

Public Speaking Anxiety or English Language Anxiety?

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Abstract: *Aligned with the industry demands to equip tertiary students with essential communication skills, courses like Public Speaking have been introduced in universities to develop and strengthen students' practical communication skills. This course can be tailored for various domains such as academic, personal and public communication. In current literature, most studies are done to measure language anxiety in specific language skills such as reading and writing but there is a lack of literature that highlights specifically on public speaking anxiety. Therefore, this paper analyses 40 students' responses to an anxiety questionnaire, the Public Speaking Class Anxiety Scale (PSCAS) developed by Yaikhong and Usaha (2012). This study identifies specific causes of public speaking anxiety among the participants. The findings reveal that the students are more anxious about having to speak in English than having to speak in public. The students also confirmed that they have a fear of speaking English and this ties up with not being able to enjoy speaking in the language. The study also highlights that that audience size seems to play a crucial role when students are presenting. In view of the findings, more coping strategies should be implemented to overcome students' anxiety towards the speaking the English language. A main issue is apparently the lack of confidence about the use of the language. Instructors for Public Speaking courses will have to equip students with the necessary language skills to overcome fear in public speaking.*

Keywords: Language anxiety, public speaking, PSCAS, teaching and learning

1. Introduction

Communication skill is often highlighted as a weak link for graduate employment in Malaysia contributing to a current high unemployment rate. An article in New Straits Times Education (2019) reported that graduates were unable to communicate well in an interview which raises the concern on whether they will be able to survive the work place with such limited communication skill even if they are employed. Dzulkifly (2018) concurred that the lack of linguistic skills especially in English is one of the leading causes of unemployment. Good communication skills in the workplace can be described as an "ability to transmit and receive information clearly, and include the ability to read the audience in order to avoid and resolve conflicts (Kermode, 2017, in Ting, Marzuki, Chuah, Misieng and Jerome, 2017). Learning good communication skills remain a challenge in tertiary education curriculum. Responding to this, the Malaysia Education Blueprint (2015-2025) emphasises on the provision of hands-on speaking activities to strengthen the learning effort. Additionally, subjects such as public speaking are gaining prominence as another attempt to improve graduates' communication skills. Such efforts are premised on the idea that

“Most people are not born public speakers; they are trained to become one” (Raja, 2017) This indicates that with adequate training and practice, one can become a better public speaker. However, not surprisingly, experiencing public speaking anxiety is often the main obstacle to becoming a better public speaker. McCroskey (1977) elucidates public speaking anxiety as fear and uneasiness linked with real or anticipated communication with one or more persons. Unlike other language skills such as reading and writing, anxiety in speaking, particularly in public speaking is often neglected in academic literature. (Ambatchew, 2003; Cheng, 2002)

2. Literature Review

2.1 Language Anxiety and Public Speaking Anxiety

Language anxiety is well investigated amongst linguists and language educators as it is an affective variable that impedes an aspect of language acquisition. One of the pioneering researches on foreign language anxiety was by Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope (1986). Horwitz et al. (1986) which demonstrates that foreign language anxiety can be associated with communication apprehension, test anxiety and fear of negative evaluation. Horwitz’s study has laid the foundation for the study on language anxiety today. Several researchers including Young (1991) have attempted to probe the sources of language anxiety. Young (1991) identified six sources of language anxiety, which are personal and interpersonal anxiety, learners’ attitudes towards language learning, teachers’ attitudes towards language teaching, teacher-learner interactions, classroom procedures and language assessments. Research on language anxiety has also expanded into specific language skills such as reading, writing, listening and speaking. According to Kim (1998), students demonstrated higher anxiety in speaking tasks as compared to other skills such as reading. This is not an isolated finding, as another study by Khamkhien (2010) also found that foreign language learners believe speaking is highly intimidating. Much research has focused on students’ apprehension in speaking tasks, but there is a general paucity of studies investigating specifically public speaking anxiety. = One outcome of the recent and contemporary researched on public speaking anxiety is the Public Speaking Class Anxiety Scale (PSCAS).

2.2 Public Speaking Class Anxiety Scale (PSCAS)

PSCAS is an instrument developed by Yaikhong and Usaha (2012) as an attempt to measure the anxiety of Thai students in a public speaking class. This instrument adopts various language anxiety scales, such as those by McCroskey (1970), Clevenger and Halvorson (1992) and Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) and Horwitz et al. (1986). This scale has contributed to a more defined instrument to measure a specific speaking genre in terms of skill use and consists focused questions that are situation-specific. It enables the instructor to evaluate students’ apprehension experienced especially during the public presentation. This present study attempts to adapt this instrument to study students’ anxiety in public speaking at a private university.

The following research questions are used for current study:

- 1) What is the nature of anxiety amongst university students who are enrolled in a Public Speaking course?
- 2) How is anxiety reflected in each of the four main domains that constitute in public speaking anxiety amongst university students?

3. Methodology

Participants

The participants were 40 diploma students who were enrolled in a public speaking course. The participants were 21 male and 19 female students majoring in different fields. Amongst the 40 participants, 11 of them speak English as their first language and the remaining 29 are second language speakers of English. The distribution of first languages spoken is shown below:

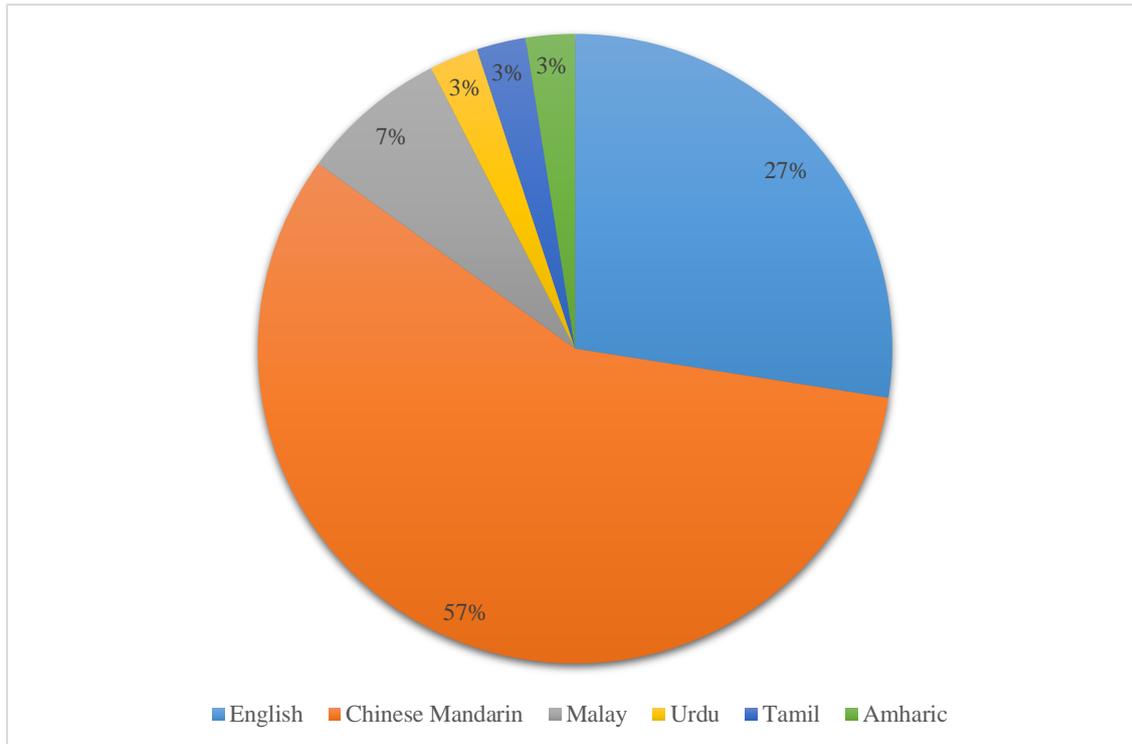


Figure 1: Participants' First Language

Online Survey

The present study used an online survey with three sections. The first section was designed to collect participants' demographic information. The second section consists of 17 questions that adapts PSCAS questionnaire by Yaikhong and Usaha (2012). Some of the questions were altered to fit the purpose and context of this study. The third section aims to investigate the causes of speaking anxiety and adapts questions from Raja (2017).

Reliability

To demonstrate the internal reliability of the questionnaire used, the Cronbach Alpha index was obtained by using the SPSS Software. The internal consistency coefficient of the questionnaire was recorded as .847. According to Fraenkel and Wallen (2009), a reliable instrument should have a Cronbach Alpha reading above .700. Since the Cronbach Alpha reading for present study is .847, this suggests that the questionnaire has consistency in eliciting the responses from the participants.

To answer the first research question, data from second section of the online survey which was adapted from Yaikhong and Usaha (2012)'s PSCAS was analysed. For this section, the participants were presented with 17 statements which they have to respond using a five-point

Likert Scale (1 as strongly disagree and 5 as strongly agree). Decisions had to be made to establish the cut-off points in the categorization of respondents according to anxiety levels to facilitate insightful discussion of the findings. This decision is guided by the simple 50% as a clear half way mark for dividing the responses. In the Likert scale 3.00 represents the mid-level of the continuum. Thus, statements with average means higher than 3.000 will be considered as having high public speaking anxiety (PSA), whereas statements with overall means lower than 3.000 will be considered as having low anxiety in public speaking.

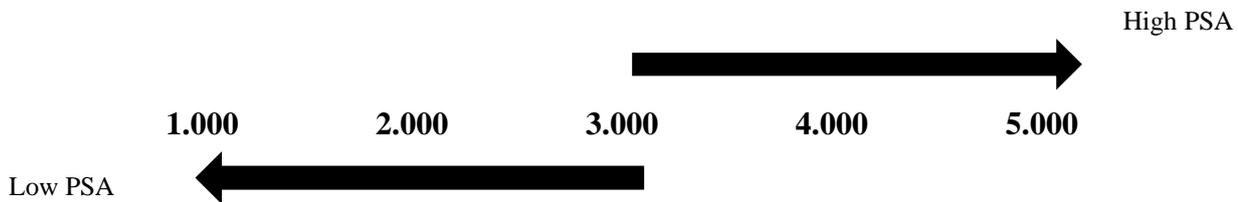


Figure 2: Establishing cut-off point for anxiety categorization with reference to the Likert Scale

To analyse these statements, the mean of each statement is calculated and tabulated in Table 1.

Table 1: Means of PSCAS's Survey Questions (N=40)

Item	Statement	Mean (N=40)
6	I feel very self-conscious (embarrassed/uncomfortable) while speaking English in front of other students.	2.525
13	I want to speak less because I feel shy while speaking English.	2.550
8	I am afraid that other students will laugh at me when I am speaking in English.	2.675
14	I dislike using my voice and body expressively while speaking English.	2.700
7	I get nervous and confused when I am speaking in English.	2.800
12	The more presentation (from Public Speaking class) I have, the more confused I get.	2.800
2	I often tremble when knowing that I am going to be called on to speak English.	2.821
15	I have trouble coordinating (synchronising) my movements when speaking in English.	2.875
1	I never feel quite sure of myself when I'm speaking English.	2.950
16	Even if I am well-prepared, I still feel anxious about speaking English.	2.950
10	It embarrasses me to volunteer to go out first to speak English.	3.050
3	I start to panic when I have to speak English without a preparation in advance.	3.100
5	I don't feel confident when speaking in English.	3.125
9	I have fear of speaking English.	3.400
17	I keep thinking that other students are better at speaking English than I am.	3.475
4	In Public Speaking class, I can get so nervous that I forget things I know.	3.600
11	I do not enjoy the experience of speaking English.	3.925
Overall Means		3.109

The table illustrates that the overall means of the PSCAS items for this study is 3.109 (N=40). This means that generally the participants can be categorised as having high anxiety in public speaking. However, since the overall average is just slightly above the cut-off point, which is 3.000; this suggests that the level of anxiety in public speaking for the respondents is not extremely high. This can also be seen that out of 17 statements, only seven statements have average mean of more than 3.000 whereas the remaining 10 statements are between 2.525 and 2.950. It can be seen from the table that: the highest mean is Item 11 (Mean= 3.925) which indicates that most participants do not enjoy speaking in English. The participants also get

nervous and forget things that they know in Public Speaking class (Mean= 3.600). It is notable from the table that participants think that their peers speak better English than they are (Mean= 3.475). It is also suggested that the participants have fear of speaking English (Mean=3.400). To answer research question 2, the results are distributed according to each of the domains that constitute public speaking anxiety. The results are presented in Table 2 below.

Table 2: Domains of PSCAS Items

Domain	Item in Questionnaire	Mean (N= 40)
Communication Apprehension	1, 3, 5, 7, 13, 14, 15	2.918
Fear of Negative Evaluation	2, 6, 8, 10, 17	2.909
Test Anxiety	12	2.800
General Anxiety of English Language	4, 9, 11, 16	3.469

From the results, the domain that registers the highest anxiety level falls into general anxiety of English language (Mean= 3.469). The means of the other three domains are below 3.000 with the lowest score in the domain on test anxiety (Mean= 2.800). The results indicate that students have fear of using English language more than having the fear of speaking in public. This is an interesting finding which contradicts Raja (2017)'s findings that found that the participants had fore fronted being shy and nervous as a dominant attribute to anxiety when talking in front of people. Similar to Raja (2017), McCains (2012) also found that 90% of the participants felt reserved when speaking in front of an audience. Likewise, Ka-kan-dee and Al-Shaibani (2018) discovered that 86.67% of participants had high level of communication apprehension in using English for public speaking.

In order to reveal if significant differences are present between each domain in terms of overall means, a one-way ANOVA test was computed. The data is tabulated in Table 3 below. The ANOVA test found that the domains are at the margin of statistical significance.

Table 3: ANOVA Test for the Domains of PSCAS Items

	Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F-value	P-value
Between groups	0.9828	3	0.3276	3.1453	0.0616
Within groups	1.3541	13	0.1042		
Total	2.3369	16			

While statistical difference is not revealed between domains, the findings nonetheless point to a link between the dislike for the English language and the fear of public speaking. The results related to the fear factor are illustrated below (Table 4).

Table 4: Percentage Responses (N=40)

Item	Question	N	Percentage of students responded "Yes"	Percentage of students responded "No"
1	Do you have fear of public speaking?	40	69%	31%
2	Do you think that this is due to lack of confidence?	40	81%	19%
3	Does the audience size (number of audience) play a role in your public speaking performance?	40	73.8%	26.2%
4	Do you think participating in more public speaking activities will help you to perform better in presentation?	40	71.4%	28.6%
5	Do you think that your fear of public speaking can be overcome by using some strategies and seeking professional help?	40	88.1%	11.9%

From the table above, the information on the causes of public speaking anxiety can be analysed. It can be extracted from the table that, 69% of the students expressed fear in public speaking. As for Item 2, it is found that quite a high percentage of students think that they do not have the confidence to speak in public (Percentage = 81%). This is briefly mentioned by Kelly and Watson (1986) that self-confidence is one important element in speaking activities. Item 3 indicates that 73.8% of the participants' agreed that their presentation will be affected by the number of audiences. This finding is similar to Raja (2017) who found that 82% of the participants believed that the audience size impacted on their presentation. Item 4 inquires the participants to answer if they think that participating in more public speaking activities will make them perform better in their presentation. 71.4% of the participants believed so. This is highlighted by Akin and Kunzman (1974) that desensitisation approach enables speakers to hide their nervousness and appear confident while presenting after becoming more active in public speaking activities.

The importance of participating in more English speaking activities to enhance students' presentation is evident in Pramela et al.'s (2016) action research. In initiating a peer support centre for English language presentations, Pramela et al. (2016) found that students were not comfortable communicating with mentors in English even through digital tools. Thus, Pramela et al. (2016) executed a new plan, where students had to organize an English language camp that had language games, language activities and group performances on stage. Pramela et al. (2016) reported that through these English language activities, a natural environment for communication and learning took place and students' anxiety was reduced. Lastly, Item 5 with the highest percentage of participants answering yes, indicates that a majority of 88.1% of the participants believed that their fear in public speaking can be improved by using strategies and seeking professional help. This is crucial as this suggests that the students would like to learn strategies to overcome their fears in public speaking. The contention is also that among the strategies is a fuller immersion in general English language interactive activities that can help to build up confidence in using the language and the belief that a snowball effect will be seen in the culmination of lessening the fear factor that is expressed in public speaking. As such, overcoming problems with general communication skills such as notching up the confidence level, and developing more skilful interactive use of the language itself will contribute to the lessening of public speaking anxiety.

4. Conclusion and Recommendations

This study was designed to investigate the public speaking anxiety but it was not able to tease out specific domain effects in terms of a significant difference in the scores obtained. One possible reason could be the small sample size used in the study. As such, a further study with a much larger sample size could be carried out to confirm or disconfirm the findings obtained in this study. However, the discrete details of the study point to higher anxiety being identified with the use of the English language rather than the presentation itself. In other words, the participants seemed to be not too afraid of having to do public speaking, but they are anxious in having to present in English.

Therefore, to overcome this, instructors have to make the students feel comfortable to use and practice English in the class. More efforts should be put into overcoming students' anxiety in using English language and this can be done in a broader context instead of centring on the notion of public speaking. The university can organise more support English language activities so that the students would be more confident and comfortable to use English.

As for increasing confidence to present (a very crucial element in reducing language anxiety in any language classroom) instructors could ameliorate the situation by creating a safe environment in the class for students to make mistakes.

In addition, strategies to overcome fear in public speaking need to be addressed. This can be done by gradually exposing the students to challenges in speaking activities. Westwick (2014) believed that creating activities and assessments with increasingly challenging tasks will be able to help students to overcome fear of talking in the classroom. Therefore, instructors need to plan and scaffold their students' learning so that the latter can feel less anxious in practicing newly acquired skills, such as speaking in public.

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