxiety that university-level students experience when giving academic research presentations in English. It also seeks in-depth data on students' anxiety factors and solutions for anxiety management during English language presentations.

Participants

The criteria for selecting participants to engage in the study are as follows: Participants must be university-level students currently enrolled or who have finished studies in the field of science. Furthermore, volunteers should have presented scholarly work in English at least once. As a result, the twenty-six intended target demographic for this study was a sample of new graduates with experience presenting their work in English. These students were majoring in Science at the Faculty of Science and Technology of a public university in Thailand. The data collection occurred at the end of the second semester of the final year. The participants were recruited using a purposive sampling technique. The researcher contacted all target participants. However, four

respondents voluntarily participated in this study. Four volunteer students were invited to attend a focus group interview. Of the four participants, three of them had taken two English courses in their first and second years, while one respondent had taken three English courses. The participants were all female and were aged between 22 and 23 years old. The participants were newly graduated and had completed a Seminar in Textile Science and Technology course. As part of this course, they had been required to present and discuss in English academic work relevant to their study major and interests.

Instruments

This study used focus group interviews to collect data, which allowed participants to provide additional insights or voice objections to ideas made by others. The interview participants were homogenous in nature, with similar characteristics such as age, educational background, and experience presenting work in English. This homogeneity can help elicit study data effectively.

The interview was semi-structured, conducted online, and recorded. The researcher used an interview protocol as a guideline to elicit the participants' presentation experiences, understand their speaking anxiety, and elicit their anxiety reduction strategies. The interview protocol consisted of two major parts. The first regarded the participants' oral presentation experiences. The second part inquired about their anxiety when delivering an academic oral presentation and asked how they overcame their fears. The interview focused on participants' anxiety factors before and during academic oral presentations, as well as the techniques they employed to cope with their anxiety. The interview protocol was checked for validity by three experts who were university lecturers and was adjusted based on their comments.

Data Collection Procedures and Analyses

The researcher contacted participants to recruit four participants for this study with experience delivering an academic oral presentation. The researcher explained the research objectives and obtained their consent through a consent form. It is worth mentioning that the study's participants were entirely voluntary, and they had the freedom to decline involvement or withdraw at any point. Then, a focus group interview was conducted online in Thai; it was recorded as a video. The interview lasted an hour and a half. The recording was transcribed verbatim. The transcription was sent back to the interviewees to read through. Thematic analysis was conducted on the transcriptions. Qualitative thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was used to explore participants' responses to questions regarding their fears and strategies for giving an academic oral presentation. In addition, the researcher considered other salient themes that emerged during the coding process, including possible university support in giving presentations and public speaking. The utterances presented in this study were translated into English by the researcher, a university lecturer who has been teaching English for fifteen years. Another university lecturer, a bilingual speaker, validated the English versions of the utterances to ensure that the translations were accurate. The inter-coder technique was employed to ensure the reliability of the findings.

Results

All the focus group interviewees rated their overall English skills as between pre-intermediate and intermediate levels. The most preferred English skill was reading (three out of four), and one selected both reading and listening skills. At the same time, English speaking was the least preferred skill. All the interviewees reported that they worried about public speaking in English. Concerning their previous experience in learning English class, all of them had experienced taking two to three English courses while they were freshmen and sophomores. These three English courses have different objectives. The first subject is a foundation English course that helps provide basic English skills for subsequent higher courses. The second course aims to teach students communicative English in a general context. Following these, the third subject provides students with essential English for academic purposes. All the interviewees had to deliver an academic English presentation as a senior. The following section discusses the findings of this study to answer *RQ1: What are the main factors contributing to anxiety in Science major EFL students during English oral presentations?*

1. Main Factors Contributing to Anxiety in EFL Students during English Oral Presentations

The data obtained from the interview indicated that the interviewees found English speaking to be the most challenging skill due to many factors. The following section displays the participants' perceptions of English speaking along with their concerns when delivering an academic oral presentation.

Lack of Vocabulary and Syntactic Knowledge

The interviewees agreed that their limited competence regarding vocabulary and syntactic knowledge caused them to worry about speaking. One of the interviewees stated that even though she knew many words, it was still difficult for her to understand the terms in different contexts. Furthermore, three of them thought that only knowing several words in English helped if they could put them into sentences accurately. The following excerpts are used to illustrate the findings.

"I feel anxious because it, um, what should I say, well... It's not just everyday English; it's related to science, and there are scientific words like this." (Interviewee C)

"Yes, exactly... The more it's in English, the more anxious I feel. Like when it's in Thai, I can still think of the next word if I forgot the script, right? But when it's in English, it's like, I freeze." (Interviewee D)

Relatively Few Opportunities to Speak English

One of the main factors that reveal the interviewees' anxiety when giving an oral presentation is their few opportunities to speak English. All four interviewees mentioned that they rarely speak English in or out of class. Although the English classes that they attended required them to use English in discussions and presentations, they needed to prepare for the talks. Two respondents stated that they needed to learn to give opinions during the discussions, while another said she never knew how to deliver an academic oral presentation. In addition, the respondents required clarification on the steps of delivering an oral presentation, as can be seen from the following excerpts.

“Also, when speaking [English], I don’t talk well because I have yet to practice much.” (Interviewee B)

“My speaking is relatively poor because, in my daily life, I don’t often use English.”

(Interviewee D)

Self-Perception of Pronunciation Competence

Self-perception of pronunciation competence is another theme in the respondents' concerns. Half the interviewees stated that they were not confident in their pronunciation. They realized that mispronouncing words caused the audience to not properly understand their talks. The respondents' uncertainty about their pronunciation caused them to avoid speaking English. One of the respondents revealed that she was worried about speaking English because she had a negative experience of being judged by others for her mispronunciation. These issues are illustrated in the following excerpts.

“I’m afraid of issues related to time and whether people will understand what I say because I’m afraid of mispronouncing things.” (Interviewee D)

“In my perspective, I lose confidence for a moment because, you know, if I make a mistake or mispronounce when speaking, I don’t dare to speak again like this. It’s not like I’ll keep talking even if I make a mistake. But I just lose confidence completely, you know.” (Interviewee C)

Lack of Confidence about the Topic

Another issue that affects all four interviewees' loss of speaking confidence is uncertainty over the assigned topic. The respondents agreed that their level of confidence was likely to decrease when they had to talk about given topics that they did not fully understand. Consequently, some of them mentioned that their level of anxiety rose when it came to the question and answer part. They thought they could not answer questions after the presentation when they did not have enough subject knowledge. Almost all the interviewees reported that they tried to memorize their presentation scripts. This increased their level of anxiety if they could not remember everything in the script. The following excerpts illustrate these issues.

“What’s causing the concern? It’s when I don’t fully understand the content, like I only grasp some information. I’m afraid that if I talk about this and someone asks me questions, will I be able to answer?”

(Interviewee A)

2. EFL Students' Strategies to Cope with Anxiety During English Oral Presentations

The information from the interview shows that this study's respondents employed several strategies and techniques to reduce their speaking anxiety, starting with the preparation stage of a presentation. This section discusses the interviewees' anxiety management techniques regarding *RQ2: What strategies do these students employ to cope with anxiety in English oral presentations?*

Familiarizing Themselves with the Subject Knowledge

All the interviewees concurred that good subject knowledge helped them reduce their anxiety during the presentation. As mentioned earlier, some interviewees worried about follow-up questions during the question and answer session. One thought if she understood her topic well, she might not be worried about responding to questions. The data also revealed that some interviewees used content words or phrases from any target texts in

their presentations.

"I'm worried that they [the audience] will ask an unexpected question. I've got my own thing going on, but I'm still afraid they'll ask me a particular question about my job, and I won't have an answer (laughs). I'm doing extra study to ensure I have good knowledge and maybe even guess what questions they'll ask so I can practice my responses beforehand." (Interviewee B)

Writing a Script, Making Notes, and Using Visual Aids

All the interviewees reported that another strategy to help eliminate worries about public speaking was to write a presentation script and make notes. With the script and their notes, they felt they did not miss anything while giving the presentation. One also said she simply read her notes when she realized she was running out of time. In addition, the results of this study showed that some interviewees found that clear, well-designed PowerPoint slides could enhance their confidence when speaking in public. As all the interviewees worried about freezing, the slides assisted the audience to quickly comprehend the talk. The following excerpts illustrate these issues.

"If I forget something I want to mention, or if I can't arrange [English] sentences in time, it's a good idea to have notes to look at from time to time." (Interviewee A)

"Yes, that's right. I must keep notes when things get tight at the end. When time is running out, and it's almost impossible to keep up, having those notes can be a lifesaver. It helps me decide quickly and ensures I can deliver all the necessary content on time." (Interviewee C)

Learning from the previous group and asking for feedback

One technique that all the interviewees mentioned in their responses as to how to decrease their speaking anxiety was to ask for help from their seniors. Since all four interviewees originally had little prior experience in public speaking, they did not know how to deliver an oral presentation. They considered presentation samples (presentation sequences) and experiences from their seniors to be meaningful sources of public speaking strategies.

"We have taken this from our seniors as a template. It seems like they've established a pattern for us to follow. It's like you start with a greeting and then introduce the topic and the advisor's name. After that, you go into the introduction and the literature review. It's kind of like what they've put in the PowerPoint slides." (Interviewee C)

Furthermore, the results of this study showed that teacher feedback and support were essential for all four interviewees in order for them not to be too worried when giving a presentation. The interviewees stated that they were more confident if their teacher commented on their PowerPoint slides and scripts before the presentation. For instance,

"My teacher gives me examples of making a presentation. She directly tells me to follow the patterns of our seniors. Before starting to write in English, I first wrote a script in Thai. I describe what the topic is about in Thai, and then I translate it into English. After that, the teacher reviews it. She helps me make the sentences more accurate." (Interviewee D)

Doing Rehearsals

All the interviewees agreed that rehearsals and practices were an excellent strategy to reduce their speaking anxiety. According to the data, all the interviewees practiced with their teammates and other groups. Apart from practicing with friends, one interviewee stated that she predicted questions that would likely be asked. She listed possible questions and then thought about possible answers beforehand.

Students' Needs in Giving English Language Academic Oral Presentations

Apart from discussing their speaking anxiety and how to reduce their worries, the interviewees also expressed their needs to help them improve their academic presentations. Hence, this section elaborates on the interviewees' opinions on what might help them improve their public speaking. Firstly, all four interviewees thought it would be helpful for EFL students to explicitly study the sequencing of academic oral presentations. Although all the interviewees had experience delivering oral presentations while taking English courses, they did not learn about the steps in oral presentations. In addition, they said that they needed more practice during English classes. In addition, the interviewees asserted that they needed to acquire common phrases used in delivering oral presentations. Some of them mentioned that they wanted their presentations to be smoother. For example, they wanted to know what words could be used when the presenter was going to change from one slide to another slide. They thought that some useful phrases, e.g., when making transitions, drawing the audience's attention to the PowerPoint Slides, and ending the presentation, could make their talks more natural. Finally, all four interviewees agreed that feedback from their teacher was important for them. They stated they did not receive much feedback after delivering presentations in their previous English classes. Some mentioned that the feedback which they had received was not specific enough. The following excerpt illustrates this.

"It's like... she [the lecturer] gave me compliments like, 'Your presentation is quite good; it's easy to follow.' And then she told me what I should improve, like... 'It'd be better not to read your notes while presenting.' But I think it'd be better if she told me what else I should do to improve my talk, such as the content, language used, or, um... accuracy." (Interviewee C)

Discussion

This study was conducted to explore EFL Science major students' experiences and anxiety in delivering academic oral presentations in English. The extent to which the participants prepared themselves for public speaking and managed their fear of speaking in front of others was scrutinized through a focus group interview. The main findings show that all four participants faced public speaking problems in four areas, namely insufficient knowledge of vocabulary and syntax, insufficient opportunities to speak English, negative self-perception of pronunciation competence, and lack of confidence about the topic.

The outcomes of this study indicate that all four interviewees worried about their presentation skills due to their limited language resources and syntax. The interviewees reflected that they worried about expressing their thoughts in English. They realized that they could not fluently communicate because they needed time to think about words and create appropriate sentences. This aligns with the findings of Laachir et al. (2022), who

discovered that students' limited language resources could be attributed to their high anxiety. In addition, Brooks and Wilson (2014) suggest that students need both macro and micro skills to give oral presentations. To increase students' confidence in speaking, they need to be introduced to both the organization of the academic presentation and to genre-specific language points, including specific vocabulary and syntax.

The findings show that the interviewees' limited opportunities to speak English or present work in English affected the participants' anxiety. The study's outcomes reveal that the interviewees felt more confident in delivering an oral presentation after the first time. This could mean the interviewees in this study had acquired more confidence in public speaking because they had already had some experience presenting their work in class. Some interviewees also stated that having more opportunities to be exposed to the target language could help them somewhat alleviate their worries. However, Amelia's (2022) study revealed that regardless of whether or not students had several chances to deliver an oral presentation, they still felt uncomfortable about public speaking.

One of the major concerns of the interviewees regards their self-perceived pronunciation. In this study, the participants demonstrated anxiety about pronunciation and expressed a fear of being judged. The interviewees stated that they seemed to lose confidence when they were criticized for their mispronunciation. This aligns with the findings of several previous studies (Amelia, 2022; Grieve et al., 2021; Kurakan, 2021; Tsang, 2022).

Interviewees' uncertainty about their subject knowledge is another of the causes of anxiety. The study outcomes clearly show that the interviewees were worried when they did not completely comprehend the content they were talking about. They reflected that they could not articulate their thoughts to their audience without sufficient subject knowledge. The findings also revealed that the interviewees' anxiety level increased during Q and A sessions because they worried about being unable to answer the questions correctly. Likewise, Kurakan (2021) reported that the students in her study were highly anxious when asked questions after their presentation. Similarly, Grieve et al. (2021) indicate that students were anxious when they felt uncertain about the topic about which they were speaking because they feared their audience might negatively respond to their talk.

Apart from investigating student anxiety regarding public speaking, the data obtained from the interview indicated that the participants employed several strategies to prepare themselves for an academic oral presentation and manage their anxiety. To begin with, all participants in this study stated that their limited ability to use language was their primary concern while they were having an academic oral presentation. Consequently, almost all of them use the scientific vocabulary and phrases in the model texts for their presentation. Because this group of students was aware of the uniqueness of the language used in different contexts, they carefully picked up meaningful terms and phrases found in the model texts in their talk.

Some interviewees reported that they were anxious about their subject knowledge or the topic they were going to talk about. It seems their anxiety would increase when they were unfamiliar with the topic they were discussing. Similarly, Bankowski (2010) discovered that students had trouble focusing on the topic while some struggled to choose the right topic. In order to reduce their anxiety regarding their subject knowledge, some students in the present study tried to predict the questions they would likely be asked after the talk. Familiarizing themselves with possible questions and answers that are likely to be asked in advance

made them feel more secure in responding to those questions.

Furthermore, the outcomes of this study show that the interviewees alleviated their stress when they developed well-crafted scripts, notes, and presentation slides. This group of students saw scripts and notes as essential strategies. This is because they felt more secure about forgetting their talk while performing an oral presentation, as they could quickly consult their scripts or notes during the presentation. In addition, the study's respondents viewed PowerPoint slides as a helpful tool to reduce their fear of speaking. Since all the respondents worried about their pronunciation, they tried to create well-designed and practical slides. Thus, the audience could follow and comprehend the presentation regardless of whether the speakers were having problems speaking. Here, the results of this study are similar to those of Yang (2010), showing that careful planning, the strategic use of slide presentations, and effective time management are all examples of oral presentation strategies.

Conclusion

To sum up, this study aimed to explore Science majors' presentation anxiety and public speaking strategies in the EFL context. The participants had experience with delivering an academic oral presentation in English. The findings of this study revealed that the interviewees had all had difficulties with anxiety when presenting their work in English. The main anxiety factors identified by the interviewees were a lack of vocabulary and syntax knowledge, a lack of English-speaking opportunities, weak self-perception of pronunciation competence, and lack of confidence about the topic. The information obtained from the interview showed that the interviewees employed various techniques to reduce their anxiety over public speaking and successfully present their content. Of all the strategies the group of interviewees used, they particularly valued feedback and support from teachers, peers, and seniors.

Anxiety can negatively affect students' performance, especially in speaking. Teachers and educators should not underestimate its impact and help students to learn how to manage their concerns. One effective way to help prepare students for successful public speaking is to explicitly guide them through the organization of an academic presentation. Teachers should demonstrate essential language features in an academic presentation, such as phrases to show a transition from one slide to another or how to draw the audience's attention to the visual aids. In addition, it is helpful for students and presenters to learn from feedback. Constructive and specific comments should be provided for students, especially detailed feedback that guides them to improve their speaking. Finally, it would be good for students to have more opportunities to both attend and deliver academic presentations.

Limitations

Since the number of interviewees involved in obtaining qualitative data in this study was limited to four, the results might only represent the experiences of some of the population in the EFL context. In addition, the study was conducted in only one particular context, so future studies should recruit more participants from

a variety of settings. Finally, anxiety in foreign language learning is a complex phenomenon. consequently, a deeper understanding of EFL anxiety should be investigated through multiple instruments, such as observations, self-reflection, and surveys.

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