

ANXIETY IN ORAL PRESENTATIONS AMONG ESL STUDENTS

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Abstract

This study examines the possible causes of anxiety in oral presentations among students who are currently taking English subjects in UiTM Dungun Campus. Communication apprehension especially in doing oral presentations is inevitable among ESL (English as A Second Language) students. This natural phenomenon occurs due to several factors by taking diverse students' backgrounds into account. However, there are also other factors that may contribute to the students' anxiety. The respondents were invited to answer a set of questionnaires using Google Forms™. The questionnaire was adapted and modified from Al-Nouh (2015). A few alterations were made to the questionnaire so as to fit the respondents' perceptions. From the survey, several factors of anxiety in oral presentations were perceived; language ability, personality traits, preparation and audience interest. Overall, the findings showed that all these four factors did affect the students' oral presentations. Several implications of the findings were discussed which include setting a friendly and stimulating class environment to cater to the different students' learning needs, sharing the scoring rubrics for students' preparation beforehand, encouraging positive attitude among the audience members and emphasizing fluency more than accuracy while using English. It is hoped that the ideas and suggestions discussed will provide the lecturers with basic guidelines of how to improve the students' command of English language through oral presentation assessments and help the students to work their way out of anxiety.

Keywords: Anxiety, Oral presentations, Communication apprehension

*Article history:- Received: 31 October 2018; Accepted: 19 June 2019; Published: 24 June 2019
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Introduction

Oral presentation assessments are found in almost all syllabuses, particularly in ESL/EFL subjects in higher academic institutions. There are countless benefits of oral presentations especially when preparing students for the real work situations. This type of assessment is essential in which students are required to communicate their ideas effectively to the audience. Other than presentation skills, soft skills can also be trained through this assessment. Students may involve in a better interaction and participation in class. They may also observe their peers' performance in oral presentations so as to improve their own presentation skills. All that has been mentioned may be only part of the positive aspects of oral presentations. There are definitely more advantages, if the students are able to see it from a positive angle.

However, in a classroom setting, students may come from diverse backgrounds. Not every student in the class would think about doing oral presentations from the positive angle. Some students may have fears of public speaking, where stage fright becomes their utmost nightmare. The other students may have negative beliefs of doing oral presentations. As a consequence, they may not be getting the positive outcomes of the oral presentations. Students often feel stressed and apprehensive when it comes to doing oral presentations in class, be it individually or in groups. King (2002) found that very often, students are anxious with the presentation and communication skills that are necessary for a good presentation. In a study conducted by Kho and Leong (2015), it was found that other than not being prepared, linguistic and psychological are the two most common factors of anxiousness while delivering oral presentations among students. Moreover, in an ESL/EFL classroom setting, it would be more difficult for the students of non-native speakers to speak with great confidence during oral presentations (Al Harun, Amirul Islam & Rahman, 2016). This is especially true to students who have not been

exposed to English in their everyday conversations. The challenge is even more real to them when English language is part of the assessment.

The factors mentioned above are closely related to the communication apprehension (CA) theory. This theory was founded by McCroskey (1977). Communication apprehension is defined as “an individual’s level of fear or anxiety associated with either real or anticipated communication with the audience” (McCroskey, 1977). Therefore, this study examines the multiple factors that cause the students’ communication apprehension or anxiety specifically in oral presentation assessments.

This study is the first attempt at examining the perceptions of difficulties that are faced when dealing with oral presentations among students who are taking English subjects in UiTM Dungun Campus. As the lecturers prepare them for the real-life work situations that always require good oral presentation skills, therefore it is important that the lecturers know from the students’ perspectives on the causes that may contribute to anxiety when they are engaged with oral presentations in classrooms.

Methods

Students of diploma and bachelor’s degree who are taking English subject participated in this study where priority was given to those taking ELC270 (English for Workplace Communication) and ELC590 (English for Oral Presentation Skills) as these subjects require oral presentation assignments to be part of their assessment component. They were invited to answer a set of questionnaires using Google Forms™. The questionnaire was adapted and adopted from (Al-Nouh, Abdul-Kareem & Taqi , 2015). A few alterations were made to the questionnaire so as to fit the respondents’ perceptions. The questionnaire can be reached at <https://goo.gl/forms/9jv3VCkoroEg9fFc2>. The respondents were required to respond to the statements of factors that affect students’ oral presentations on the Likert scale of 1(strongly disagree) to 4 (strongly agree). The statements of factors that affect students’ oral presentations in the questionnaire were categorized into personality traits, preparation, audience interest and language ability.

Result and Discussion

In the demographic section, it was found that majority of the respondents were female students, and most of them were from bachelor’s degree programs. (State number of respondents involved in the survey).

Gender

111 responses

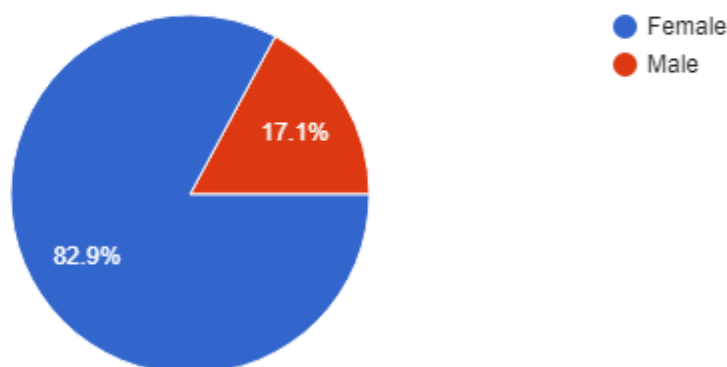


Figure 1: Respondents according to gender

Education Background

111 responses

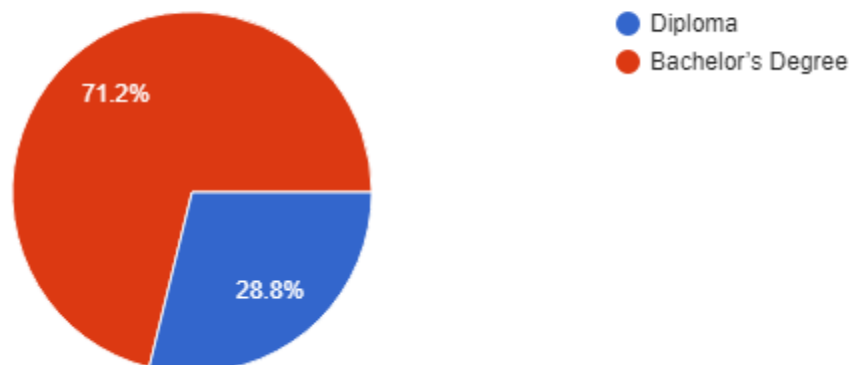


Figure 2: Respondents' academic background

As mentioned earlier, the statements of factors that affect students' oral presentations are divided into four categories; 1) Personality traits, 2) Preparation, 3) Audience interest and 4) Language ability. Majority of the respondents agreed and strongly agreed with all five statements. The responses showed that the respondents are students with low self-esteem and low self-confidence where they do not like speaking in public, afraid to speak alone and would prefer to be accompanied by a partner or group members, anxious and easily embarrassed. Some of the traits showed that the respondents are introverts (Cherry, 2018) and are the high scorers for neuroticism according to the Five-Factor Model of Personality (Goldberg, 1990; McCrae & John, 1992; McCrae & Costa, 1987, as cited in Diener & Lucas, 2018). The responses for personality were recorded as in the table below;

Table 1: Respondents' responses for personality traits

| Factors That Affect Students' Oral Presentations | Strongly Disagree | Disagree | Agree | Strongly Agree |
|---|-------------------|----------|--------|----------------|
| I don't like the idea of doing oral presentations. | 24.56% | 30.70% | 36.84% | 7.89% |
| I prefer to do an oral presentation in pairs or in groups. | 5.26% | 21.05% | 31.58% | 42.11% |
| I feel very anxious before an oral presentation. | 0.00% | 13.16% | 45.61% | 41.23% |
| I find an oral presentation difficult because I have low self-confidence. | 9.65% | 23.68% | 42.11% | 24.56% |
| I feel embarrassed when I do an oral presentation in English. | 12.28% | 27.19% | 40.35% | 20.18% |

Proper preparation is crucial before an oral presentation. From the responses, it was discovered that majority of the students preferred to bring notes during a presentation, still worried even if they have prepared well, easily forget everything when they begin presenting and organizing ideas logically while presenting is a challenge for them. This explains that they still need encouragement and help (Rosenthal, 2013) from the surrounding environment and support systems that could be their lecturers and classmates. The responses for preparation were recorded as in the table below;

Table 2: Respondents' responses for preparation

| Factors That Affect Students' Oral Presentations | Strongly Disagree | Disagree | Agree | Strongly Agree |
|---|--------------------------|-----------------|--------------|-----------------------|
| I bring notes with me during my oral presentation even if I am well-prepared. | 14.91% | 14.04% | 35.09% | 35.96% |
| I feel worried even if I have prepared well beforehand. | 7.02% | 13.16% | 46.49% | 33.33% |
| When I start my oral presentation, I forget everything I wanted to say. | 14.91% | 21.05% | 36.84% | 27.19% |
| I need to read from my notes during oral presentations. | 16.67% | 33.33% | 34.21% | 15.79% |
| I find it difficult to organize my ideas logically during oral presentation. | 9.65% | 23.68% | 48.25% | 18.42% |

Audience plays a great role in a success of one's oral presentation. Majority of the respondents agreed that they tend to be afraid when the audience is watching them. The audience's reactions such as giving a bored look or not paying attention also affected their performance. There was also the tendency to be humiliated when the audience laughs at them while delivering oral presentations. The role of audience is not simply to hear, but to engage and listen attentively to what is being presented. It may be helpful and harmful at the same time (Brown & Brown, 2017). The responses for audience interest were recorded as in the table below;

Table 3: Respondents' responses for audience interest

| Factors That Affect Students' Oral Presentations | Strongly Disagree | Disagree | Agree | Strongly Agree |
|--|--------------------------|-----------------|--------------|-----------------------|
| I feel frightened when a lot of people are watching me. | 11.40% | 17.54% | 43.86% | 27.19% |
| The audience's reactions affect my performance in the oral presentation. | 5.26% | 17.54% | 42.11% | 35.09% |
| I worry that the audience will laugh at me when I speak English. | 19.30% | 19.30% | 33.33% | 28.07% |

When undergoing English subjects, specifically among ESL students, English language component is taken into great consideration as it is a big part of the scoring rubrics for the oral presentation assessments. As non-native speakers, majority of the respondents worried of low English speaking ability. They tend to think about grammar more than fluency in English. Most of them would think in Bahasa Malaysia before they translated into English. Lack of vocabulary has made them a challenge to find suitable words in order to express meaning. Pronunciation was also a big problem as they were not exposed to speaking English daily. These are all normal problems among ESL students where they tend to strive for perfection in speaking the language when in reality they have minimal exposure to the use of English language in their daily lives. Oral presentations should have positive impacts to the language learners, but the lack of exposure to the language may diminish the impacts (Brooks & Wilson, 2014). The responses for language ability were recorded as in the table below;

Table 4: Respondents' responses for language ability

| Factors That Affect Students' Oral Presentations | Strongly Disagree | Disagree | Agree | Strongly Agree |
|--|-------------------|----------|--------|----------------|
| I'm worried because of my low English speaking ability. | 6.14% | 19.30% | 36.84% | 37.72% |
| I care about grammar more than fluency in oral presentation. | 10.53% | 35.96% | 36.84% | 16.67% |
| During an oral presentation, I think in Bahasa Malaysia then translate it into English. | 6.14% | 32.46% | 43.86% | 17.54% |
| I find it hard to find the suitable word to express my meaning. | 3.51% | 21.05% | 50.00% | 25.44% |
| I have a problem with oral fluency and pronunciation during oral presentation. | 7.02% | 27.19% | 47.37% | 18.42% |
| I prefer to memorize the script of the speech / oral presentation rather than understand it. | 22.81% | 31.58% | 29.82% | 15.79% |

Conclusion

Overall, the findings showed that all these four factors did affect the students' oral presentations i.e. personality traits, preparation, audience interest and language ability. There are several implications of these findings. First, since students come from diverse backgrounds, that means they possess different learning styles and personality traits. It is vital for the lecturers to be able to cater to their different learning needs. Not every student in the class would think about doing oral presentations from a positive aspect. Students with low self-esteem and self-confidence should be treated with different and suitable teaching methods. When it comes to handling anxiety with this group of students, creating a conducive environment in class should be given an emphasis. They might have prepared their scripts and contents thoroughly. It is the lecturer's job to set a classroom environment which is not threatening to them while they are delivering presentations. Lecturers should be able to set a friendly and motivating environment. When sitting at the back and assessing the students' performance, lecturers should always put a smile on the face and nod their head as to give sign that they understood what the students are trying to convey. When they feel comfortable and motivated on the stage, the confidence will take place itself. Second, before the students begin their oral presentations, they should be exposed with the scoring rubrics so that they know how to go about it and minimize the flaws. The scoring rubrics should not be treated confidential and should be shared with the students beforehand. Allowing the students to bring lengthy notes with them while presenting would not be a good practice, but lecturers can always allow them to bring short notes as guidance and not to be read all along the presentation. This will help them to be more prepared in terms of having a good flow and coherence of the presentations. Having a good slide show may also aid them while presenting and a good way to help them prepare for the presentations. However, they should always be reminded that the slides should be concise, or else the slides may hinder the run of the presentations. Third, audience members can be both helpful and harmful to one's presentation. Other than teaching the students the presentation skills, lecturers should also teach them how to be good audience members. Audience plays a great part in helping the presenters to feel motivated to speak and keep speaking. Among things that could be practiced include to be actively engaged by answering questions when they are asked, clap their hands at the beginning and at the end of the presentations, smile, and always show interest to what the presenter is talking about. When audience members manage to show positive attitude, it will certainly help reduce the speaker's anxiety while on the stage because they would feel motivated and appreciated. Fourth, to possess a good command of English language is inevitably necessary in shaping the students' oral presentation skills. When communicating, lecturers should emphasize that fluency is more important than accuracy. It is true that being grammatically correct while speaking is good, but when it is being emphasized greater than fluency, it may impede the success of an oral presentation. The students should be reminded that as long as they are able to convey the message to the audience correctly, then their presentation is a success already. As for accuracy, it takes years for people to be good at. In teaching them oral presentation skills, language phrases are things that are far more important to be mastered. Therefore, get the students

familiar with the language phrases as a preparation beforehand. The enrichment of vocabulary too is deemed important. This will help them to find suitable words to express meaning and avoid being lost in the midst of delivering the presentation. Common to non-native speakers, students tend to do direct translation of Bahasa Malaysia to English. This is the part where lecturers should help them to be exposed to the authentic English conversation engagement. Various videos of good speakers with good command of English language could be shown to the students. When they are able to prioritize fluency rather than accuracy, the confidence level will be raised and hence the reduced level of anxiety while delivering oral presentations. With the ideas and suggestions given, it is hoped that they will provide the lecturers with basic guidelines of how to improve the students' command of English language through oral presentation assessments. It may take years for the students to reduce their anxiety, but with correct supervision, they may go far.

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