

Factors of Public Speaking Anxiety (PSA) and Strategies to Mitigate PSA among Postgraduate Students of Malaysian Public Universities in Online Presentations

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Article history:

Received: 28 March 2023

Accepted: 18 May 2023

Published: 1 September 2023

Abstract

This study aims to examine the contributing factors of public speaking anxiety (PSA) among international and Malaysian postgraduate students and to explore the strategies and influences of PSA on the students' learning performances. Adopting Personal Report of Public Speaking Anxiety (PRPSA) and Foreign Language Communication Anxiety Scale (FLCAS), a qualitative research design was employed. Three postgraduate students were chosen according to a selective sampling method and interviewed using semi-structured interview protocol. The interview questions were adopted and customised to suit the online context as a situation specific setting. Results indicated that fear of negative evaluation and making errors along with peer pressure were among the main reasons for PSA. To cope, the students employed practicing and making comprehensive preparation to reduce PSA. The strategies were also identified to be unique according to the students' causes of anxiety. It is also found that PSA had a significantly negative influence on some postgraduates' online learning performances while having a moderate effect on some other postgraduates. This research is significant to figure out the causes of learners' foreign language anxiety and the relationship between speaking anxiety and academic performance.

Keywords: *public speaking anxiety, PSA, Personal Report of Public Speaking Anxiety, PRPSA, Foreign Language Communication Anxiety Scale, FLCAS, online presentation*

Background of the study

Anxiety is a quite often experienced feeling in human's and other animals' life. According to Spielberger (1972), the emotion of anxiety comes from a perception of threat, a perception informed by symbols, anticipation, and elements of uncertainty. One subarea of anxiety learning is language anxiety. An individual with language anxiety experiences stress, fear, worry, and nervousness (Horwitz et al., 1986). Language anxiety on the other hand, as identified by Zheng (2008) is a difficulty associated with psychological factors. They include self-belief, reflections along actions and habits when speaking beyond the confine of a classroom setting. The fear of public or public speaking anxiety (PSA) can be experienced by people when they prepare to speak or deliver (Taly & Paramasivam, 2020) and is situation-based (Bodie, 2010). Especially, PSA happens when the individual speaks in a foreign language or a second language.

Throughout the last decades, a great deal of attention has been paid to the study of language anxiety (Mouhoubi-Messadh & Khaldi, 2022). Studies were conducted on pre-service teachers (Kenoh, 2021), non-English majors (Yildiz, 2021), undergraduates and postgraduates (Grieve et al., 2021), international post-Universiti Teknologi MARA, Vol. 7, No. 3, 2023

graduate students (Taly & Paramasivam, 2020) by researchers to explore those who were experiencing language anxiety in speaking a foreign language. Of course, there were scholars who conducted their studies in teacher's angle (Eriksson, 2020; Mouhoubi-Messadh & Khaldi, 2022). These scholars put the emphasis on the factors, reasons, and strategies of language anxiety in the context of the physical situation. However, not too many of them considered foreign language speaking/second language speaking anxiety in the online learning context. Thus, additional research on online speaking anxiety among high-level learners is needed to reduce learners' anxiety and help them perform better in their online classes.

Problem statement

Public speaking is marked as one of the most distinguished skills in the 21st century that need mastering by individuals (Mabini, 2023). Interestingly, Desvitasari (2023) found in her research that 15 percent of students who were also preservice English teachers still experienced high speaking anxiety even though they have prepared the speech in advance. Most international postgraduates encounter the challenges of PSA while using English as a second language or foreign language to do online presentations in front of their classmates, lecturers, or other academic partners (Grieve et al., 2021). Language learning is negatively affected by foreign language anxiety (Mouhoubi-Messadh & Khaldi, 2022). Speaking anxiety impedes the learning progress of the students (Eriksson, 2020). Decades ago, Horwitz et al. (1986) already pointed out that the most difficult aspect of foreign language learning was speaking due to students' subjective anxiety and the threatening nature of oral communication. Therefore, it is significant to figure out the causes of learners' foreign language anxiety and the relationship between speaking anxiety and learners' performance. Two previous research showed that 40% of people and 25% of adults experienced PSA (Lee, 2014). Online public speaking is different from physical presentations. Some researchers claimed that the virtual online context would bring a positive effect on speaking anxiety (Anderson et al., 2005; Hinojo-Lucena et al., 2020; Madzlan et al., 2020). Some argued that online context couldn't guarantee public speaking performance (Helvie-Mason, 2010). Therefore, further research about online public speaking is needed to provide more evidence on this controversy.

To review, although language anxiety has been discussed for decades, PSA needs to be investigated in different perspectives (especially cross-cultural) for its complicated and multi-faceted nature (Eriksson, 2020; Taly & Paramasivam, 2020). Therefore, this study will conduct a qualitative study on both Chinese and Malaysian postgraduate students in Malaysian public universities to examine the PSA that occurred during online academic sessions.

Research objectives

This research sought to dissect how postgraduate students enrolled in Malaysian public universities are affected by PSA during online presentations. Thus, the objectives of the study are as follow:

- i) To identify the factors of PSA among postgraduate students enrolled in Malaysian public universities during online presentations.
- ii) To examine the strategies adopted by postgraduate students enrolled in Malaysian public universities to mitigate PSA during online presentations.

Research questions

In fulfilling the research objectives, this study sought to answer the following questions:

- i) What are the factors of PSA among postgraduate students enrolled in Malaysian public universities during online presentations?
- ii) How do postgraduate students enrolled in Malaysian public universities mitigate PSA during online presentations?

Theoretical framework

Public speaking anxiety (PSA)

Public speaking is one of the most feared tasks not only among students but also speakers everywhere (Dwyer & Davidson, 2012). Relatively, individuals will experience a form of anxiety during this setting. The term public speaking anxiety (PSA), as coined by MacIntyre, Thivierge, and MacDonald (1997), is to measure a person's apprehension and nervousness during actual presentations within large communicative groups. Many researchers studying PSA associate this phenomenon with Social Anxiety Disorder (SAD) which involve more cognitive-related experiments alongside treatments as part of the research aims (Stein & Stein, 2008). The most common term for PSA as mentioned by Elmanfi and Gaibani (2016) is 'stage fright', which does not necessarily occur within a traditional classroom setting of class presentations, but also within group discussions, normal conversations within small or large groups, phone calls, and a few other situations.

It has become more apparent that students experience communication apprehension during public speaking. Hinojo-Lucena et al. (2020) studied engaging virtual reality as part of treatment for PSA and claimed that strong engagement with social media has significantly contributed towards this anxiety. They also noted "social isolation" to be an adverse effect of internet use, not just PSA.

Tools to measure speaking anxiety

Personal Report of Public Speaking Anxiety (PRPSA)

A tool developed by McCroskey (1970) and Richmond and McCroskey (1992), the Personal Report of Public Speaking Anxiety (PRPSA), is used to measure anxiety which can be rated from low (5%) to high anxiety (40%) (Yirci et al., 2018). Quite similar to Foreign Language Communication Anxiety Scale (FLCAS), PRPSA adopts a Likert scale questionnaire with 34 questions with different codes of constructions - 22 are negative and 12 positive.

Enlightening research done by Kostic-Bobanovic and Bobanovic (2007) comparing the anxiety between two groups of students, which were freshmen and final year students, revealed significant disparities where 14 freshmen experienced low anxiety but 37 semester-end students and 51 freshmen had high anxiety but only 13 semester-end students fell into the low anxiety category.

Foreign Language Communication Anxiety Scale (FLCAS)

The term “language anxiety” (LA) (MacIntyre, 1998, p.27) has much to do with the emotional strain experienced by a person acquiring or utilising the second language. LA has also been associated with several other variables like performance and achievements of language learners and the results obtained were rather conflicting (Trang, 2012). One thing that can be understood, however, was that the association between anxiety and language performance is a cyclical process (Kráľová, 2016). Kráľová (2016) further elaborated that this is due to the fact that second or foreign language learners who committed mistakes in the process of learning will experience an increase in Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA) and is a recurrent process.

The studies on language anxiety have developed over the years to investigate variables that could aid or hamper language learning processes. Horwitz et al. (1986) and Spielberger (1972) narrowed three types of anxiety as laid out by psychologists as trait, state, and situation-specific anxiety. Trait anxiety resonates with individuals whose characters are very much predisposed to feeling stressed or nervous in any situations (Spielberger, 1983). In contrast, state anxiety comes and go or is intermittent, depending on the time scale or “duration of language learning” (Cassady, 2010). In the context of second language anxiety (SLA) and FLA, Gardner (1985, as cited in Trang, 2012) identified them under the umbrella of situation-specific anxiety due to the unique facet that a foreign language classroom setting holds when compared to other academic settings, positing an apparent difference in terms of language use and apprehension.

With that in view, Horwitz et al. (1986) devised a tool called FLCAS to measure whether students’ accomplishments are related to FLA (Park, 2012). FLCAS consists of 33 items evaluated within a Likert-scale, ranging from “strongly agree” to “strongly disagree”. The application of FLCAS is widely adopted by many researchers and has diversified into quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methods.

Conceptual framework

The conceptual framework that has been developed for this research is based on its reference to PSA and adopting two measurements for speaking anxiety, the PRPSA and FLCAS. In understanding PSA for this research, the PRPSA questionnaire is used as a guideline to examine the level of apprehension experienced by postgraduate students during public presentations. On the other hand, the FLCAS questionnaire is adopted to address situation-specific anxiety, which for this research refers to PSA during online presentations among the students.

Thus, with the understanding of the concepts of PSA along PRPSA and FLCAS, below is the representation of the conceptual framework adopted from the theoretical framework and tools of measurement to answer the research questions:

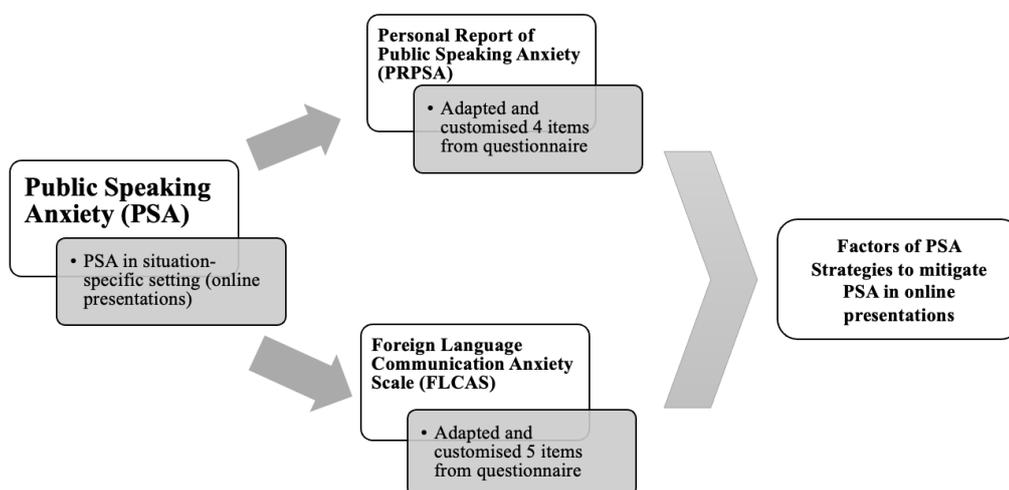


Figure 1 Conceptual Framework in Measuring PSA adopting PRPSA and FLCAS

Methodology

Research design and instruments

The method used in this study was a qualitative study which is to explore the perceptions of speaking anxiety (Spielberger, 1972, p.12) among postgraduate students in online presentations in public universities. To answer the two research questions, a method of interview has been chosen by the researchers to collect in-depth responses by the interviewees. Qualitative interviews (Cohen et al., 2002, p. 23) are used as a research method to gain as much insight as possible by constructing questions that align the researcher with the goals of the study, the questions, and the subsequent related questions that may arise. Although past studies adopting PRPSA and FLCAS mostly utilised questionnaires in data collection, this interview method was selected to facilitate the researchers for further clarifications in understanding PSA experienced by the respondents.

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In order to collect data during the interviews, a semi-structured approach (Ohata, 2005) was used to allow for discussion of the various interview questions. In adopting the tools of PRPSA and FLCAS, an interview protocol has been designed in nine interview questions. The questions were constructed and used to learn as much as possible about postgraduate students' experiences and specific strategies for discussing their ideas in a structured and natural way in the face of giving a public presentation in an online classroom.

Most of the questions focused on information about the students' experiences and strategies when giving public presentations in online classrooms, with only a few about their life as international students and their relationships with classmates of different nationalities. In addition, the last question gave the interviewees space to reflect on their thoughts about online learning in case important information was missed during the interview.

The nine interview questions are of the following classifications; four questions were adopted and customised based on the original PRPSA questionnaire by McCroskey (1970) and McCroskey and Richmond (1992). and the other five questions under FLCAS by Horwitz et al. (1986). Table 1 below is the sample of the original questionnaire along the customised questions for the research:

Table 1 *Comparison between Original statements from PSA measurement tools and customised questions*

Tools	Item Number	Original Statements	Customised Questions
PRPSA	6	I have no fear of giving a speech.	Do you have fears when you do your public speaking / presentation in online classes?
	5	I get anxious when I think about a speech coming up.	What are the main factors / causes that contribute to your fear in public speaking / presentation in online classes?
FLCAS	22	I don't feel pressure to prepare very well for language class.	How do you usually deal with your fear of speaking before and during your online public speaking?
	10	I worry about the consequences of failing my foreign language class.	Do you think public speaking/ presentation will affect your marks?

Sampling

This study uses a purposive sampling of three postgraduate students at Malaysian public universities who speak English as a foreign language. The criteria chosen for the sampling are of four; the level of study (postgraduate and specifically in PhD), university enrolment (public university), location of university enrolled (Malaysia) and mother tongue (English as a second language or a foreign language). The three participants were postgraduate students from different universities in Malaysia. One of the students was a Malaysian and the other two were international students from China. They all had varying degrees of English as a foreign language experience, so they all experienced speaking anxiety when students gave public presentations in English as the tool of communication.

Data collection

All interviews were conducted using video and the audio platform called Zoom. Before starting the interviews, ethical information was again clearly stated to the participants, as well as the purpose of the study and the interviews. In addition, in order to facilitate more accurate and detailed transcription, the interviews were recorded by the Otter application of smartphones. Then the researcher would extract preliminary subject data and coding analysis through Nvivo software.

Each interview lasted about 10-15 minutes, and all interviewees were interviewed individually on Zoom so that they could easily share their thoughts about their online presentations without interference from anyone. As well as their views on the advantages and disadvantages of speaking online compared to speaking offline. The language medium for the interviews was English, as it is the common language for all participants.

According to Braun and Clarke (2019) there is a necessity to analyse the interview data using thematic analysis method. The linguistic data expressed by the students through the interviews was recorded in the original video form they conducted in English. The researchers used thematic analysis because it was more appropriate to explore psychological variables, such as speaking anxiety. Also, data was triangulated by reverting back to the interviewees post interview for further clarifications.

Data analysis

With the analysis of interview information, this paper learns of the sources of anxiety and the strategies to deal with anxiety. The interview recordings were transcribed thoroughly, and Nvivo was used to encode classified data. Coding minimises information while splitting data into study units and coding-related classifications (Davidson, 2009). The subject analysis method was used and thematic analysis employed. Thematic analysis, according to Davidson (2009), is a qualitative research method that uses a set of systematic procedures to induce and deduce the category of a phenomenon. Its primary goal is to clarify a phenomenon

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and find solutions by recognising the fundamental codes of the phenomenon and then classifying those codes concerning the context and process of analysis.

The initial information stemmed from the subjects' understanding of speaking anxiety, which was then reduced to study devices based on general subjects by examining the participants' language instances. These units are arranged right into ideal headings, such as "language proficiency," "analysis from others," "peer pressure," and "crashes." Figures 2 and 3 below are samples of interview codes extracted using Nvivo on factors of PSA and strategies to mitigate them.

名称	文件	参考点	创建日期	创建人	修改日期	修改人
1. Perceptions on online learning		0	0 2022/7/9 10:24	CRH	2022/7/9 12:37	CRH
2. Causes of Public Speaking Anxiety		0	0 2022/7/9 10:26	CRH	2022/7/9 10:26	CRH
language proficiency		1	2 2022/7/9 11:18	CRH	2022/7/9 17:46	CRH
listening ability		1	1 2022/7/9 11:39	CRH	2022/7/9 11:39	CRH
evaluation from others		2	3 2022/7/9 11:19	CRH	2022/7/9 17:43	CRH
peer pressure		2	2 2022/7/9 11:26	CRH	2022/7/9 17:45	CRH
accident		0	0 2022/7/9 12:23	CRH	2022/7/9 12:23	CRH
network connection		1	3 2022/7/9 11:20	CRH	2022/7/9 17:49	CRH
power supply		2	2 2022/7/9 11:22	CRH	2022/7/9 17:50	CRH
technology		1	1 2022/7/9 11:32	CRH	2022/7/9 12:24	CRH
teachers' accent		1	2 2022/7/9 11:39	CRH	2022/7/9 12:13	CRH
3. Strategy		0	0 2022/7/9 10:26	CRH	2022/7/9 10:31	CRH
4. Influences		0	0 2022/7/9 10:27	CRH	2022/7/9 10:27	CRH

Figure 2 Interview Codes for Factors of PSA

名称	文件	参考点	创建日期	创建人	修改日期	修改人
1. Perceptions on online learning		0	0 2022/7/9 10:24	CRH	2022/7/9 12:37	CRH
2. Causes of Public Speaking Anxiety		0	0 2022/7/9 10:26	CRH	2022/7/9 10:26	CRH
3. Strategy		0	0 2022/7/9 10:26	CRH	2022/7/9 10:31	CRH
2) Strategies		0	0 2022/7/9 10:31	CRH	2022/7/9 10:32	CRH
note (tips)		1	1 2022/7/9 11:36	CRH	2022/7/9 17:10	CRH
speak slowly		1	1 2022/7/9 11:37	CRH	2022/7/9 11:37	CRH
good preparations		2	2 2022/7/9 11:42	CRH	2022/7/9 18:27	CRH
psychology set-up		1	2 2022/7/9 11:46	CRH	2022/7/9 18:28	CRH
evaluation from others		1	2 2022/7/9 11:48	CRH	2022/7/9 11:48	CRH
avoid eye-contact		1	1 2022/7/9 12:03	CRH	2022/7/9 12:03	CRH
well-practiced (repetition)		2	2 2022/7/9 11:36	CRH	2022/7/9 17:10	CRH
1) Preferred		0	0 2022/7/9 10:31	CRH	2022/7/9 17:08	CRH
note (tips)		1	1 2022/7/9 11:50	CRH	2022/7/9 18:29	CRH
practicing of PS subject		3	3 2022/7/9 11:51	CRH	2022/7/9 11:55	CRH
familiarity of PS subject		1	1 2022/7/9 11:52	CRH	2022/7/9 11:52	CRH
learning with foreigners		1	1 2022/7/9 11:54	CRH	2022/7/9 11:54	CRH
4. Influences		0	0 2022/7/9 10:27	CRH	2022/7/9 10:27	CRH

Figure 3 Interview Codes for Strategies to mitigate PSA

Results

The interview transcriptions have abled the researchers to answer the two research questions. It is firstly paramount to understand the background of the respondents before analysing their experience on PSA. Table 2 below represents the demographic background of the three interviewees for the study. The variables represent their nationality, university of study, study programme and age.

Table 2 Demographic background of three interviewees

Student	Nationality	University (Degree)	Program	Age
Student N	Malaysia	UUM (PhD)	Applied Linguistics	30
Student Z	China	UPM (PhD)	English Language	40
Student C	China	UPM (PhD)	English Language	31

Research question 1: Factors of PSA among postgraduate students in online presentations

Anxiety is more than a multi-dimensional phenomenon. Many possible factors lead to PSA (Horwitz et al., 1986). Local students from Malaysia (Student N) and international students from China (Student C and Student Z) expressed their influencing factors in their online speeches discussing the causes of speech anxiety. To answer the first research question which is the factors of PSA among postgraduate students during online presentations, the researchers have identified six significant factors or reasons. They include the restraint of the classroom environment, fear of oral expression, fear of mistakes and evaluation, fear of English lecturers, self-related cognition and self-perception, fear of not using the accurate pronunciation, fear of not using the correct grammar, and fear of not using the correct vocabulary. The reasons for their anxiety can be further classified as follow:

Fear of negative evaluation

The respondents stated that fear of negative comments from teachers and classmates was a prominent concern and a significant cause of anxiety. They are afraid of being corrected in public, especially of feeling humiliated if these remarks are accompanied by disparagement. They also pay too much attention to others' opinions and have concerns about their comments. For example, Student C notes, *"As for the fears, because you know, we are not children. When we speak English, we will say oh, now I'm a Ph.D. student. And maybe your students, maybe I mean your friends or your parents, your relatives will think now you are a Ph.D. student and your English must be very good. So, you must control yourself to speak English fluently. So, if I'm if I make some mistakes in English, I'm afraid of some evaluations from my peers, from my doctors or from my classmates."* While Student Z says, *"I think one factor is the evaluation from my classmates or my Doctor."*

Fear of speech inaccuracies

According to Gregersen and Horwitz (2002), the fear of making mistakes is strongly related to students' concerns. The finding of this research mirrors a study by Rahman et al. (2023) where they revealed that 65 percent of Pashto-speaking students fear making mistakes during public speaking. One common concern that Chinese and Malaysian students have in their class is that they worry about saying the wrong words and failing to find the accurate ones. They avoid speaking not because they fear negative comments from their teachers and classmates, but because they like to use correct sentences with different structures which require vast mental vocabulary and good understanding of grammar. One of the interviewees mentioned, *"You know, as a Chinese international student, maybe I'm good at writing or reading. But my output ability, I mean speaking abilities are not so good. Just the like now I don't know how to express my ideas. Maybe my speaking is not so good as for my other English skills. So sometimes, maybe, just for the speaking ability, it's not so good. So maybe I cannot do a good presentation"* (Student C). In addition, when asked about forgetting vocabulary and grammar, she said, *"Because English is not my mother tongue. I cannot show myself so naturally and so fluently to express my real ideas"* (Student Z). It is worth mentioning that the Chinese student also said that her listening ability is also a factor causing anxiety when speaking in English. In the interview, the student clearly said: *"If you have a poor listening ability, you will have speaking anxiety. Because if you communicate with others first, you will catch the idea"* (Student Z).

Peer pressure

According to Ansari and Oskrochi (2004), a highly confident person is more likely to achieve positive and successful results. The respondents from China mentioned that lack of confidence or self-esteem were potential factors, and that they would suddenly become less confident when giving a public speech, which could lead to PSA. Specifically, Student C mentioned, *"Some of my classmates, they come from different nationalities, I mean, their oral abilities are better than me."* In addition, the Malaysian student also discussed how high confidence can lead to positive results in cases of language difficulties. For example, Student N revealed in the interview that, *"So with such mindset together with my very much preparation that I have made before and during, I believe that it will make myself very much presentable, mentally and physically, even though it is just for the online presentation."* This reflects that students do their own psychological construction to increase their confidence in their expression, so as to reduce the expression pressure possibly deriving from other excellent students. For instance, the interviewee mentioned, *"I would say that during the presence of public speaking, I let myself know that I am like the master of the topic."* This indicates that the perception of students on their English-speaking ability becomes the root of their anxiety.

Fear of educators' accents

The results suggest that incorrect pronunciation is one of the sources of students' anxiety. That is, if listeners cannot recognise the speakers' accents, they will be stressed when trying to understand the speakers. Student Z comments, *"The only worry is I do not understand the teachers' accent, I cannot understand the teachers. Listen to me. I don't have to worry about the teachers' negative evaluations. I just worry that I cannot understand."*

Research question 2: Strategies to mitigate PSA among postgraduate students in online presentations

The interviews have reflected several strategies employed by the three students. The interview protocols have included two perspectives on these questions - the strategies employed and the preferred ones to reduce PSA. A noteworthy response on strategies employed shared by students N, Z, and C was that preparation as a primary strategy in mitigating anxiety before presentation. This is supported by a study done by Kondo (1994) which identified preparation as the second of six strategy types and is usually exercised by people with high anxiety levels. Student N engaged with a positive mindset as another part of strategy in PSA where she mentioned, *"I would say that during the presence of public speaking, I let myself know that I am like the master of the topic."* Aydin (2008) uncovered that the repercussion of unsatisfactory performance is one of the major factors of PSA. This can be associated with the need for "self-validation" of success among language users (Daly, 1991, as cited in Suleimenova, 2013).

Another strategy (also preferred strategy) that was agreed upon by all three students was the need to practice before presentation. This finding is supported by research done by Tse (2012) where he specifically indicated that practices as simple as engaging in simple dialogues or text messaging using the target language can help reduce speech apprehension. It is imperative to note here that the degree of practice varies according to the three respondents. Student Z mentioned specifically on practicing using the device to assist the presentation, while student C incorporated repetition of organised speech within her presentation practice. Student N on the other hand, practices using annotated points and is more flexible within her practice of speech. Wati et al. (2020, p. 265) mirror this strategy within their study that indicated repetition in students' behaviors including "tapping on the head, torso, and hands" as part of coping mechanisms in mitigating PSA. It can be noticed here that self-regulatory techniques are significantly aligned to sources of PSA in which for student Z is technological competence presenting online while students C and N mentioned peer pressure and negative evaluations.

As for preferred techniques to reduce PSA, student C highlighted specific strategies such as slowing her speech and practicing with foreigners. She mentioned, *"...because this semester I have a foreign group member, during group discussion with a foreigner, I think my oral ability, my speaking expression have changed a lot. I mean, I'm not so nervous as before, I mean, I can relax a little while speaking with a for-*

eigner to do the group discussion. And then I can learn some expressions and phrases, I can learn some ways of doing presentation from the foreign group member. Then I can cultivate or I can improve my ability of doing the presentation.” This self-regulatory technique can be associated as an early intervention strategy in managing PSA. This can be further linked to research done by Horwitz et al. (1986, as mentioned in Kalra & Siribud, 2020) in which they mentioned that language learners are intimidated and are fearful of negative evaluation by native speakers of the language learnt due to the perceived flawless competency. Here, the fear of being negatively judged is not apparent as student C acknowledged improvements of reduced PSA within the communication exchange with another L2 speaker in her learning setting.

Overall, strategies in handling PSA by three respondents can be categorised under pre and during the public speaking processes. This posits rather similar outcomes to the management strategy outlined by Tee (2021) which indicated speech planning or comprehensive outlines as key techniques under pre presentation process while overseeing speech momentum and following notes are required during presentation among undergraduate students. Therefore, these results yield to the understanding that students implement strategies according to their factors of PSA and employ techniques to reduce errors and inaccuracies during public speaking. This in turn helps with positive self-affirmation as L2 speakers.

Further findings: Influences on online learning performances

Among these participants, online public speaking anxiety performed differently in different online learning situations (Taly & Paramasivam, 2020). Online learning performances are a prescriptive combination of scores that come from the students’ assignments, exams, group work, etc. (Wei & Chou, 2020). For international postgraduate students, their final marks of group discussion, class participation, communication with supervisors or lecturers can be regarded as a result of their online learning performances.

Marks and evaluation

Among these three interviewees, only student C believes that public speaking anxiety may influence students’ marks due to less opportunity to impress their lecturers. Students N and Z take a different view from student C and don’t consider PSA as a factor affecting students’ class performance. But student N and student Z have different reasons for their points. Student N says, “...because I have been engaging with the second language for years. So, I would say that I'm very much comfortable using it...”. However, student Z claims that marks are not that important if the speech were well-designed, logical, and clearly presented.

Peer communication

Group discussion and other group work always involve peer communication with a second language for international students. In the opinion of student Z, this is a friendly and relaxing process without too much pressure. On the contrary, student C chooses to keep silent in a group that needs to work with a second language or foreign language due to the speaking anxiety caused by lower language proficiency. She says, *“But after the meeting if I really want to express myself, I will write something and send it to our WhatsApp group.”* Student N’s speaking anxiety comes from a communication dilemma among the higher and lower language level students.

Class participation

In the class, students may face dozens of peers who are supposed to be in the same language and academic level. In this regard, some students feel anxious when they try to participate the class activities, especially those who are at an insufficient level. In student Z’s words, *“I don’t want to be evaluated by my peers”*. Student C selects another solution to deal with her anxiety, that is, to keep silent during class. Because she thinks *“I’m not the one who is good at speaking. So, during class, I always keep silent. Sometimes I really want to answer my doctor’s questions. But maybe there’s another student she or he speaks more fluently than me, I will just keep silent and be a listener again...”*

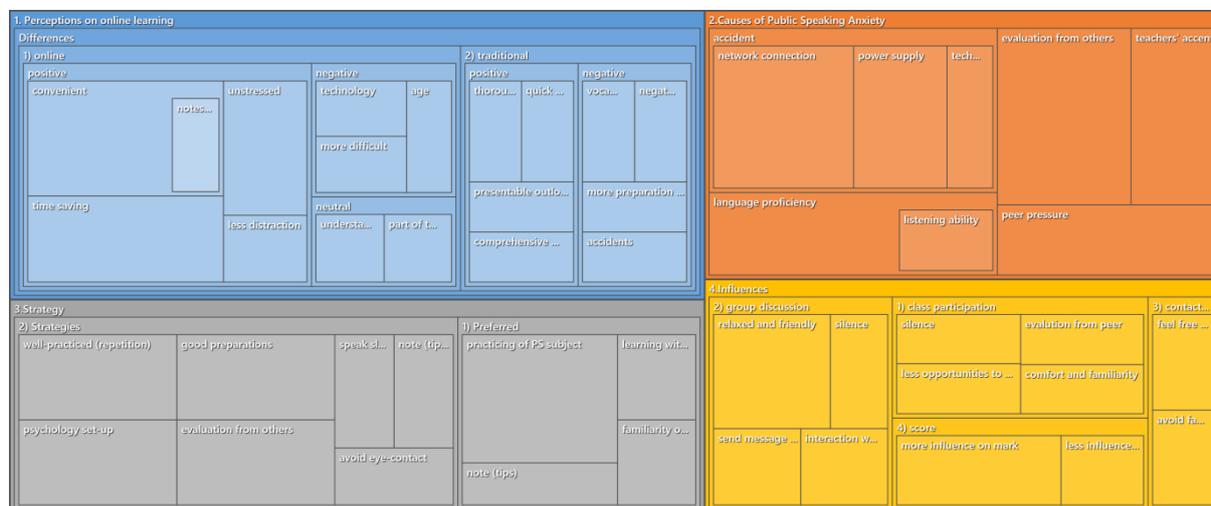
Communication with supervisors

Interaction with supervisors is also a significant aspect for postgraduates. Some students contact their supervisors with emails or communication apps like WhatsApp. But because of her insufficient speaking ability, student C says: *“If my supervisor wants to listen to my idea face to face, I can do that. But I think that will have a little influence or have a bad impression on my doctor...”*. On the contrary, there is no such anxiety for student Z because she believes it’s normal to make mistakes in front of her teachers. This is due to her cognition that *“supervisors’ level is much better than us”*. The only reason that makes her feel nervous is her supervisor’s accent.

Below is the summary of results on perceptions on online learning, causes of speaking anxiety, strategy used by interviewees and influences of the three interviewees.

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Figure 3 Summary of results on perceptions on online learning, causes of speaking anxiety, strategy used by the interviewees



Discussion

Factors of PSA among postgraduate students in online presentations

In a word, formal classroom conditions support the finding from previous studies that students feel more anxious in Second Language/Foreign Language classes because their performance is continuously observed by their instructors and friends (Melouah, 2013; Pappamihel, 2002). Students should be informed that mistakes and being corrected by teachers during learning are common phenomena. Students lack vocabulary items, and they cannot remember words to express their desired views. Their knowledge of making sentences using proper words is inferior. Students should read English newspapers, where they have the opportunity to learn words, which is very helpful in acquiring new words and improving cognitive abilities. At the same time, speaking anxiety has a positive side because if students want to improve themselves to compete with others, they will focus more on speaking skills to improve their English oral expression. Students' mentality and opposing views on themselves are the reasons for the lack of confidence in speaking. The findings suggest that friendly and informal classroom environments can cause less anxiety.

Strategies to mitigate PSA among postgraduate students in online presentations

The interviews have revealed that students' employ unique strategies as attempts to rectify their causes of PSA. Netta et al. (2020) acknowledged several strategies that could generally assist students in managing PSA - practice, having positive mindsets, envisioning positive outcomes, converging composure and regulating appropriate physical movements during PS. Westwick (2014) theorised coping mechanisms into three

which are Exposure Therapy, Cognitive Modification, and Skills Training. The coping mechanisms encompass practical procedures to mitigate PSA from technically arranging tasks' difficulty levels, reconstruction of mindsets and speaking skills (Westwick, 2014). This reflects that students should consider adopting comprehensive methods in reducing PSA. While there is no one-method approach to fit all, it is best to consider stepping out of the comfort zone and utilised new strategies to achieve the best desired outcome.

Influences of PSA among postgraduate students

From the semi-structural interview, it was found that PSA had a significantly negative influence on some postgraduates' online learning performances while having a moderate effect on some other postgraduates.

Negative effects on online learning performance

Students may keep silent or use the written form to communicate with their classmates or teachers. For those who have a negative influence, peer pressure, others' evaluation, language proficiency (including vocabulary, speaking, and listening) and accents afford the main anxiety of online learning (Mouhoubi-Messadh & Khaldi, 2022). Therefore, they choose the written form to give themselves time to identify the answer. One interesting point is that one Malaysian postgraduate feels anxious while communicating with lower-level language users. On the contrary, the fear of the other two Chinese postgraduates originates from their higher-level peers. Especially, they don't want to be judged by their peers who are expected to be at the same level as them. Like what Eriksson (2020) claimed, the lack of confidence and self-esteem might be the reason.

Moderating effects on online learning performance

Interestingly, language anxiety decreases when some postgraduates communicate with a higher-level language ability supervisor. This might be explained by Taly and Paramasivam's (2020) finding that positive feedback can reduce PSA of students. Their language deficiency is no longer a key influence on their performances while communicating with supervisors but accents. As Taly and Paramasivam (2020) concluded, cultural differences might cause communication anxiety. Also, peer communication tends to be a natural and easy situation for some postgraduates. It is worth noting that the performances of students with a higher language literacy are consistent in different settings.

Conclusion

This research conducted a semi-structured interview to explore the main causes and strategies of PSA among international postgraduates in Malaysia. The findings also revealed the influences of PSA on international postgraduates' online learning performances. The research showed that negative evaluation, lan-

guage proficiency, peer pressure, teachers' accents are the main factors leading to PSA. Habitually, students choose to reduce PSA through preparation and practice. Some postgraduates preferred other strategies like speaking at a slower pace or immersing in an English-speaking context. For higher-level language proficiency international students, PSA didn't affect their class performances too much except for communicating with lower language speaking group members. These lower-level students chose the written form to mitigate their PSA during the class. In the current study, there is a cross-cultural difference between Malaysian and Chinese international postgraduates from UUM and UPM in the main causes and online learning performances due to their language proficiency.

This study figured out some new causes of international students' PSA in the online context, such as teachers' accents and online accidents (including electricity problems and networks). These new causes arise with the transformation of learning places and shift of learning approach. Future studies can choose to focus on male postgraduates or postgraduates from hard science disciplines. The sample size of the current study is too small to reach data saturation and be representative. Larger sample size may also provide different results on the differences between Malaysian and Chinese international postgraduates. This study will provide implications for international postgraduates and their teachers in and out of the classroom communication. Gentler and more encouraging feedback from the teacher could mitigate the PSA of postgraduates. Also, the students could also self-regulate themselves through some strategies like slower speech, practicing, and preparation.

Author contributions

This research is the collective effort of the three authors. Noorfarida Filzah focused on writing the theoretical and conceptual framework, Chen Ruohan outlined the methodology and research design section while Zhang Jing compiled the data and discussion. The interview protocol was discussed together based on the theories included. Conceptualisation, N. F.; methodology and research design, C. R.; interview protocol, M. S., Z. J., and C. R.; compilation of data and discussion, writing—original draft preparation, C. R.; Z. J.; writing—review and editing, N. F. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship and/or publication of this article.

Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author, N. F., upon reasonable request.

Conflict of interest

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Acknowledgments

Some parts of this paper have also been presented to the 4th International Conference on English Language Teaching (ICON-ELT) 2023 for publication.

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