

## INDONESIAN EFL STUDENTS' STRATEGIES IN DEALING WITH SPEAKING ANXIETY IN PUBLIC SPEAKING COURSE

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### ABSTRACT

Public Speaking is one of the courses learned by the students at universities. In this pilot study, the purpose was to investigate the students' strategies in coping with anxiety in English Public Speaking course. Participants of the study were two junior students of English Education Department of Universitas Muhammadiyah Aceh, Banda Aceh in Aceh Province, Indonesia. The study purposively selected them based on their gender and class engagement in the Public Speaking course in 2019/2020 academic year. The study used the qualitative method, with interview to collect the data. Findings showed that the students applied several strategies to deal with their speech anxiety, including having adequate preparation and practice and using hand and body movements when delivering a speech. This study recommends that teachers promote such strategies to other EFL students so that they can overcome their fear of public speaking.


KEYWORDS: *Public Speaking Anxiety, Students' Strategies.*

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### INTRODUCTION

Public speaking is a form of communication which refers to speaking in front of people. However, different from usual communication, public speaking is usually planned, done formally, and organized (Kearney & Plax, 1996; O'Hair, Rubenstein, & Stewart, 2010; Beebe & Beebe, 2015). According to Beebe and Beebe (2015), before delivering a speech in front of the audience, a public speaker should use Standard English and also practice the speech beforehand.

However, due to speaking in front of many people, it is common for public speakers to feel nervous when they give their speeches. Feeling nervous or anxious is one of the problems in delivering a speech or in public speaking. In the case of university students,



they have to perform public speaking as it is a frequently used type of assessments in higher education, and therefore, they experience stress and anxiety whenever they want to give a speech or any oral presentation in front of others (Nash, Crimmins, & Oprescu, 2016).

Dwyer and Davidson (2012) cite that an early study by Bruskin in 1973 reported that over 40% of American adults feared speaking in front of people, and by replicating Bruskin's survey, they found that among American students, more than 61% of them stated they were scared of public speaking. Similarly, about 63% of the university students in Brazil were also reportedly afraid of public speaking (Marinho, de Medeiros, Gama, & Teixeira, 2017). Also, in Pakistan, about 75% of the students stated that they had a fear of public speaking (Raja, 2017). Likewise, here in Indonesia, most of the students at Walisongo State Islamic University in Semarang felt nervous when asked to do oral presentation (Huda, 2018), as also the case among the students at Sanata Dharma University in Yogyakarta (Anandari, 2015), and in general, many students also worried about speaking English in public speaking class at Tidar Islamic Boarding School in Magelang (Imron & Hantari, 2019). Nevertheless, "everyone, even the most experienced speakers, often feel jittery before they give a speech" (O'Hair et. al., 2010, p. 14). In fact, it is next to impossible for any public speakers to completely get rid of anxiety (Beebe & Beebe, 2015).

In this pilot study, the purpose was to investigate the strategies employed by English as a foreign language (EFL) students in the Province of Aceh, Indonesia in dealing with speech anxiety in Public Speaking course. This study can provide input for teachers to help other EFL students in reducing their speaking anxiety.

#### LITERATURE REVIEW

##### *PUBLIC SPEAKING*

Beebe and Beebe (2015) assert that public speaking is one of the skills that can be beneficial for anyone, especially university students, in order to gain employment since high communication skills are very much needed to advance in career. Students who study public speaking will be able to rehearse themselves to improve their ability, confidence, and pronunciation to master English well as public speaking is often occurred in formal settings. In addition, it is important for the students to practice public speaking in order to be more accustomed to communicating in front of a group of people. People face various circumstances in the daily life that make them need to speak in front of many people for numerous reasons and before all kinds of audiences (Kearney & Plax, 1996).

In public speaking, the speakers talk with meanings to their listeners using their communicative skills (Sprague & Stuart, 2008). When a public speaker is speaking or giving a speech, the complexity rises since the speaker needs to prepare well his/her mind, voice, and body at the same time (Sprague & Stuart, 2008). Therefore, this condition may lead the speaker to be nervous and anxious when he/she is delivering a speech.

#### *PUBLIC SPEAKING ANXIETY (PSA)*

In general, anxiety is a natural phenomenon dealing with emotions, and can be considered "healthy" (Felman, 2020). Psychologically, anxiety refers to "an emotion characterized by feelings of tension, worried thoughts and physical changes like increased blood pressure" (American Psychological Association, 2020, n.p.). In the context of public speaking, extending from the definition of communication apprehension by McCroskey (1977), MacIntyre, Thivierge, and MacDonald (1997) define public speaking anxiety (PSA) as "an individual's level of fear or anxiety associated with either real or anticipated communication in front of a group of persons", p. 158), or "a situation-specific social anxiety that arises from real or anticipated enactment of an oral presentation" (Bodie, 2010, p. 72). Symptoms related with PSA include feeling "nausea, sweating, weak knees, and a dry mouth" (Boyce, Alber-Morgan, & Riley, 2007, p. 142).

There are several causes that lead public speakers to be anxious when giving a speech, including having inadequate positive experience in public speaking, being different from the audience, or being worried to be the center of attention (O'Hair et al., 2010). A previous study by Bippus & Daly (1999) reported that people felt anxious when speaking in front of the audience because they were afraid of humiliation, they worried about their speech preparation, they felt uneasy about their physical appearance, they felt pressured when performing, they had low self-esteem, they felt the audience would not be interested, they had not much speaking experience, they were afraid of making mistakes, and they were afraid of having negative or failed performance. In a similar vein, Anandari (2015) also found that the causes of speaking anxiety among the students in her study included feeling embarrassed, uneasy, and negative toward their own performance; and fear of evaluated negatively by the audience (Irawan, Warni, & Wijirahayu, 2018); and likewise in Ahmed's (2016) study which indicated that the students were mostly afraid of failure or making mistakes in speech performance and being humiliated by their peers.

It can be understood that PSA or fear of public speaking is quite commonly faced by people (Knight, Johnson, & Stewart, 2016), and it reflects an emotional reaction from a speaker which may lead into an uncomfortable situation when talking before a group

of people. Every speaker, professional or novice, has experienced PSA; however, the difference lies in the way each speaker manages his/her anxiety so that the anxious feeling does not hinder the speech he/she wants to deliver (O'Hair et al., 2010).

Nevertheless, public speaking can still be overcome. According to O'Hair et al. (2010), to handle speech anxiety, the students need "to have a clear and thorough plan for each presentation" (p. 18). They propose several strategies to help the students manage their fears in public speaking as in the following:

- 1) *Prepare and Practice*: the students have to sufficiently prepare the material to be presented, and they should also rehearse their speeches/oral presentation before performing.
- 2) *Modify Thoughts and Attitudes*: this strategy means that the students need to have a positive mindset about speaking in front of people, and to treat public speaking as an interesting and meaningful way to communicate with people.
- 3) *Visualize Success*: to imagine the success of public speaking is very beneficial as the students will try to project a better scenario in their minds, and thus, help them control their emotions or tensions before delivering a speech.
- 4) *Activate the Relaxation Response*: the students can also try to meditate or control breathing before giving a speech to relax their tensions.
- 5) *Use Movement to Minimize Anxiety*: the students can also release their anxiety by doing some body movements such as making gestures to highlight points in the speech or moving around to keep the audience interested.

Other coping mechanisms for PSA have also been summarized by Westwick (2014) which include: *Exposure Therapy* (e.g., arranging oral assignments which gradually increases in terms of difficulty and length), *Cognitive Modification* (e.g., replacing negative thoughts with positive ones), and *Skills Training* (e.g., developing speaking skills by giving proper methods in public speaking).

#### RESEARCH METHODS

This pilot study used the qualitative method. The participants of the study were two junior students (one male and one female) of English Education Department at Islamic Studies Faculty of Universitas Muhammadiyah Aceh (Muhammadiyah Aceh University). The students were selected purposively by considering their gender and their class participation in the Public Speaking course in the 2019/2020 academic year.

To collect the data, the interview was conducted. The interview guide was used to obtain the data about the strategies that the students used to cope with their anxiety in Public Speaking course.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The results obtained from the interview showed that the students (Student A, female; Student B, male) have applied some strategies to overcome their anxiety in Public Speaking course which corresponded to those of O'Hair et al. (2010).

### *Strategy 1: Preparing and Practicing*

Both students answered that they prepared themselves at home before delivering a speech in the classroom. It was one of their strategies to minimize their anxiety in public speaking. If they did not prepare themselves and practice a lot at home, they would have been very nervous to speak. The followings are their statements:

Student A:

*"The strategies that I use to reduce my anxiety whenever I have to do a public speaking is, umm well, first of all, I'd like to make the concept, like brainstorming my idea and looking for some resources to strengthen my speech. And I'm a kind of person who needs to memorize the point of each paragraph, so I'll understand the content or context that I'm going to share about. After that, I'm gonna practice in front of the mirror, of course to see my gesture. Then, oh by the way, I need to prepare it minimum 2 or 3 days 'cause I did the practice several times. But, when it turns into the real day, absolutely I'll still feel pretty nervous, uh, usually I need to stay away from the crowd because it can distract my mind, then I repeat or read again the speech that I'd like to perform, I pray, take a deep breath, uh, just outhale it a bit strong, and just step on and give my best."*

Student B:

*"My strategy when dealing with anxiety in public speaking is to practice the material that will be conveyed continuously because the material is very important. After considering the material or point to be conveyed, practice in front of people who do not know at all about the content of my material, for example I usually practice my public speaking material in front of my family who is gathering (continued even though being nervous). I do it repeatedly to reduce nervousness, not be too serious, and focus on the material I want to convey."*

In addition, student B also added that he practiced delivering a speech in front of the mirror at home.

This finding revealed that both students needed preparation and practice before delivering a speech in the Public Speaking course. They would be even more anxious if they did not prepare it well beforehand. They thought that preparation played an important role in helping them to be more confident in delivering a speech in the course.

### *Strategy 2: Using Movements*

In minimizing their speech anxiety, the students told that they used some movements during their speech.

Student A:

*"Ah yes of course, that's the most crucial things that I have to do I bet, because I can't speak well if I didn't do movement, but still in control. I mean I can't just stand like a statue."*

She also added:

*"It actually depends on the situation, I mean, uh, depends on how long the speech that I'm going to deliver, if it less than 7 minutes I might just stand in the podium and touching my pen is enough, but if the public speaking like in the seminar or more than 10 minutes, of course I'll take a walk and moving."*

On the other hand, student B answered that he might move to the left or to the right when giving a speech. He also added:

*"Sometimes I move my body to see all the audience".*

Another movement used by the students in solving their anxiety problem was by touching or holding the podium or something else, such as a pen.

Student A said:

*"Yes, I definitely would. For sure, umm I feel like touching or holding something could make me more comfort, even sometimes I use my pen to hold and control the nervousness."*

Similarly, student B also used the strategy to minimize anxiety. He said:

*"Of course, when I start giving speeches if there is a podium I hold it to reduce a little anxiety."*

The result shown in *Strategy 1* here also conformed to what Ahmed (2016) found in his study among the students in Pakistan. The students in his study also admitted that preparing and practicing their speeches in advance helped them minimize their anxiousness. In addition, a study by Widhayanti (2018) also revealed that Indonesian EFL learners' strategies in coping with speaking anxiety included preparing speeches before the day of performance and rehearsing their speeches.

As a matter of fact, adequate preparation and practice are crucial in shaping a good public speaker. According to Sprague and Stuart (2008, p. 52),

*"The fact that good speakers make speech making look effortless does not mean it is easy and uncomplicated. Speakers who have prepared thoroughly*

can be as confident as skydivers who have exhaustively checked all their gear or investors who have studied innumerable projections.”

Their statement is also strengthened by the theory promoted by Kearney and Plax (1996, p. 100) that “the surest way to reduce your fears about giving a speech is to do your homework. Even though practice does not always make perfect, it can certainly make you feel more confident about what you are going to say.”

Beside preparation and practice, the students also used hand and body movements to relieve their nervousness during speaking (*Strategy 2*). Making such movements or gestures or non-verbal acts in reducing fear of speaking is indeed helpful to make a speech feel natural as well as to convey the messages while speaking (Griffin, 2018). This can also reduce tension during speech delivery and keep the audience attracted to the speaker’s performance (O’Hair et al., 2010).


Based on the interview, the study found that the strategies used by the students here were in line with those proposed by O’Hair et al. (2010), those are *prepare and practice* and *use movement to minimize anxiety*. Although the students only stated two strategies out of five proven strategies by O’Hair et al. (2010), these findings suggest that other EFL students can also apply similar ways to deal with their PSA.

#### CONCLUSIONS

EFL students often experience anxiety in a varying degree about giving a speech or oral presentation in front of other people. Nevertheless, such a fear of public speaking is common among professional and novice speakers. However, there are several strategies that experts have suggested to reduce speech anxiety that the EFL students can implement. In this study, the findings showed that the students have applied some recommended strategies in their public speaking course, including preparing and practicing a speech and using hand and body movements during their speech to reduce their anxiety.

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