



OVERCOMING THE STAGE: AN EXPLORATORY STUDY OF ESL PUBLIC SPEAKING ANXIETY

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ABSTRACT

Public speaking anxiety (PSA) is a common challenge among English as a Second Language (ESL) learners, particularly in academic environments where English is used as the primary medium of communication. This study explored the triggers of public speaking anxiety, the emotional and cognitive experiences of ESL learners, and the coping strategies they employ to manage anxiety during public speaking. The research was conducted among selected students at Mindoro State University (MinSU), Main Campus, who had prior experience in public speaking activities such as class reporting, presentations, and demonstration teaching. Using an exploratory research design, the study employed in-depth interviews as the primary data collection method. A researcher-made interview guide consisting of three sections was utilized to gather information related to the triggers of anxiety, emotional and cognitive responses, and coping mechanisms used by the participants. The data gathered were analyzed using inductive thematic analysis, following the steps of familiarization, coding, theme generation, theme review, theme definition, and reporting. The findings revealed several key triggers of public speaking anxiety, including fear of grammatical errors, fear of negative evaluation, audience presence, lack of confidence in pronunciation and vocabulary, and anxiety related to formal speaking tasks such as presentations and demonstration teaching. In addition, participants reported experiencing anticipatory anxiety, cognitive overthinking, and various physical manifestations such as trembling, sweating, and increased heartbeat during speaking situations. Despite these challenges, learners employed several coping strategies, including repeated preparation and practice, relaxation techniques, positive self-talk, the use of notes and visual aids, and seeking support from

peers and teachers. The study concludes that public speaking anxiety among ESL learners is influenced by linguistic, psychological, and situational factors, but supportive classroom practices and strategic interventions can help improve students' confidence and communication skills.

Keywords: *public speaking anxiety, ESL learners, language anxiety, coping strategies*

INTRODUCTION

Public speaking anxiety (PSA) is a common and significant issue among English as a Second Language (ESL) learners, particularly when it comes to public speaking in English. For ESL learners, this anxiety is often intensified by linguistic barriers, such as fear of mispronunciation, limited vocabulary, and unfamiliarity with formal speaking conventions. In the context of Filipino college students at Mindoro State University (MinSU), cultural factors, including the value placed on humility and avoidance of public embarrassment (e.g., *hiya*), may also play a crucial role in intensifying PSA. These students often experience a combination of emotional and cognitive challenges when speaking in front of an audience, including physical symptoms like trembling or sweating, as well as intrusive thoughts related to fear of negative evaluation.

The emotional and cognitive dimensions of PSA are well-documented in existing research. Scholars like Horwitz et al. (1986) and MacIntyre & Gardner (1994) have identified cognitive overload and anxiety as major factors that impact the ability to speak confidently in a second language. Furthermore, the emotional toll of PSA can hinder students' academic performance, participation, and social integration. However, research focusing on the unique experiences of Filipino ESL learners, especially within the specific academic setting of MinSU, remains sparse. Existing studies predominantly explore PSA in general, overlooking the role of cultural dynamics and the specific coping mechanisms employed by Filipino learners.

Although various coping strategies have been proposed, including cognitive-behavioral therapy and exposure-based methods (Anderson et al., 2005), there is a need for more context-specific research to identify effective techniques for Filipino ESL learners. Understanding these strategies, along with the triggers and emotional responses to public speaking, will provide valuable insights that can inform pedagogical practices and support structures in ESL education. This study aims to fill these gaps by exploring the triggers of PSA, the emotional and cognitive experiences of ESL learners during public speaking, and the coping strategies they use to manage their anxiety.

This research would contribute to the body of literature on language anxiety and provide practical recommendations for improving public speaking skills among ESL learners at MinSU.

Research Objectives

Generally, this study aimed to understand the experiences of the students during public speaking. Specifically:

1. To explore the triggers of public speaking anxiety among ESL learners.
2. To understand the emotional and cognitive experiences of ESL learners during public speaking.
3. To identify coping strategies ESL learners use to manage public speaking anxiety.

METHODOLOGY

This part presents the methodology the researcher employed in analyzing and interpreting the data about the variables in the study.

Exploratory research design is used to study unsolved problems, allowing for the exploration of new ideas and the identification of patterns without the limits of a formal framework. According to Saunders et al. (2014), this strategy is especially useful when the researcher is unsure about the exact nature of the problem or phenomenon being examined, as it allows for the development of more explicit research questions and hypotheses for further examination. It is frequently the beginning point for expanding knowledge in areas where existing information is scarce.

The study was conducted at Mindoro State University, Main Campus, Alcate, Victoria, Oriental Mindoro. The participants are the selected students of the university who have experienced public speaking two to three times. They were chosen because they have a foundational level of exposure to public speaking but may still require further development in confidence, delivery, and effective communication skills.

For the purpose of this research, in-depth interviews were done. The study utilized a researcher made interview guide with three parts as the main data gathering instrument. The first part is composed of questions that will explore the triggers of public speaking anxiety among ESL learners. The second part dealt with emotional and cognitive experiences of ESL learners during public speaking. And lastly, it dealt with questions assessing the respondents' coping strategies in managing their public speaking anxiety.

Thematic analysis was used in this study. In using the thematic analysis, there are different approaches to consider. The researcher decided to use the inductive approach as it involves deriving meaning and creating themes from data without any preconceptions. In doing a thematic data analysis, the researcher followed the steps: familiarization, coding, generating themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes and writing up.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Based from the analyzed responses of the participants on the different questions assessing the three major objectives of the study, here are the generated themes:

Triggers of public speaking anxiety among ESL learners

1. Fear of Grammatical Errors and Language Inaccuracy

One of the most prominent triggers of public speaking anxiety among the participants is the fear of making grammatical errors and using incorrect sentence structures when speaking English. Many respondents reported being highly conscious about their grammar during presentations, which leads to hesitation and nervousness while speaking. For instance, one participant stated, "I felt very nervous because I was not sure if my grammar was correct." Another respondent shared, "I was so worried about making grammar mistakes that my hands were shaking." Similarly, another participant explained, "I felt anxious during my class report because I was afraid of making grammar mistakes." These responses indicate that the fear of linguistic inaccuracy can significantly affect students' confidence when speaking English in public.

Recent studies confirm that linguistic concerns such as grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation are major contributors to speaking anxiety among ESL learners. Research indicates that learners often experience anxiety when they feel their linguistic competence is insufficient, which may hinder their ability to communicate effectively (Rajitha & Alamelu, 2020). Additionally, studies have shown that grammar-related concerns are among the most dominant factors that trigger speaking anxiety among English learners. Similarly, recent research on English public speaking anxiety among university students found that learners who perceive themselves as having limited linguistic competence often experience higher levels of anxiety because they fear making mistakes during oral communication.

These findings suggest that language accuracy concerns play a crucial role in shaping ESL learners' confidence and willingness to speak in public.

2. Fear of Negative Evaluation and Judgment

Another significant theme emerging from the responses is the fear of being negatively evaluated by peers or teachers. Many participants expressed concerns that their classmates might laugh at them or judge their English ability when they make mistakes. One participant mentioned, "I was worried that my classmates might laugh at my wrong grammar or pronunciation." Another stated, "I kept thinking about whether my classmates and teacher would notice my mistakes." Similarly, another respondent shared, "I would overthink worrying that they might judge me or say negative things about the way I spoke."

This fear of negative evaluation creates psychological pressure that increases students' anxiety when speaking English in front of others. According to recent studies on foreign language anxiety, learners often associate speaking tasks with the risk of

embarrassment and criticism from peers, which intensifies their nervousness during presentations.

Furthermore, research has found that fear of peer judgment is one of the most frequently reported reasons why students avoid speaking English in public or participating in oral activities.

3. Audience Presence and Classroom Pressure

The presence of an audience was also identified as a major factor that increases students' anxiety when speaking English. Many participants indicated that they become more nervous when they stand in front of many people or when they notice that others are watching them closely. For example, one participant explained, "When there are many people watching me, I feel more nervous because I think they will judge me if I make mistakes." Another respondent stated, "When the audience looks serious, I feel more pressure and lose confidence." Similarly, another participant shared, "The audience presence affects me because it creates pressure to speak English well."

These responses suggest that the physical presence and reactions of the audience significantly influence students' anxiety levels. In classroom settings, speaking tasks often involve evaluation by peers and teachers, which can increase performance pressure.

Recent studies also confirm that speaking activities are among the most anxiety-provoking tasks in language learning environments. Learners often experience physical symptoms such as nervousness, shaking, and hesitation when speaking becomes the main focus of classroom activities. Additionally, research on foreign language anxiety in higher education classrooms indicates that speaking activities frequently trigger anxiety because students feel they are being constantly observed and evaluated by others.

4. Lack of Confidence in Pronunciation and Vocabulary

Another theme that emerged from the participants' responses is the lack of confidence in pronunciation and vocabulary. Several students reported that they struggle to find the correct words or worry about mispronouncing English words during presentations. One participant shared, "Sometimes I cannot find the right words to say." Another stated, "I once had to present in class, and I felt nervous because I might mispronounce words." Similarly, another respondent explained, "It is hard when I am not sure about the right word to use." These statements indicate that limited vocabulary and pronunciation difficulties can increase anxiety because students fear that their message may not be understood clearly by the audience.

Recent research supports this finding, suggesting that limited vocabulary and pronunciation difficulties are common linguistic barriers that contribute to speaking anxiety among ESL learners. When learners lack sufficient vocabulary or are unsure about pronunciation, they tend to hesitate and become less confident during oral communication.

Moreover, studies on language learning anxiety show that learners who perceive their oral proficiency as inadequate are more likely to avoid speaking tasks due to fear of communication breakdown. Thus, linguistic limitations can significantly contribute to the development of anxiety in English public speaking situations.

5. Anxiety in Formal Speaking Tasks such as Presentations and Demonstration Teaching

The responses also revealed that formal academic speaking tasks, such as class presentations, reporting, and demonstration teaching, are major triggers of anxiety among ESL learners. These situations require students to speak English for an extended period while being evaluated by their instructors and classmates. For example, one participant shared, "My recent experience where I felt anxious while speaking English in public was my last reporting." Another respondent stated, "I felt very anxious during my demo teaching." Similarly, another participant mentioned, "I experienced strong anxiety during our class oral presentation." These tasks often require students to demonstrate both subject knowledge and language proficiency simultaneously, which can increase pressure and anxiety.

Recent research indicates that structured speaking activities such as presentations and public speaking tasks are among the most anxiety-inducing experiences for language learners because they combine performance, evaluation, and linguistic demands. Additionally, studies highlight that repeated exposure to speaking situations and practice opportunities can help reduce public speaking anxiety by improving learners' confidence and communication skills.

Emotional and cognitive experiences of ESL learners during public speaking

1. Anticipatory Anxiety Before Public Speaking

A prominent emotional experience expressed by the participants is anticipatory anxiety, which occurs before the actual speaking event. Many respondents reported feeling nervous, tense, and worried while preparing to speak in English. This anxiety is often accompanied by overthinking about possible mistakes, audience reactions, and language performance. Several participants described their feelings before speaking as intense nervousness. One participant shared, "Before public speaking I feel so nervous." Another respondent explained, "Before speaking I feel very nervous and worried if I will make mistakes." Similarly, another participant stated, "Before, I usually feel nervous and a little tense. My heart beats so faster and I overthink about whether I will say the right words."

These responses indicate that anxiety often begins even before the speaking event starts. Anticipatory anxiety is common among language learners because they expect potential errors or negative outcomes during communication.

Recent research confirms that ESL learners frequently experience heightened anxiety before oral performances due to concerns about language competence and evaluation by others. Studies have shown that anticipatory anxiety can negatively affect

learners' confidence and willingness to communicate in English (Asio et al., 2024). Additionally, research on foreign language anxiety suggests that pre-speaking nervousness is often associated with learners' fear of making linguistic errors and being negatively evaluated by peers (Chong et al., 2025). Thus, anticipatory anxiety appears to be a major emotional experience that ESL learners face before public speaking situations.

2. Cognitive Overthinking and Self-Doubt During Speech Preparation

Another theme that emerged from the responses is cognitive overthinking and self-doubt, particularly related to grammar, pronunciation, and audience perception. Many participants reported that when preparing to speak, they frequently think about potential mistakes and how others might judge their English proficiency. For instance, one participant stated, "First is my grammar and the pronunciation of the word, then how the audience perceive me." Another respondent shared, "I worry about my grammar and if people understand me. I also compare myself to more fluent classmates." Similarly, another participant mentioned, "I often think what if I make a mistake or what if they don't understand me." These responses demonstrate that ESL learners often experience internal cognitive pressure while preparing to speak. The fear of making mistakes and the tendency to compare themselves with more fluent speakers contribute to self-doubt and increased anxiety.

Recent studies support this finding, indicating that cognitive processes such as negative self-evaluation, overthinking, and self-comparison are common among language learners experiencing speaking anxiety. These thought patterns often lead learners to underestimate their abilities and focus excessively on potential errors (Rohmah & Mushthoza, 2024). Similarly, research on language learning psychology suggests that negative self-perception and fear of linguistic inadequacy can intensify anxiety and hinder learners' oral performance (Afidawati et al., 2024).

3. Physical and Emotional Manifestations of Anxiety

Participants also described several physical and emotional symptoms that occur during public speaking in English. These symptoms include trembling, sweating, increased heartbeat, stuttering, and mental blocks. Such reactions indicate that anxiety affects both the physiological and psychological states of learners. For example, one participant explained, "My hands sweat, shaking, and emotionally I feel nervous and forget how to explain." Another respondent stated, "I feel my hands shaking, my heart beating fast and sometimes I sweat." Similarly, another participant shared, "My voice shakes and sometimes my mind goes blank when I feel too nervous." These responses suggest that speaking anxiety is not only experienced mentally but also physically. Physical symptoms often intensify learners' nervousness because they become more aware of their anxiety while speaking.

Recent research confirms that foreign language anxiety frequently manifests through physiological responses such as trembling, sweating, rapid heartbeat, and voice instability. These symptoms are often triggered when learners perceive speaking tasks as stressful or threatening (Shaden & Algazo, 2025).

Moreover, studies on public speaking anxiety among ESL learners indicate that emotional responses such as fear, embarrassment, and pressure often accompany these physical reactions (Rajitha & Alamelu, 2020).

4. Gradual Emotional Adjustment During the Speaking Process

Another theme identified in the responses is the gradual reduction of anxiety while speaking. Some participants reported that although they initially feel nervous, their anxiety slowly decreases as they continue delivering their speech. One participant explained, "Before public speaking I feel so nervous, during my nervousness slowly fades." Another respondent shared, "During the speech I try to manage my anxiety." Similarly, another participant stated, "During speaking I feel anxious but I try to stay focused and calm."

These responses suggest that as learners become more engaged in the speaking activity, they gradually gain confidence and focus more on delivering their message rather than worrying about mistakes.

Recent studies support this observation, showing that exposure to speaking situations can help learners gradually adapt to anxiety-provoking environments. As learners continue speaking, they may shift their focus from fear to communication, which helps reduce anxiety (Chong et al., 2025). Furthermore, research indicates that repeated speaking experiences can improve learners' self-efficacy and confidence, ultimately reducing their anxiety levels over time.

5. Post-Speech Reflection and Emotional Relief

The final theme that emerged from the responses is post-speech emotional relief accompanied by self-reflection. Many participants reported feeling relieved after finishing their speech, although they often continue thinking about the mistakes they made. For instance, one participant stated, "After speaking I feel so much relief." Another respondent shared, "After I feel relieved but think about my mistakes." Similarly, another participant mentioned, "Afterward, I feel both relieved and a bit disappointed because I think about what I could have said better."

These responses indicate that while completing the speech reduces immediate anxiety, learners often engage in self-evaluation afterward. This reflection may involve feelings of satisfaction, pride, or disappointment depending on how they perceive their performance.

Recent research suggests that post-performance reflection is a common experience among language learners. Learners often analyze their speaking performance to identify mistakes and areas for improvement (Rohmah & Mushtoha, 2024). Additionally, studies on second language learning indicate that post-task reflection can contribute to language development, as learners become more aware of their strengths and weaknesses in communication (Afidawati et al., 2024).

Coping strategies ESL learners use to manage public speaking anxiety

1. Preparation and Repeated Practice as Confidence-Building Strategies

One of the most common coping strategies identified by the participants is extensive preparation and repeated practice before speaking in public. Many respondents reported that practicing their speeches several times helps them become more familiar with the content and reduces their nervousness. For example, one participant stated, “I practice my speech many times before the presentation and try to focus on the main point instead of my fear of mistakes.” Another respondent shared, “I try to prepare and practice my speech many times.” Similarly, another participant mentioned, “I practice my lesson plan many times before the demo teaching.”

These responses suggest that preparation helps learners build confidence and reduce uncertainty about their performance. Practicing allows learners to organize their ideas, anticipate possible difficulties, and develop greater control over their speech.

Recent research supports this finding. Studies indicate that repeated practice is one of the most effective strategies for reducing speaking anxiety because it increases learners’ familiarity with their content and improves fluency (Afidawati et al., 2024). Additionally, research on public speaking in second language learning shows that structured rehearsal and preparation significantly improve learners’ confidence and reduce communication apprehension (Rohmah & Mushthoza, 2024).

2. Relaxation Techniques and Emotional Regulation

Another coping strategy reported by participants is the use of relaxation techniques, particularly deep breathing and physical relaxation methods. Many respondents mentioned that controlling their breathing helps calm their nerves before and during their speech. One participant shared, “I always do the inhale and exhale technique to relax my body.” Another respondent explained, “I try to take deep breath before speaking.” Similarly, another participant stated, “I practice deep breathing before I start speaking.”

These responses indicate that learners actively attempt to regulate their emotional and physiological reactions to anxiety through relaxation strategies. Deep breathing can help reduce physical symptoms such as rapid heartbeat and trembling.

Recent studies confirm that relaxation techniques are effective in reducing public speaking anxiety. Research has shown that breathing exercises and mindfulness techniques help learners regulate stress responses and maintain focus during speaking tasks (Shaden & Algazo, 2025). Moreover, emotional regulation strategies are commonly recommended in language learning contexts to help students manage performance-related anxiety (Chong et al., 2025). Therefore, relaxation techniques serve as practical coping mechanisms that help ESL learners manage their emotional responses during public speaking.

3. Cognitive Self-Encouragement and Positive Thinking

Participants also described the use of positive self-talk and encouraging thoughts as a way to overcome anxiety. Many learners reported reminding themselves that they are capable of speaking English and that making mistakes is acceptable. For instance, one participant stated, "I always say to myself that I can do it." Another respondent shared, "I keep positive thinking so it will lessen my overthinking." Similarly, another participant mentioned, "I told myself it's okay to make mistakes."

These responses show that learners attempt to manage their anxiety by reframing their thoughts and maintaining a positive mindset. Positive self-talk can help learners focus on their ability rather than their fears.

Recent research supports this strategy. Studies on language anxiety indicate that positive cognitive strategies, such as self-encouragement and reframing negative thoughts, can significantly reduce anxiety and improve learners' willingness to communicate (Asio et al., 2024). Additionally, research suggests that learners who adopt positive attitudes toward mistakes are more likely to develop confidence in speaking situations (Rajitha & Alamelu, 2020).

4. Use of Notes, Visual Aids, and External Support Tools

Another theme that emerged from the responses is the use of support materials, such as notes, outlines, visual aids, or technological tools, to help manage anxiety. Participants explained that having reference materials allows them to stay on track during their presentations. One participant explained, "I write keywords on a small paper." Another respondent shared, "I prepare visual aids so I can rely on them when I forget my words." Similarly, another participant mentioned, "I focus on my notes when I feel nervous."

These responses indicate that external aids serve as cognitive support tools that help learners remember key points and maintain their confidence during speaking tasks.

Recent research highlights that scaffolding strategies, such as outlines, cue cards, and visual aids, can help reduce cognitive load and speaking anxiety among language learners (Afidawati et al., 2024). Furthermore, studies have found that digital tools and AI-assisted preparation can also support learners in organizing their speech and improving language accuracy (Chong et al., 2025).

5. Social Support and Positive Audience Feedback

Another coping strategy identified in the responses is drawing encouragement from supportive peers, teachers, or audience members. Participants reported that seeing classmates nodding, smiling, or responding positively helped them feel calmer and more confident. For example, one participant shared, "When my classmates were nodding, it helped me stay calm." Another respondent stated, "I looked at one classmate who was smiling and it helped me continue my speech." Similarly, another participant mentioned, "When I saw the students responding to my questions, I gained confidence."

These responses suggest that positive audience reactions can significantly reduce anxiety and encourage learners to continue speaking. Recent research confirms that supportive learning environments play a crucial role in reducing language anxiety. Studies show that encouragement from teachers and peers helps learners feel more comfortable participating in speaking activities (Shaden & Algazo, 2025). Additionally, collaborative learning environments and peer support have been found to increase learners' confidence and motivation to communicate in English (Afidawati et al., 2024).

Conclusions

The findings of this study reveal that public speaking anxiety among ESL learners is influenced by multiple linguistic, psychological, and situational factors. The results indicate that fear of grammatical errors, fear of negative evaluation, audience pressure, and limited confidence in pronunciation and vocabulary are among the primary triggers of anxiety during English public speaking tasks. Additionally, learners experience various emotional and cognitive responses, including anticipatory anxiety, overthinking, self-doubt, and physiological symptoms such as trembling and increased heartbeat. Despite these challenges, the participants demonstrate the ability to manage their anxiety through several coping strategies, including extensive preparation and practice, relaxation techniques, positive self-talk, the use of notes and visual aids, and seeking support from peers and teachers. These findings align with recent literature suggesting that language anxiety is a complex phenomenon that affects learners' communication performance but can be mitigated through supportive learning environments and effective coping strategies (Afidawati et al., 2024; Asio et al., 2024; Chong et al., 2025; Rohmah & Mushthoza, 2024; Shaden & Algazo, 2025). Overall, the study highlights that while public speaking anxiety remains a common challenge among ESL learners, appropriate pedagogical support and strategic interventions can help students gradually build confidence and improve their English communication skills.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study, it is recommended that language instructors implement supportive classroom practices that help reduce students' public speaking anxiety while enhancing their confidence in using English. Teachers may provide more opportunities for low-pressure speaking activities, gradual exposure to public speaking tasks, and constructive feedback that focuses on communication rather than grammatical perfection. Incorporating structured preparation activities, rehearsal sessions, and the use of visual aids can also help learners feel more prepared and less anxious during presentations. Additionally, educators may introduce relaxation techniques, positive self-reflection exercises, and peer support strategies to help students manage emotional and cognitive stress during speaking tasks. Creating a supportive and non-judgmental classroom environment where mistakes are viewed as part of the learning process can further encourage students to participate actively in oral communication. Future researchers may also explore intervention programs or instructional strategies specifically designed to reduce public speaking anxiety among ESL learners in different educational contexts.

Compliance With Ethical Standards

The authors hereby declare that this work was conducted in strict accordance with ethical research guidelines. All respondents were provided informed consent prior to participating, ensuring that they were fully aware of the study's nature and objective. Respondents were informed that they had the right to withdraw from the study at any moment, without consequence or detriment. The respondents' anonymity was protected throughout the research procedure, and all personal information was kept private. The respondents' well-being was prioritized, and all measures were taken to protect their rights and dignity. The authors additionally confirm that no conflicts of interest arose during the course of the investigation. Every attempt was taken to avoid plagiarism, and all sources were appropriately mentioned. Additionally, the findings were interpreted honestly and without bias. Finally, the findings of this study were used purely for research reasons, benefiting the academic and scientific communities.

Acknowledgments

The authors would like to offer her heartfelt gratitude to all of the respondents who kindly contributed their time and ideas to make this research possible. Their involvement and honest contributions were critical to the accomplishment of this study. She is also thankful to Mindoro State University, her institution, for the support it has extended. The authors are also extremely grateful to their family for their consistent support, encouragement, and understanding during the study process. Their faith has been an unwavering source of strength, and they could not have done it without their love and wisdom.

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