

# Factors of Public Speaking Anxiety (PSA) and Coping Strategies Among Malaysian Public University Students in Virtual and Physical Presentations

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**Abstract:** *Mastery of public speaking skills is crucial for students in higher learning institutions. This study aims to explore university students' experiences with public speaking anxiety (PSA) within the Malaysian public university context by looking at both virtual and physical presentations. Data gathered using semi-structured interviews and thematic analysis conducted using Nvivo14. Furthermore, the study guides the development of interventions and support mechanisms aimed at bolstering students' confidence and performance in public speaking. This research is significant for university students to gain insights into the causes of public speaking anxiety and its impact on academic performance, thereby facilitating the development of effective coping mechanisms and support systems for both online and physical presentation contexts.*

**Keywords:** Public Speaking Anxiety, Coping Strategies, Presentation

## 1. Introduction

Public speaking refers to the delivery of a structured and formatted speech to a live audience to inform, influence, or entertain. It results from successful verbal communication that enables speakers to express thoughts and ideas freely and be understood by the audience. This skill is typically associated with persuasive communication and has become an essential tool for advocating Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by raising awareness, mobilizing resources, building partnerships, and influencing decision-making within society. Literature reveals that public speaking has significantly contributed to the development of SDGs, particularly in relation to SDG Goal 4, which advocates for quality education and, in this sense, the ability to speak publicly (Fauzi et al., 2023). In Malaysia, the English language is widely used in academic and workplace settings. The establishment of English as the primary language in the school system and corporate communication was a significant consequence of British colonization in Malaysia. In the pre-independence era, English was widely used in elementary and secondary education, while its importance in corporate communication has persisted to this day (Zanola, 2015). However, studies of public speaking in the Malaysian context have revealed that many Malaysian university students have inadequate communication and presentation skills due to a poor command of the English language, which directly impacts their ability to speak in public despite English being institutionalized as a second language (Tee, 2021).

## Anxiety

Anxiety, a significant psychological condition that profoundly affects people's lives, can be experienced at nearly every stage and lesson in an individual's educational journey. Daud et al. (2019) reports a link between anxiety and effective language learning. The detrimental effect of anxiety is particularly evident in speaking and writing lessons that require active participation in the classroom (Horwitz et al., 1986). Literature indicates that students in speaking lessons are often reluctant to speak the target language and fear making mistakes (Khasawneh, 2021; Qurnia & Marlina, 2020).

The term “language anxiety” (LA) refers to the emotional strain experienced by individuals when acquiring or using a second language (MacIntyre, 1999). LA has been linked to various factors, including performance and achievement in language learning, with research findings showing conflicting results (Raja, 2017). However, it is generally understood that the relationship between anxiety and language performance is cyclical. Çağatay (2015) elaborates that mistakes made by second or foreign language learners during the learning process can lead to an increase in foreign language anxiety (FLA), creating a recurring cycle.

Over the years, studies on language anxiety have explored numerous variables that may either facilitate or hinder the language learning process. Horwitz et al. (1986) identified three types of anxiety as described by psychologists: trait, state, and situation-specific anxiety. Trait anxiety refers to individuals who are inherently more prone to feeling stressed or nervous in various situations (Wati et al., 2021). In contrast, state anxiety is transient and depends on specific circumstances or the “duration of language learning.” Regarding second language anxiety (SLA) and FLA, it is categorized as situation-specific anxiety due to the distinct nature of foreign language classroom settings compared to other academic environments, highlighting notable differences in language use and apprehension.

## Public Speaking Anxiety

According to several sources (Gallego et al., 2022; Wati et al., 2021), one of the key factors contributing to language anxiety is attitude. As noted in MacIntyre (1999), EFL learners may hold varying attitudes toward languages other than their mother tongue. These attitudes, whether positive or negative, can be influenced by the perceived difficulty, importance, elegance, and status of the language. Furthermore, attitudes toward a language may reflect learners' feelings about the community members who use it. If individuals do not mitigate these negative feelings, they can become a permanent aspect of their temperament (Riasati, 2011).

Situational anxiety, on the other hand, is the anxiety expressed by second language learners in specific situations (Horwitz et al., 1986). This type of anxiety often arises from the learners' lack of familiarity with the situation in which they must use the language. Once they become familiar with the situation, their anxiety diminishes or even vanishes (Bledsoe & Baskin, 2014). Speaking skills in a second or foreign language are particularly anxiety-inducing. Research indicates a connection between English speaking anxiety and students' speaking fluency, showing that speaking anxiety adversely affects learners' English-speaking fluency (Çağatay, 2015), especially during oral presentations and conversations with native English speakers (Öztürk & Gürbüz, 2014). Consequently, numerous studies have investigated the causes of speaking anxiety, its detrimental effects, and potential solutions (Raja, 2017). For instance, Zanolà (2015) identified the inter-language meaning system as a cause of postgraduate students' English language speaking anxiety.

Unlike daily conversation, an oral presentation requires more detailed and complex preparation, adhering to specific characteristics and conditions to meet its objectives (Zhang et al., 2020). There are three key elements of a good oral presentation. Firstly, it must be highly structured, requiring detailed planning and time management, as the speaker must adhere to a specified time frame. The audience may not ask questions during the presentation, but they can do so afterward, necessitating the presenter to anticipate possible queries. Secondly, an oral presentation uses more formal language. The choice of words and phrases is crucial, as the use of strong or colloquial language can elicit negative reactions from the audience. Slang, jargon, and poor grammar should be avoided to maintain a positive impression. Thirdly, the method of delivery is critical. Unlike daily conversations where interjections, casual postures, and fillers are common, an oral presentation demands good voice projection and posture. An effective speaker must avoid interjections such as "you know" or "you see," and ensure a confident and clear delivery.

Public speaking anxiety manifests through physical and psychological symptoms such as panic, increased heart and breathing rates, heightened adrenaline, and tension in the shoulders and neck (Alghorbany & Hamzah, 2020; Irvine, 2020). Gallego et al. (2022) identified symptoms like tenseness, trembling, sweating, palpitations, and sleep disorders. It was observed that anxiety impacts student behavior, causing avoidance of speaking opportunities and physiological reactions such as talking too fast, stammering, and losing eye contact with listeners. The anxiety experienced when speaking a foreign language (FL) differs from that when speaking a first language (L1). In FL contexts, speakers must be mindful of lexical cues, syntactic structures, and pronunciation, which adds to the complexity and contributes to heightened anxiety (Horwitz et al., 1986). Research consistently shows that learners experience more anxiety in speaking than in other language skills (Öztürk & Gürbüz, 2014). Self-esteem, which involves a holistic perception of oneself and relates to feelings of self-worth and the ability to handle challenges, impacts public speaking anxiety. High self-esteem is associated with greater verbal fluency and reduced anxiety about speech errors (Hamidah, 2023). In contrast, self-confidence refers to belief in one's own abilities and judgment, affecting willingness to engage in public speaking. Individuals with high self-confidence approach communication with assurance and optimism as stated by Riasati (2011) and Wati et al. (2021). Oral presentations require detailed preparation and adherence to specific characteristics, including structured planning, formal language, and a clear method of delivery as noted by Zanola (2015), Qurnia and Marlina (2020), and Zhang et al. (2020). Effective presentations involve time management, anticipation of audience questions, appropriate language use, and maintaining good posture and voice projection. Challenges in public speaking have been extensively studied. Bledsoe and Baskin (2014) found that fear of mistakes, shyness, anxiety, and lack of confidence hinder effective public speaking among English language students. Tee (2021) identified similar issues in EFL classrooms, including lack of confidence and speech anxiety. Çağatay (2015) reported additional factors such as nervousness, inadequate preparation, lack of eye contact, and unclear pronunciation as barriers to effective public speaking.

## 2. Methodology

This paper uses a qualitative data collection method, namely a semi-structured interview, to answer the research questions: (1) What are the factors of public speaking anxiety (PSA) among Malaysian public university students in online and offline settings? and (2) What are the strategies Malaysian public university students use in coping with public speaking anxiety (PSA)? This study employed a semi-structured questionnaire adapted from Tee et al. (2021)

and was distributed to Malaysian university students enrolled in public speaking and related courses. The semi-structured interview allows participants to respond flexibly. The largest part of the interview was guided by questions related to public speaking anxiety issues and coping strategies. This method aims to provide a holistic view of the research problem to explore, explain, understand, and describe it meticulously (Gallego et al., 2022). This approach made it possible to gather meaningful and comprehensive responses regarding the aspects that lead to public speaking anxiety and the coping mechanisms the students used. The participants were Malaysian university students enrolled in public speaking and related courses. A total of 22 students responded to the questionnaire and provided insights into their experiences with public speaking anxiety in both online and offline settings. Data were collected using a semi-structured questionnaire distributed through Google Forms. Open-ended questions were included in the questionnaire with the intention of eliciting comprehensive answers on the students' experiences with public speaking anxiety and the coping mechanisms they employed. Thematic analysis was utilized using Nvivo14 to examine the qualitative data obtained from the 22 semi-structured interviews. Initially, the data were thoroughly reviewed to understand the participants' experiences with public speaking anxiety (PSA) and their coping strategies. Key segments of the interview transcripts were then coded to identify significant aspects related to PSA and coping mechanisms.

### 3. Results and Discussions

#### Emotional Responses to Public Speaking

Students reported a range of emotional responses to public speaking anxiety. Key themes include:

**Figure 1: Emotional Responses to Public Speaking**

Emotional Response	Example Statements
1. Nervousness and Fear	Nervous; Afraid; Very nervous especially in front of strangers
2. Mixed Emotions	Both nervous and excited; Excited and anxious
3. Physical Symptoms	Heart sinks; Hands shake; Heart beats fast and loud

Research on public speaking anxiety highlights a range of emotional responses experienced by students. Nervousness and fear are particularly prominent, as illustrated by one participant who reported feeling "nervous" and "afraid" during presentations. Another student expressed, "I feel nervous and afraid," with additional comments revealing heightened anxiety when speaking in front of unfamiliar audiences: "Very nervous, especially in front of strangers." This is consistent with findings from prior studies that have linked public speaking to significant emotional distress, especially when individuals are not familiar with their audience (Bledsoe & Baskin, 2014). In addition to nervousness, participants also reported experiencing a mix of excitement and anxiousness. Statements such as "Both nervous and excited" and "Excited and anxious" reflect the complex emotional state that accompanies public speaking engagements. This duality of emotions, where excitement coexists with anxiety, is a common theme in public speaking literature, indicating that students are often eager to present but simultaneously grapple with significant stress (Zhang et al., 2020).

Physical symptoms of anxiety were notably severe among participants. One interviewee described their experience as: "My heart sinks to my chest, my hands shake, and my heart beats fast and loud." These physical manifestations of anxiety align with research on the physiological effects of stress during public speaking (Horwitz et al., 1986; Öztürk & Gürbüz, 2014).

## Perceived Challenges in Public Speaking

Participants identified several challenges that contribute to public speaking anxiety:

**Figure 2: Perceived Challenges in Public Speaking**

Challenge	Example Statements
1. Language and Vocabulary Issues	Low skills in speaking; Grammar error fears
2. Overthinking and Fear of Judgment	Afraid of others' opinions; Overthinking classmates' thoughts
3. Technological Issues	Wi-Fi connection interrupts presentations
4. Non-verbal Communication	Difficulty maintaining eye contact and body language
5. Language Barriers	English is not the first language; Difficulty speaking coherently

Participants identified several challenges in public speaking that contribute to their anxiety. Language and vocabulary issues were particularly prominent. One student mentioned, "Low skills in speaking, low competency," while another noted, "Grammar error is the most challenging because I'm afraid the audience will laugh or belittle me." These concerns highlight a widespread apprehension about making language errors and facing negative feedback from the audience. Overthinking and fear of judgment were also significant challenges. As one participant put it, "I overthink what other people who are in the same class as me might think," and another added, "Afraid of others' opinions." This reflects a common issue where students become preoccupied with how they are perceived by others, which emphasizes their anxiety (Fauzi et al., 2023).

Technological issues in virtual settings emerged as an additional challenge, with one respondent noting, "From my online class, WiFi connection can be a problem too as it interrupts the flow of the presentation." This adds a layer of stress associated with virtual presentations, where technical difficulties can further disrupt the speaker's performance. Maintaining eye contact and proper body language was another challenge. One student remarked on the difficulty of "Maintaining the proper eye contact and body language." This issue is particularly relevant in both physical and virtual settings, where effective non-verbal communication is crucial for engaging the audience. Grammar and fluency concerns were frequently cited as well. Participants expressed fears about their points being misunderstood due to language barriers, as one respondent said, "I'm afraid if people can't comprehend my points and they might judge me because of that," while another mentioned, "English is not my mother tongue. It is difficult to speak coherently."

## Sources of Anxiety in Public Speaking

The sources of anxiety are multifaceted. Key themes include:

**Figure 3: Sources of Anxiety in Public Speaking**

Source of Anxiety	Example Statements
1. Fear of Mistakes	Fear of making mistakes; Blanking out during presentation
2. Judgment from Peers	Afraid others may judge my fluency
3. Lack of Confidence and Preparation	Underprepared; Overthinking performance
4. Language Proficiency	Not good in English; Limited vocabulary

The sources of anxiety in public speaking are multifaceted. Fear of making mistakes was a prevalent theme, with one participant stating, "Fear of making mistake," and another expressing concern about blanking out if they forgot their lines: "I would blank if I don't remember what to say." The fear of errors is a well-documented aspect of public speaking anxiety, where the prospect of making mistakes can lead to significant stress (Tee, 2021). Judgment from peers



was also a significant source of anxiety. One student noted, "Afraid that others may think my fluency is bad," highlighting a concern about being negatively evaluated by classmates. Furthermore, lack of confidence and preparation were cited as contributing factors to anxiety. Participants mentioned feeling "Unprepared" and described how overthinking their performance contributed to their stress, as reflected in, "I overthink, I'm underprepared." Inexperience and insufficient practice were also noted, with one respondent stating, "I would say I feel anxious due to my lack of experience." These factors align with research indicating that inadequate preparation and lack of experience are significant predictors of public speaking anxiety (Çağatay, 2015). Language proficiency and vocabulary limitations were additional sources of anxiety. Comments such as, "I am not good in English and vocabulary," reflect concerns about language skills impacting their ability to communicate effectively.

### Classmates' Reactions to Mistakes

Students described their perceptions of how classmates react to mistakes:

**Figure 4: Classmates' Reactions to Mistakes**

Reaction Type	Example Statements
1. Fear of Judgment	They would judge me; They'll look at me weird
2. Supportive Classmates	Encouraged me to keep going; Said it's okay to make mistakes
3. Indifference	They don't feel anything; They have their own worries
4. Mixed Reactions	Some don't care; Others judge mistakes

Students had varied perceptions of their classmates' reactions to mistakes. Fear of being judged or laughed at was expressed, with statements like, "They would judge me" and "They'll look at me weird". Conversely, some students reported positive experiences, noting, "Fortunately, they never discouraged me from making mistakes; instead, they sometimes encouraged me to keep going, saying it's okay to make mistakes". This indicates that while fear of judgment is prevalent, there are also supportive elements within the classroom environment. Indifference or lack of attention from classmates was another perceived reaction, with one participant commenting, "I don't think they feel anything about it. I'm sure they have their own thing to worry about". This suggests that some students may not be as concerned about peers' reactions as initially feared. Mixed reactions were also noted, with comments such as, "I think there will be 2 reactions, one is they don't even care since they didn't pay attention to me speaking or they will be like 'what's wrong with this girl?' if I make a mistake". This highlights the varied nature of peer responses to mistakes, which can range from indifference to judgment or support.

### Coping Strategies for Public Speaking Anxiety

Students employed the following strategies to manage their anxiety:

**Figure 5: Coping Strategies for Public Speaking Anxiety**

Strategy	Example Statements
1. Practice and Preparation	Practice a lot; Make scripts; Understand content
2. Relaxation Techniques	Deep breathing
3. Positive Self-talk	Motivational phrases like 'You are the champion'
4. Focusing on Objects	Avoid eye contact; Focus on an object
5. Seeking Support	Receiving encouragement from friends/classmates
6. Using Props or Scripts	Memorize script but avoid looking at it
7. Spiritual Support	Praying for comfort and support

Students employed a range of coping strategies to manage their public speaking anxiety. Practice and preparation were emphasized as key strategies, with one respondent stating, "I would practice a lot if I were given time before the class. Make my own scripts and understand the contents." This reflects a proactive approach to reducing anxiety through thorough preparation. Deep breathing and relaxation techniques were also mentioned as helpful, with one student noting, "Deep breathing." This aligns with research suggesting that relaxation techniques can mitigate the physical symptoms of anxiety (Horwitz et al., 1986).

Positive self-talk and motivation were cited as additional strategies. One participant described their approach: "For me, I would take a deep breath before I begin and some motivational words will help, for me, it's 'You are the champion, go out and go get it.'" This technique of using self-affirmations and motivational statements is supported by literature on enhancing confidence and reducing anxiety (MacIntyre, 1999). Avoiding direct eye contact by focusing on objects was another strategy mentioned, with one student stating, "Not look directly into their eyes, instead focus on an object." This approach can help manage anxiety by reducing the perceived pressure of maintaining eye contact with the audience. Seeking support from friends and classmates was also highlighted, with one respondent saying, "Receiving support from friends/classmates." This indicates that social support plays a significant role in alleviating public speaking anxiety (Raja, 2017). Using props or scripts for support was another strategy, as one student mentioned, "I memorise script. Even though I have my script in my phone or on a paper I will not look at them." This reflects a preference for having a prepared reference to aid in the presentation. Finally, prayer and spiritual support were noted by one participant, who said, "I usually pray hahaha sounds funny but honestly it helps, you feel like God is always by your side." This highlights the role of personal belief systems in managing anxiety, offering a sense of comfort and support.

#### 4. Conclusion

This study utilized semi-structured interviews to investigate public speaking anxiety (PSA) among Malaysian university students and their coping strategies. Findings revealed that students often experience significant emotional responses like nervousness and fear and report physical symptoms such as shaking hands and a rapid heartbeat. Key challenges include language and vocabulary issues, which exacerbate anxiety due to concerns about grammatical errors and negative judgment. Technological issues during virtual presentations also contribute to stress. Sources of anxiety identified include fear of making mistakes, peer judgment, and lack of experience, which undermine students' confidence. To cope with PSA, students employ various strategies such as preparation, deep breathing, positive self-talk, and seeking peer support. Some avoid direct eye contact or use props and scripts. Public speaking classes, despite their initial intimidation, generally enhance students' confidence and skills. However, online learning introduces new challenges, including technological problems and adapting to virtual formats. The implications of this study extend to educators, policymakers, and students themselves. For educators, the findings emphasize the need to create supportive classroom environments that mitigate anxiety such as providing constructive feedback and fostering peer encouragement by means that are up to the creativity of individuals. Policymakers can incorporate public speaking training into university curricula or programs ensuring students develop the confidence and skills necessary for academic and professional success. For students, the study underscores the importance of practicing coping mechanisms, such as systematic preparation and seeking peer or mentor support, to overcome public speaking challenges. Future research should aim to include larger and more diverse samples to gain a comprehensive understanding of the factors contributing to PSA across different contexts. Such

studies could inform the development of improved public speaking training programs and support systems tailored to the needs of Malaysian university students. By addressing these issues, educational institutions can foster an environment where students feel empowered to develop their public speaking abilities and ultimately enhancing their academic performance and professional readiness in an increasingly competitive landscape to face the real world.

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