

# **EXPLORING STUDENTS' LEVELS OF ORAL PRESENTATION APPREHENSION IN ESL CONTEXT**

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**Abstract:** The study was aimed to investigate ESL students' levels of oral presentation apprehension. All postgraduate students from Faculty of Education of a public university in Malaysia participated in this study. It is a qualitative study, and data needed for the study were extracted from McCroskey's Personal Report of Public Speaking Anxiety (PRPSA). The participants answered 34 Likert-scale items, and the data were analysed by using PRPSA scores formula. Participants who scored more than 131 were considered to have a high level of oral presentation apprehension, and those who scored below than 98 were considered to have a low level of oral presentation apprehension. Besides, the moderate level of oral presentation apprehension was determined by the number of scores ranged from 98 to 131. Descriptive analysis was also performed by using SPSS. The findings reveal that overall, the participants have a low level of oral presentation apprehension. 66.7% of the participants had a low level of oral presentation apprehension, 29.2% had a moderate level of oral presentation apprehension, and only 4.2% had a high level of oral presentation apprehension. Furthermore, it was reported that the external and internal effects of oral presentation apprehension experienced were rated negatively by the participants. However, the scores for the internal effects were higher compared to the external effects. This is believed due to the participants' high exposure to the oral presentation activity and pedagogical trainings as well as their language proficiency.

**Keywords:** ESL context, oral presentation apprehension, second language learning

## **INTRODUCTION**

Learning a new language is one of the hardest things to learn regardless of its position in society; either it is a second language or a foreign language. It is influenced by a range of factors which include motivation, language aptitude, personality, motivation, and anxiety. A successful language learner is the one who acquires all the four language skills which are reading, writing, listening, and speaking. However, besides being able to read, write and listen in the target language, learners are mostly expected to be able to communicate effectively in the target language. It must involve the skill to convey both literal and implied meanings, and the efficacy to utilise language literacy across diverse situations for different occasional purposes (Gatie, 2020).

Malaysia Education Blueprint 2013-2025's shift is to produce students who are capable of communicating globally, operationally and effectively (Ministry of Education, 2013). Hence, ESL educators and instructors have implemented various strategies to realise the national target. However, Malaysian students' performance shows little improvement for their speaking skills (Kashinathan & Aziz 2021). One of the most influential factors that hinders one's communication in the target language is communication apprehension. Communication apprehension refers to one's level of anxiety associated with either real or anticipated communication with another person or persons. This impedes language attainment especially in learning a second or foreign language (Bećirović, 2020). This could also be influenced by the nature of the assessment that inhibits students' potential in speaking. In Malaysia, students' speaking ability is predominantly measured by oral presentation assessment, and this method is a major practice across all educational levels in Malaysia, occasionally supported by visual aids (Kho & Ting, 2023). An extensive literature has been conducted on communication apprehension, but fewer has specifically focused on oral presentation especially in Malaysia (Jalleh et. al., 2021; Rauf et. al., 2021; Husin & Makmur, 2021; Kho et. al., 2021; Kho & Ting, 2023). Hence, to address this gap, this study aims to investigate students' levels of oral presentation apprehension. Besides, the current study's findings are important for future research in strategizing the follow-up actions by both educators and learners (Brooks et al., 2021).

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Foreign language anxiety**

The seminal studies on anxiety largely categorise anxiety into three types: trait, state, and situation specific anxiety (Cattell & Scheier, 1963; MacIntyre & Gardner, 1989, 1991; Spielberger, 1966). Trait anxiety is a part of one's personality which is consequently stable and reasonable over time. Thus, people with trait anxiety have a high tendency to be apprehensive in a wide range of events (Spielberger, 1983) and the causes are also varied. State anxiety is a temporary apprehensive feeling that fluctuates over time. Unlike trait anxiety, it is unstable and has a high possibility to change over time. This is because it occurs at a specific moment under a specific circumstance (Spielberger, 1983). Whereas situation-specific anxiety specifies a particular situation which results in the anxious feeling like foreign language anxiety. It is similar to trait anxiety in terms of stability, but it is not consistent across situations. It is important to note that in this study, the researcher focuses on situation-specific anxiety as it is intended to study anxiety or apprehension in a particular situation.

Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope (1986) has developed Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) to measure foreign language anxiety. In the study, it is suggested that foreign language anxiety is an individual complex of self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings, and behaviours related to classroom language learning arising from the exclusivity of the language learning process. It is an effective factor that possesses high potential to negatively affect the language learning process. Furthermore, language anxiety has been subdivided into three main underlying components: (1) communication apprehension, (2) test anxiety, and (3) fear of negative evaluation. The first is communication apprehension which suggests that oral communication or speech is the central modality of a language. Whereas test anxiety is the anxious feeling stemming from academic evaluation. Finally, the fear of negative evaluation is the fear of destructive evaluation from society.

As FLCAS continues to hold significant relevance, it remains extensively utilised in research especially in language studies. Besides, it has been recognised as a complex personal

characteristic of research subject due to its profound effects on one's language learning achievement (Piniel & Zólyomi, 2022). It has been proposed that one's language anxiety levels could be reduced by improving language learning environment via teaching strategies to significantly further develop one's language learning achievement (Yang et al., 2022). However, in a recent study, it was revealed that language anxiety did not serve as a predictor for second language achievement. In fact, language anxiety was associated only with the initial levels of language achievement, implying that anxiety reflects the initial experience rather than ongoing achievement in the second language (Sparks & Alamer, 2024). Despite the variability in research findings, it remains imperative to determine the levels of language anxiety in devising teaching and learning strategies. This might be due to the distinctiveness of foreign language anxiety that elicited in situational context (Ran et al., 2022).

In this study, the researcher focuses on communication apprehension as the main component of the research. Other underlying components as mentioned above are not discussed further to fulfil the research objectives.

## **Communication apprehension**

Communication apprehension (CA) is defined by McCroskey (1977) as “an individual's level of anxiety associated with either real or anticipated communication with another person or persons” (p.279). It is also known as oral communication apprehension or speaking anxiety. Moreover, communication apprehension is divided into two types which are state communication apprehension and trait communication apprehension. State communication apprehension is applied to a specific communication situation such as giving a speech in public or giving a presentation in class, and trait communication apprehension is applied when an individual experiences anxiety in all communication situations (McCroskey 1970). However, it is suggested that both types are irreconcilable to view all human behaviours. Historically, McCroskey's (1984) study on communication apprehension has become the theoretical framework to other research on foreign language anxiety particularly on communication apprehension. An instrument called Personal Report of Communication Apprehension (PRCA-24) has been developed to measure communication apprehension and its high reliability and validity encourage other researchers to use it to further explore communication apprehension.

Furthermore, the overall communication apprehension also includes group CA, meeting CA, dyadic CA and public CA. A recent study conducted by Croucher et. al (2024) has found that group CA did not show a significant change over time. However, meeting CA noted a statistically significant change. Besides, dyadic CA and public increased significantly. These suggest an overall statistical increase in total CA over time. It is essential to note that this current study only explores public communication apprehension.

McCroskey (1977) also highlighted the internal-focused effects of communication apprehension. The findings should not be interpreted as regular behaviour as their potential to deviate from the aggregate behaviours will be low. Even though the implications might be behavioural, the experience of communication apprehension is internal. Feeling of discomfort is the only effect of communication apprehension that is universal across types of communication apprehension and individuals. The lower the communication apprehension, the less the internal discomfort. Despite that, there are some external behavioural outcomes, but the distinctions are according to the types of communication apprehension. Generally, there are three predictable patterns of behavioural outcomes due to high communication apprehension; communication avoidance, communication withdrawal and communication disruption. In this study, state communication apprehension particularly in giving an oral presentation in the target language is the focus. The researcher also limits the nature of this study to face-to-face or real time language learning environments. In fact, this study is not intended to further investigate

trait communication apprehension in detail and other types of state communication apprehension other than oral presentation in class.

## **METHODOLOGY**

This study was conducted to investigate the levels of oral communication apprehension. This study is qualitative, and the design of this study is explanatory design. It was carried out using a set of questionnaires to investigate students' oral presentation apprehension. Population of this study is all 24 education postgraduate students from a public university in Malaysia. The researcher used total population sampling, which is a type of purposive non-random sampling, to select the sample of the study. The researcher decided to study the entire population because the size of the population is typically small. It is significant for the researcher to reduce risk of missing potential insights from members that are not included.

A questionnaire was used to investigate students' apprehension levels on oral presentation. The researcher has adapted McCroskey's Personal Report of Public Speaking Anxiety (PRPSA) which was constructed to measure public speaking anxiety through a 34-item Likert-scale instrument. It possesses strong validity and internal reliability at .94. Hence, the researcher has adapted all 34 items and performed some changes by specifying the general topic of public speaking apprehension to oral presentation apprehension.

The levels of oral presentation apprehension were determined using the PRPSA scores formulated by McCroskey. The researcher has computed the sub-scores together to get the overall level of oral presentation apprehension. Those who score more than 131 are considered to have a high level of oral presentation apprehension. While those who score less than 98 are considered to have low level of oral presentation apprehension and those who score between 98 to 131 are considered to have moderate level of oral presentation apprehension. The following table summarises the formulated scores.

*Table 1: McCroskey Formulated Scores for Oral Presentation Apprehension*

Level	Score
High level of oral presentation apprehension	>131
Low level of oral presentation apprehension	< 98
Moderate level of oral presentation apprehension	98 - 131

## **FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

### **Students' Levels of Oral Presentation Apprehension**

*Table 2: Students' Overall Score on Oral Presentation Apprehension*

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Overall Scores on Oral Presentation Apprehension	24	89.67	23.35

The results in Table 2 show that overall, the participants have a low level of oral presentation apprehension (mean = 89.67, SD= 23.35). Then, the researcher has also conducted individual analysis on the levels of oral presentation apprehension to further clarify students' levels of oral presentation apprehension.

*Table 3: Students' Levels of Oral Presentation Apprehension*

	Frequency	Percent
Level		
High	1	4.2
Low	16	66.7
Moderate	7	29.2
Total	24	100.0

As shown in Table 3, most of the respondents (66.7%) have a low level of oral presentation apprehension with a score below 98. Another seven respondents (29.2%) have moderate level of oral presentation apprehension, and only one respondent (4.2%) have high level of oral presentation apprehension. Hence, it could be concluded that most of the students possess a low level of oral presentation apprehension. The following is a descriptive statistic on the individual items based on internal and external effects of communication apprehension. The respondents have rated each item by using a five-point Likert Scale which is ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

*Table 4: Descriptive statistic on external effects of oral communication apprehension*

	Mean	Std. Deviation
Item 10: My hands tremble when I am giving a presentation.	2.21	1.14
Item 19: I perspire just before starting a presentation.	2.42	1.10
Item 20: My heart beats very fast just as I start a presentation.	2.79	1.25
Item 22: Certain parts of my body feel very tense and rigid while giving a presentation.	2.67	1.01
Item 25: I breathe faster just before starting a presentation	2.67	1.13
Item 31: I have trouble falling asleep the night before a presentation.	1.67	.76
Item 32: My heart beats very fast while I am presenting.	2.58	1.14
Item 34: While presenting, I get so nervous I forget facts I really know.	2.46	1.10
Overall Mean	2.43	1.08

The results in Table 4 indicate the overall mean scores for items on external effects of oral communication apprehension (mean = 2.43, SD= 1.08). Generally, all items on external effects of oral communication apprehension were rated negatively by the respondents.

Table 5: Descriptive statistic on internal effects of oral communication apprehension

	Mean	Std. Deviation
Item 1: While preparing to give a presentation, I feel tense and nervous.	3.17	1.37
Item 2: I feel tense when I see the words "presentation" on a course outline when studying.	2.67	1.20
Item 3: My thoughts become confused and jumbled when I am giving a presentation.	2.63	1.14
Item 4: Right after giving a presentation I feel that I have had a pleasant experience.	4.33	.64
Item 5: I get anxious when I think about a presentation coming up.	3.29	1.27
Item 6: I have no fear of giving a presentation.	2.71	1.20
Item 7: Although I am nervous just before starting a presentation, I soon settle down after starting and feel calm and comfortable.	3.79	0.93
Item 8: I look forward to presenting.	3.42	1.10
Item 9: When the instructor announces a presentation assignment in class, I can feel myself getting tense.	2.88	1.33
Item 11: I feel relaxed while giving a presentation.	3.12	1.08
Item 12: I enjoy preparing for a presentation.	3.21	1.10
Item 13: I am in constant fear of forgetting what I prepared to say.	2.54	1.23
Item 14: I get anxious if someone asks me something about my topic that I don't know.	3.46	1.23
Item 15: I face the prospect of giving a presentation with confidence.	3.71	.81
Item 16: I feel that I am in complete possession of myself while giving a presentation.	3.63	.82
Item 17: My mind is clear when giving a presentation.	3.42	.97
Item 18: I do not dread giving a presentation.	3.46	.98
Item 21: I experience considerable anxiety while sitting in the room just before my presentation starts.	2.83	1.17
Item 23: Realising that only a little time remains in a presentation makes me very tense and anxious.	2.79	1.18
Item 24: While giving a presentation, I know I can control my feelings of tension and stress.	3.92	.72
Item 26: I feel comfortable and relaxed in the hour or so just before giving a presentation.	3.00	1.06
Item 27: I do poorer on presentation because I am anxious.	2.96	1.20
Item 28: I feel anxious when the teacher announces the date of a presentation assignment.	2.67	1.10
Item 29: When I make a mistake while presenting, I find it hard to concentrate on the parts that follow.	2.46	1.14
Item 30: During an important presentation I experience a feeling of helplessness building up inside me.	2.50	1.02
Item 33: I feel anxious while waiting to deliver my presentation.	3.08	1.14
Overall Mean	3.14	1.08

Table 5 presents the overall mean scores for items on internal effects of oral communication apprehension (mean = 3.14, SD= 1.08). Generally, all items on internal effects of oral communication apprehension were rated negatively by the respondents except for Item 4 which confirms the respondents' pleasant feeling right after giving a presentation. Even though both external and internal items were generally rated negatively by the respondents, the

mean score on the internal effects of oral communication apprehension is higher (mean = 3.14, SD= 1.08) than the mean score on the external effects of oral communication apprehension (mean = 2.43, SD= 1.08).

The descriptive analysis further clarifies the low level of oral presentation apprehension experienced by the respondents. The majority of the respondents do not feel overwhelmed by the nervousness of oral presentation. They also do not experience physical troubles like perspiration, increased heartbeats, and sleep deprivation. However, they do agree that they do feel somewhat nervous about having a presentation, but it does not overwhelm and hinder them from finding pleasure in doing so.

In this study, the overall level of students' oral presentation apprehension is low (Table 2). It is corresponding to their negative responses on the internal and external effects of oral presentation apprehension. It is reported that the respondents do not experience physical troubles like perspiration, increased heartbeats, and sleep deprivation. Besides, they regard oral presentations as a pleasant and enjoyable experience. However, the respondents still acknowledge the internal tense feeling of having a presentation. A possible explanation for the current findings might be due to the respondents' high exposure to the oral presentation activity and pedagogical training in ESL as well as their high proficiency in the target language. It can be argued that the pedagogical exposure has exposed teachers for better teaching performance and for better language attainment in the target language which are accounted for by their low level of oral communication apprehension. In relation to that, the reinforcement paradigm, which has been suggested as the cause for the development of oral communication apprehension, might also contribute to the current findings. McCroskey (1970) has suggested home and school as the two influential environments that could predict one's oral communication apprehension. Hence, it could be argued that the current findings are the results of reinforcement of oral presentation activities that they have received at educational institutions which reinforce oral presentation skills.

Besides, according to McCroskey (1986), people may either avoid or confront a situation that they anticipate making them uncomfortable. As a result, people with a high level of oral communication apprehension generally choose to avoid communication to escape the discomfort feeling they associate the circumstance with. Similarly, under such circumstances, communication withdrawal will be another behavioural pattern associated with high communication apprehension, as well as communication disruption that is highly related to one's inadequate communication skills. Hence, it can therefore be assumed that the possibility for the respondents to avoid and withdraw from an oral presentation apprehension is low. Likewise, there is also a low chance for the respondents to experience communication disruption. However, it cannot be concluded that their behaviours are the exact reverse of those who possess a high level of oral presentation apprehension. The possibility for the respondents to over communicate in a presentation is high which could result in communication disruption. Therefore, further research should be undertaken to investigate the relationship between reinforcement paradigm and one's oral communication apprehension.

## **CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION**

In this study, the aim was to investigate the levels of oral presentation apprehension. The results of this investigation show that the overall level of oral presentation apprehension is low. It reflects their positive feeling on the oral act of presenting, but the feeling of nervousness on having a presentation somewhat still exists. However, the anxious feeling is not debilitating, and it does not overwhelm them. Even so, it is important to note that the positive feelings certainly can be further strengthen despite having low oral presentation apprehension. The

current study's findings have been able to identify the potential benefits of identifying students' levels of oral communication apprehension and the possibility of developing pedagogical strategies in easing the apprehension. It can help students and educators to be aware of their internal and external feelings to form control in maximising the potential in speaking skills. As this study was exploratory and only used questionnaire, future research is suggested to employ action research, case study or mixed study. Secondly, the current research was based on a sample of ESL postgraduate students from education department in a public university in Malaysia. Their language proficiency could differ from other group learners like pre-diploma and undergraduates and students in other countries, which limit the generalizability of this study. Therefore, future research can expand the sample of the study. It is also suggested to further explore in-depth research on the effectiveness of various pedagogical strategies to ease students' oral presentation apprehension.

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