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Anxiety During Oral Presentations in English Among Malaysian Undergraduates

Research Paper

Nalini Arumugam[1]*, Anis Aleeya Binti Hashim[2], Sivajothy Selvanayagam[3] & Isai Amutan Krishnan[4]

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Abstract

The study aims to investigate the factors that may cause anxiety during oral presentations that are conducted in English and to identify the strategies used by them to cope with it. The study employed a quantitative method. Questionnaires were distributed to 300 undergraduates from three public universities in Malaysia. SPSS (version 23) tool was used to analyze the data statistically to find frequency, mean, and standard deviation. The findings showed that the respondents commonly have negative emotions, physical symptoms, and fear of making mistakes during English oral presentations. The findings further revealed that students' language ability, audience reaction, and teacher' feedback are the factors that affected undergraduates' anxiety in oral presentation using the English language. Undergraduates cope with their anxiety by making efforts to understand the topic and prepare ahead of time to as part of their coping strategies.

Keywords: Anxiety, oral presentations, coping strategies, emotions, efforts

1. Introduction

University undergraduates are often required to participate in oral presentations, where it is one of the main assessments prescribed by the university Živković (2014). Having the confidence to speak or present ideas in front of others is quite challenging for most people, including undergraduates who need to learn and use English in the classroom. The anxiety can be heightened when English is not their native language (Miskam & Saidalvi, 2019). Undergraduates are sometimes unable to deliver their best due to their level of anxiety regarding this most threatening situation (Hazila, 2014). She added that the feeling of anxiety may lead to other associated symptoms of anxiety such as reticence, hesitation, and poor performance when they are forced to present in front of others. Anxiety is said to be a very common, yet serious issue that can happen to anyone, especially when asked to speak in their second language, English (Munohsamy et al., 2015). Hence, it is crucial to investigate the reasons for their anxiety to deliver in the English language and the ways they cope with their anxiety.

While preparing undergraduates for real work situations, assessments in English oral presentations are important too as they help them master the language so that they can communicate well and deliver their ideas to the audience. However, not all undergraduates feel confident doing the oral assessment in English (Miskam & Saidalvi, 2019). Some undergraduates encounter the fear of speaking and presenting orally in front of other people and this is quite challenging as they need to develop confidence and cope with their nervousness in their second language classroom (Miskam & Saidalvi, 2019).

*Corresponding Author's Email: nalini@uitm.edu.my
[1, 2, 3]Akademi Pengajian Bahasa, Universiti Teknologi MARA, 40100 Shah Alam, Sleangor Darul Ehsan, Malaysia
[4]Faculty of Languages and Linguistics, University of Malaya, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

As the anxiety issues among undergraduates cannot be taken lightly, it is necessary to find out how the undergraduates cope with their anxiety when presenting in English. Therefore, this study aims to investigate the symptoms of their anxiety and the factors that may contribute to it during their English oral presentations, as well as to identify the strategies used by them to cope with their anxieties during the presentations. However, many researchers have studied the topic of anxiety in an oral presentation, but very few have narrowed it down to the English oral presentation among undergraduates, especially when English is not their first language. Therefore, this study aims to bridge the gap in this area.

2. Methodology

This study employed a quantitative method of research. A questionnaire was adapted and modified from Nurul et al. (2019). This was used to collect data from 300 undergraduates from three universities in Malaysia, which are Universiti Teknologi MARA, Shah Alam (UiTM), Universiti Malaysia Terengganu (UMT), and Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM), where undergraduates must pass the English course. The questionnaires were distributed through the URL link in online applications such as *WhatsApp*, *Telegram,* and *Facebook*. The questionnaire consists of four sections; Part A consists of demographic profile items; Part B consists of 10 items about the symptoms of anxiety that the undergraduates faced in English oral presentation; Part C consists of 10 items of the factors that may lead to anxiety; Part D consists of 5 items relating to strategies that they used to cope with the anxiety problems they faced. Except for the demographic questions, all of the questions are required by the undergraduates to answer in a Likert scale ranging from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree". The data were analyzed using statistical analysis by SPSS software and presented in the form of descriptive statistics.

Demographic data was found from the questionnaire's Part A that was collected among the respondents. It was found that most of the respondents are Malay with 81%, while only a few of them are Chinese and Indian with 10% and 9% respectively. The respondents from UiTM were the most numbers with 36%, followed by UMT with 33%, and UKM with 31%. As for UiTM students, most of them are from the Faculty of Architecture, Planning, and Surveying with 23%, while the rest are from the Academy of Language Studies with 13%. Meanwhile, for UKM and UMT, only one faculty from each university participated. The respondents from UKM were from the Faculty of Education, and UMT students are under the Faculty of Business, Economics, and Social Development.

3. Findings and Discussion

The findings for the first research question which is identifying the symptoms of anxiety faced during English oral presentation divided into three categories: Negative Emotions, Physical Symptoms, and Mistake-making. When learners process target language knowledge, the positive or negative emotions would affect language processing in their mind and people who have higher trait anxiety are typically nervous people lacking emotional stability (Chen, 2015). Table-1 presents the results for undergraduates' symptoms of anxiety.

Table 1. Undergraduates' Symptoms of Anxiety while Presenting in the English Language

No.	Statement	Mean	SD
	Negative Emotion		
1	I stammer and code-switch when I am speaking in English in front of others.	3.9	.95
2	I start to panic when it is my turn to speak in English in front of my class.	3.8	1.01
3	I don't feel confident with myself while speaking in English.	3.6	1.05
	Physical Symptoms		
4	My hands are shaking and I cannot think straight when I was standing in front of others.	4.2	.91
5	I find it hard to look at the audience while presenting.	3.7	1.03
	Mistake-making.		
6	I am afraid of making mistakes while presenting in English.	4.16	.91
7	I tend to make mistakes when I feel nervous.	4.00	.93

The highest mean, M=3.9, SD=0.95 shows that the respondents stammer and start using their mother tongue to use the right choice of the vocabulary. This finding is in line with a study done by Arumugam, et al. (2017) which indicated that the majority of respondents have a neutral opinion about feeling stress or anxiety while presenting in their second language could lead to code-switching while a small group of the respondents shared that code-switching. Chen (2015) also made a similar discovery where students who are advanced English speakers or almost near-native speakers would deliver a speech in English easily.

The respondents admitted that they panic to present in English in front of their classmates and many will get too nervous to think of the right words to deliver their ideas and sometimes they feel loss of ideas (M=3.8, SD=1.01). Afiqah (2015) also found similar findings where she stated that anxiety during English presentations has led the undergraduates to forget the things that they already know because they cannot think properly, and they tend to forget the lesson that they have learned in class makes it hard for them to explain the presentation topics.

Respondents were found to have negative emotions and symptoms of anxiety where most of them indicating that they have low self-esteem and lack confidence every time they speak in English. This item fairs with a mean, M=3.6, SD=1.05. Nurul et al. (2019) also shared a similar finding where their respondents hate the idea of speaking in front of people especially when they need to use English rather than their mother tongue.

The results also showed a high mean of (m=4.2, SD=.91) for the item that the respondents shared that they suffer shaky hands and unable to think clearly when the anxiety hits them while presenting in English.

These findings concur with a previous study conducted by Aeni et al. (2017) where it was found that one of the participants felt anxious and nervous while presenting and showed many physical symptoms such as shaking hands, and another participant showed discomfort with her body movements. The statement "I find it hard to look at the audience while presenting" fairs with a mean (m=3.7, SD=1.03) indicates that they cannot relate to the situations as they may think that eye contact is an essential move to build a pleasing environment while presenting. Having a fear of making errors or mistakes causes learners to give up some parts of their oral performance Aeni et al. (2017).

The respondents can relate to the item "I am afraid of making mistakes while presenting in the English language" the most with the highest mean (m=4.16, SD=.91) probably because they have to speak in English. Most of them rarely use it in their daily life due to the fear of making any grammar or pronunciation mistakes make them reach anxiety level. In a study conducted by Chen (2015), it was found that one of the participants said he got nervous and anxious during oral presentations because English is his second language, while another participant also stated the same reason that the anxiety attacked him during the oral presentation because English is not his mother tongue. Results indicate the least number of means is the item "I tend to make mistakes when I feel nervous" with m=4.00, SD=.93. Some respondents agree that they may not be aware of their mistakes when they are nervous until their lecturers or peers highlight them. However, many of them agreed that they were conscious of their mistakes whenever they panicked and were bewildered by the situation where they needed to use English in front of the class.

In short, negative emotions, physical symptoms, and mistake-making appeared to be apparent among undergraduates in their presentation in the English language. Raja (2017) states that presenters will experience emotions like panic and anxiety when they find themselves in situations where they become the focus of attention.

3.1. Factors Cause Anxiety in English Oral Presentation

The findings for the factors that may cause anxiety in English oral presentation are divided into three categories; Language Ability, Audience Reactions, and Teacher Feedback. According to Razawi et al. (2019) undergraduates with low English language proficiency worry more about their oral presentations and tend to focus more on grammar than fluency during the presentations.

Table 2. Responses for Language Ability items

No.	Statement	Mean	SD
	Language Ability		
1.	I always feel that the other students speak English better than me.	4.23	.92
2.	I think that my English is very weak.	3.81	1.21
3.	I tend to make a lot of pronunciation mistakes while presenting in English.	3.77	1.22
	Audience Reaction		
4.	Audience expressions scared me to continue my presentation.	3.91	1.26
5.	I am afraid that the other students will laugh at me when I present orally in English.	3.85	1.14
6.	The audience asked a lot of questions.	3.71	1.27
	Teacher Feedback		
7	I am afraid that my English lecturer is ready to correct every mistake I make.	4.17	.83
8	My lecturer corrected my English in front of my classmates.	3.92	1.11
9	My lecturer commented on my mistakes in unpleasant tones.	3.50	1.12

As Table 2 demonstrates, item "I always feel that the other students speak English better than me" got the highest mean (m=4.23, SD=.92) where the majority of respondents can relate to this item, probably because they do think that there are always people who are better in English more than them. The respondents are also found to be feeling negative as they believe that their English is very weak with a mean, m=3.81, SD=1.21. Studies by Chin et al. (2016) also depicted the same results as the majority of the students believed that their classmates speak better English than them. The respondents agreed to have anxieties of making pronunciation mistakes while presenting in English and recorded the lowest mean (m=3.77, SD=1.22). Those who frequently and most frequently use English can be very confident with their language, as they fluently speak English daily. However, some of them also agreed that they still feel anxious because they do think the other students are better than them.

Audience reaction is one of the factors that cause anxiety among undergraduates during oral presentations. Presenters who have a fear of public speaking, especially in English tend to be terrified of sounding silly or would not be understood by the audience (Živković, 2014). We can relate this claim to the item "I am afraid that the other students will laugh at me when I present orally in English" where the majority of the respondents have agreed to the statement with a high mean, m=3.85, SD=1.14. There was a tendency to feel embarrassed or humiliated if the crowd laughed at them during oral presentations. This finding is similar to the results of a study by Chin et al. (2016) where they found that students were afraid of being laughed at by the audience as they did not want to be perceived as less proficient or labeled as weak and consequently be judged negatively by their peers and lecturers.

The majority of the respondents agreed that they tend to panic when the audience is watching them as the item "Audience expressions scared me to continue my presentation" showed the highest value of mean with m=3.91, SD=1.26. Audience expressions like giving bored looks affected their presentation especially when they make mistakes and the audience starts giving weird looks to signal the errors. It is similar to the observation made in a study by Razawi et al. (2019) in which they noted that the majority of their respondents agreed of being afraid when the audience is watching them presenting in front of the class. They also stated that the respondents were worried about the audience's reactions such as "not paying attention and giving a bored look" since all of those actions would affect their presentations negatively.

This study has found that teacher feedback is one of the factors that cause anxiety in oral presentation among undergraduates. The respondents mostly agreed to all items under the factor of teacher's feedback where the item "I am afraid that my English lecturer is ready to correct every mistake I make" shows the highest value of mean (m=4.17, SD=.83) out of all 3 items in the component. They can relate to the item because undergraduates tend to be afraid if the lecturer is ready to correct their mistakes. Some respondents who got an A in their English grade in SPM and those who have confidence in the English language also expressed that they agreed to the item

because sometimes the lecturer's feedback scared them as they would be negatively evaluated and scored lower marks. This alarming finding shows that the teacher's feedback affected almost all undergraduates in their oral presentations.

Most respondents also agreed with a high mean (m=3.92, SD=1.11) that their anxiety affected their presentations because some lecturers directly corrected their English in front of the class and they felt very embarrassed to face their classmates, while some of them also corrected the undergraduates in unpleasant tones (m=3.50, SD=1.12). This finding has been highlighted by Warsame (2018) where it was found that the lecturer's negative feedback to the students such as criticizing in front of the classmates made them inactive in the classroom especially during the presentation to prevent saying wrong words has contributed to anxiety because of the fear of losing face. Overall, it is found that undergraduates' English language competence, audience reactions, feedback from teachers affected their performance in English oral presentations. Although feedback from teachers allows many positive opportunities in improving learning development, negative feedback can discourage students' effort and decrease student's motivation (Rehman, 2016). Presenters' anxiety will reduce when the audience manages to show positive attitudes during the presentation as it can build their motivation to perform well.

3.2. Strategies Used to Cope with Anxiety during English Oral Presentations

As highlighted by Chen (2015), some students in her study claimed that the strategies used during English oral presentations to cope with anxiety were focused on two categories: Preparations and Physical Adjustment. Thus, this study also identified similar strategies adopted by the students in coping with their speaking anxiety in presentations. Table 3 below presents the responses for Preparations items.

Table 3. Responses for Preparation items

No.	Statement	Mean	SD
1	Ahead of time, I carefully plan out the information I want to present, including any props, audio or visual aids.	4.91	.29
2	Before the presentation, I tried to understand better about my topic.	4.68	.47
3	I tried to consider what questions the audience may ask and have my responses ready.	4.26	.52
4	I wear my best outfit to look more formal and professional while presenting.	4.73	.49
5	I tried to smile more in front of the audience.	4.22	.58

Based on Table 3, the majority can relate to the item "Ahead of time, I carefully plan out the information I want to present, including any props, audio or visual aids" with the highest recorded mean (m=4.91, SD=.29). The undergraduates must prepare materials ahead of what they were going to present in front of the class and what ideas that they wanted to perform. Better preparation will equal better performance. When learners are well prepared, it will improve their motivation and make it easy to focus on delivering the message (Morin, 2020).

Before the presentation, the undergraduates understand their topic and prepare well, fairs with a mean, m=4.68, SD=.47. Hanifa and Yusra (2018) indicated that it was clear from the data obtained that all respondents believe that mastering the topic and content before the presentation is the key to presentation success. To ensure that their topics are well mastered, some of them gathered many resources, including books, articles, journals, and others.

Physical adjustment is also one of the strategies agreed upon by all respondents. It can be noted that all of them can relate to the item "I wear my best outfit to look more formal and professional while presenting" as it recorded the highest number of the mean (m=4.73, SD=.49) who agreed to it. They tried hard to look more professional and formal by focusing on their outfits. The mean of m=4.22, SD=.58 can relate to the item "I tried to smile more in front of the audience". They tried to smile more during English oral presentations to cope up with the fear and anxiety of speaking in front of people especially in their rarely used language, English. Chen (2015) also indicated in her study that physical adjustments are a common coping strategy when dealing with anxiety in the classroom.

4. Conclusion

It was found that the majority of the respondents indicated that they experience anxiety during oral presentations in the English language. The findings show that there are several symptoms of anxiety that the undergraduates face while presenting in English including negative emotions, physical symptoms like shaking hands and trembling body, and making mistakes due to nervousness. Besides, poor perception of their language ability, audience reactions, and teacher feedback are all found to be the major factors that have caused anxiety among the undergraduates. Strategies like preparedness before the presentations and physical adjustments are found to be very useful coping mechanisms for undergraduates to perform better in oral presentations.

Undergraduates too need to be taught better coping strategies when facing anxiety during oral presentations. While they strive to prepare ahead of time for their presentations to reduce their anxieties, they need to be armed with other coping mechanisms that will enhance their learning and their academic performance, in general in the university. Hence, further research on causes and types of anxiety in the classroom is imperative to determine the actions instructors can take to overcome this serious issue. The Focus group method can provide more detailed information and would be able to provide more accurate findings to the extent of anxiety and help educators address this rather serious issue.

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