

MỘT SỐ GIẢI PHÁP NHẪM GIẢM THIỂU LO LẮNG CỦA SINH VIÊN CHUYÊN NGÀNH TIẾNG ANH TRONG LỚP HỌC THUYẾT TRÌNH

Đặng Ngân Giang*

Thuyết trình trước đám đông là một kỹ năng không thể thiếu trong mọi chương trình giảng dạy tiếng Anh cho sinh viên đại học bởi kỹ năng này có vai trò quan trọng không chỉ trong quá trình trau dồi trình độ ngôn ngữ mà còn cả trong công việc tương lai của sinh viên. Tuy nhiên, sinh viên chuyên ngành tiếng Anh thường hay rơi vào trạng thái lo lắng khi thực hiện các bài thuyết trình bằng tiếng Anh. Bài viết này làm sáng tỏ những yếu tố khơi dậy cảm giác lo lắng của sinh viên khi thuyết trình trước đám đông, sau đó đưa ra một số giải pháp phù hợp nhằm chuyển đổi một lớp học kỹ năng thuyết trình tiếng Anh thành môi trường tích cực giúp xua tan lo lắng của sinh viên. Tác giả hi vọng bài viết sẽ có ích cho giáo viên và sinh viên ngoại ngữ trong việc giảm thiểu lo lắng và cải thiện hiệu quả thuyết trình.

Từ khóa: lo lắng, lo lắng khi thuyết trình trước đám đông, lớp học thuyết trình.

Public speaking has long been proved an indispensable skill in teaching English as a foreign language to students at tertiary level as it plays a vital role in not only their foreign language development but also their future career. However, during their course of study, English majors often feel anxious before and during their oral presentations in English. This paper, therefore, sheds lights on common factors that often provoke students' anxiety in their oral presentations. It then offers some effective remedies to transform an EFL oral presentation class into a positive, supportive and stress-free learning environment. It is hoped to benefit both teachers and students of a foreign language in reducing students' anxiety and boosting their public speaking performance.

Keywords: anxiety, anxiety in oral presentation, presentation class.

SOME ADEQUATE REMEDIES FOR ENGLISH MAJORS' PUBLIC SPEAKING ANXIETY IN EFL ORAL PRESENTATION CLASSES

1. Introduction

It is no longer novel to state that public speaking has been proved not only a vital language skill but also a crucial social one. According to Ansur (2017), public

speaking is a useful skill that demonstrates one's speaking ability in both language learning and working contexts. It helps EFL learners express their ideas and boost their confidence in speaking the target language in front of many people. Besides, in a variety of working contexts in the 21st century, good communication skills, especially the ability to deliver a smooth

* ThS., Khoa tiếng Anh, Trường Đại học Hà Nội

Email: giangdn@hanu.edu.vn

presentation, have become one among the most necessary criteria that employers look for in their candidates. This generates a must for universities to equip their students with public speaking during a four-year bachelor program. As a result, public speaking or presentation skill is often a significant element of any EFL curriculum for English majors at tertiary level.

However, it is undeniably common for almost all EFL learners, even the capable ones, to confront certain problems in their oral presentations. To name one, they may either feel nervous and uncomfortable or tremble with excitement while speaking in front of the crowd (Steward and Tassie, 2011). They tend to speak with small volume and disrupted fluency or race their words in such speed that the audience can hardly catch up with. This leads to the fact that the discourse contents or messages may not be transferred appropriately and effectively. Unfortunately, many EFL teachers have yet to take their students' speaking anxiety into full account despite their awareness of its existence (Chowdhury, 2014). As a result, many of them have yet to successfully help students tackle such psychological problem in presentation class. Helping learners overcome nervousness and anxiety, thus, should catch much more attention from teachers in EFL public speaking classes. This paper, as a secondary research using a secondary data set, aims to provide a theoretical basis for EFL teachers and students to identify popular contributors to students' state of

anxiety and suggests some solutions to reduce and avoid it.

II. Public speaking anxiety

Since more research studies were directed towards learners' anxiety, there have existed various definitions of the phenomenon by different scholars. In general, anxiety is often activated by worry about possible happenings in our life (Kumar, Kaur & Thakur, 2017). In details, American Psychological Association (2016, as cited in Kumar et al., 2017) refers to it as a feeling resulted from strain, stress or physical changes. To put it in more extreme words, Gaibani and Elmenfi (2014) associate anxiety with "a state of uncomfortable emotion when danger is perceived" (p.105).

According to Hashemi and Abbasi (2013, as cited in Chowdhury, 2014), the state of anxiety taking place during learners' process of learning a foreign or second language in educational context is referred to as language anxiety. Many researchers have shown that language anxiety is experienced in occasions involving speaking more than any other skill. This is because learners may have difficulties not only in using the foreign language but also in facing other people (Young, 1990). From that basis, speaking anxiety is defined as feelings particularly occurs while speaking a foreign language as a fear of being assessed, judged or examined by others. It is emphasized that this fear portrays a complicated and multifaceted reality that may exert certain effects, either positive or negative, on

learners with regards to their culture, previous language learning process, characteristics, and classroom atmosphere.

In their study, Kayaoğlu and Sağlamlı (2013) claim that learners with anxiety may likewise be accompanied by a collection of physical and passionate responses that can be seen through gestures and actions. Such reactions can exert significant influences on their capacity to effectively give a discourse or make a presentation. They also identify some of the most frequent effects, including extreme sentiments of uneasiness, stress, apprehension, trembling or shaking, sweating, potentially dazedness or a fast pulse, which can be easily witnessed if attention is paid.

III. Contributors to public speaking anxiety

In order to seek ways to alleviate public speaking anxiety, it is unquestionably necessary to discover its sources. Research has shown that even though anxiety is a natural phenomenon, it stems from numerous causes. For better identification and analysis, Asnur (2017) categorizes them into two main groups based on their relationship with a learner: external and internal contributors. External contributors refer to factors that emerge from the learning environment or background of the learner; whereas, internal ones have their root from within the learner themselves.

1. External contributors

The first external factor proved to be a significant reason for EFL undergraduates' public speaking anxiety in oral presentation is the highly competitive in-class atmosphere (Kayaoğlu & Sağlamlı, 2013). It is often the case that anxiety occurs more among the students considering their peers as more proficient users of English compared to them. To explain, students who have competitive nature tend to compare their performances with their peers; as a result, it is easier for them to feel anxious due to the fear of failing to do better than others (Zhang & Zhong, 2012; Chowdhury, 2014). This not only dents their confidence but also somehow unnecessarily places them under competitive pressure, resulting in nervousness and anxiety.

Other factors that may contribute to fears in public speaking classroom include physical health factor (Asnur, 2017) and (inter-)cultural gaps and misunderstandings (Stewart & Tassie, 2011). The latter mostly take place in classes having many international students. This may happen, for example, when presenters wrongly interpret their audiences' non-verbal reactions during their performance due to the cultural differences in body language.

2. Internal causes

There are some factors stemming from students themselves that provoke public speaking anxiety among them. One of these is something students are born with - social phobia. Students suffering from this

always have a strong irrational fear of one or more social performance situations (Slater, Pertaub, Barker & Clark, 2006). They frequently feel terrified that they will act in a way that is humiliating or embarrassing in front of other people.

It has also been found that the lack of competence in foreign language items is one of the factors responsible for public speaking anxiety (Kayaoğlu & Sağlamel, 2013; Hashemi & Abbasi, 2013). Such language items include learner's pronunciation, grammatical features and lexical sources of the target language. Since learners are not allowed to use their mother tongue in an English presentation, anxiety occurs whenever they find it hard to express themselves in English (Gaibani & Elmenfi, 2014), making them stutter or forget their speech.

Another common factor triggering public speaking anxiety is the fear of being inferior (Kayaoğlu & Sağlamel, 2013). A learner may feel nervous and tense speaking in the public as they are afraid of losing 'face' and self-image for their bad performance. This is because they care too much about the impressions they convey in others' minds (Alahem, 2013). In other words, anxious students are very much concerned about being negatively evaluated and corrected by other people as it may ruin the identity they have formed about themselves. This tends to occur even more regularly in such context where people easily reach judgment about each other (Asnur, 2017).

Lack of preparation is also proved to be one of the vital contributors to public speaking anxiety (Asnur, 2017). It is undeniable that even a native user of English can feel tense to give a presentation without adequate preparation and practice. This is because without preparation, learners cannot be sure of the contents they are going to talk about, the pronunciation of key or difficult words, the management of their eye contact, or the time they are going to have movement or interaction with audience. As a result, confidence cannot be built before they deliver a presentation in English, which makes them feel anxious instead.

In conclusion, public speaking anxiety can stem from both external factors, including competitive class atmosphere, physical health factor and cultural misunderstanding as well as internal factors such as inborn social fear, low competence of foreign language, fear of being inferior and lack of preparation. On this basis, antidotes to anxiety during public speaking or presentation are introduced in the following section.

IV. Some treatment strategies

Brown (2002, as cited in Nino, 2009) stresses that if anxiety is managed effectively, students can profit from it to deliver a presentation with faster, smoother speed and a more dynamic attitude. With the hope to help different classroom stakeholders in tackling with the students' public speaking anxiety, the author brings forwards some following antidotes, which are categorized based on the subjects adopting the strategy.

1. For teachers

1.1. Applying helpful teaching activities

Since it is teachers' teaching that can exert the greatest effects on students in class, teachers are highly recommended to carry out activities that not only facilitate students' development of public speaking ability but also help reduce the level of anxiety within presentation classes.

Lin, Azmi, Razak, Sahiddan and Tarmizi (2014) suggest some activities to tackle anxiety on the basis that teachers should be aware of student's enthusiasm level during their teaching. They also refer to the experiential learning model which states that students learn from a cycle of four processes, namely reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, active experimentation and concrete experiences. They believe that forging a close bond among students can help them alleviate anxiety in presentation class thanks to their familiarity with the audience. Such activities are recommended to be used as ice-breakers to begin each class or a practice exercise before giving a presentation. Two typical examples of them include:

- Creative ways to use an object: This activity can be carried out before impromptu speech presentation so that students can apply their creative and imaginative thinking on their own. They have to find out what to do with the weird object that they already draw from a bag, then present the idea to the class. Hilarity might be prompted out, which generates a comfortable learning environment.

- Chocolate vs. Ice-cream: Students are asked to promote their own freshly produced ice-cream or chocolate with advertisements and posters in this activity as a preparation in practicing before delivering persuasive speech. They have to convince their customers to buy their product over others'. This activity can be flexibly applied by replacing chocolate and ice-cream with other items of students' interests.

Another activity that has been proved helpful in oral presentation classes is the spontaneous 1-minute speech, which is also referred to as Posispeak (Pontillas, 2020). To adopt this activity, teachers should prepare small pieces of paper on which different familiar topics are written or printed and paste them on recycled Popsicle sticks. Then at the beginning of a lesson, three to five students are chosen to be presenters. They would pick their topic in the form of lottery, then immediately deliver a short speech about it in around 1-1.5 minutes without preparation. Comments from other audiences should be written and submitted to teachers, then teachers would synthesize the feedback into a kind of motivational letter to identify the speakers' strengths and weaknesses and suggest ways to improve. It should be noted that no grade should be given. This activity would gradually let students familiarize with delivering a short speech in front of a crowd and avoid putting stress on them in terms of the speaking contents as they can talk about daily simple topics.

Besides, in the context of technological advancements and online learning, many

Internet-based activities have been recommended. One of them is the use of blended-learning activities to teach public speaking by Ibrahim and Yusoff (2012). Instructors can ask the students to record their presentation, then upload on a web-based tool to receive feedback from their peers before going to traditional class for further practice with teachers' comments. Another option could be to generate more comments from others people apart from classmates, for instance, members of the public interested in the speech contents. These activities offer students more opportunities to practice delivering a presentation outside classroom, which in turn help reduce the pressure from competitiveness with their peers. However, since the presentation is open to the public, teachers should also let the students conscious of the dark side of the Internet, which may include harmful comments and personal attack. Moreover, it is suggested that this activity should only be applied in first classes of the course with lower-skilled students as the actual interaction with audience is a crucial element in public speaking.

Similarly, Slater et al. (2006) suggest using a virtual learning environment. Accordingly, students can practice giving a presentation to virtual audience with either positive or negative behaviors in order to get used to dealing with different attitudes. Although such virtual environment evokes a somehow extreme social situation, it still offers learners with real experience of coping with public speaking anxiety.

1.2. Providing a supportive learning environment

To relieve anxiety, it is highly recommended for teachers to provide a fair, comfortable and stress-free learning atmosphere for their students, particularly by eliminating bias and being less punitive (Steward & Tassie, 2011).

Firstly, teachers should help students acknowledge that being in a state of anxiety is a common experience for them and each of them may feel different levels of anxiety in public speaking. This makes a crucial contribution to preventing them from making unintentional criticism of themselves and others. Also, teachers should strive to reduce subjective analysis as well as personal preferences of students with better performances (Steward & Tassie, 2011). In particular, they had better not clearly show their particular favor to more active students such as those who first volunteer to speak in front of others or elicit more responses. This is because more reluctant students may lose their confidence and confront unnecessary pressure as a result of increasing feelings of inferiority.

Moreover, teachers are also advised to be more encouraging and less punitive (Steward & Tassie, 2011). They should not let students dread the day of their presentations due to the fear of having all their flaws identified. Teachers are also suggested to avoid paying too much attention to one aspect of oral presentation that anxious students may have problem with, for example, eye contact or hand

gestures. Instead, they can provide constructive feedback on what students perform well to help raise their confidence. Such supportive atmosphere can help reduce students' fear of errors.

It is often believed that the provision of praise plays a vital role in developing an encouraging environment for teaching and learning. However, Thompson (1997) notes that teachers should only paying compliments to student-presenters in front of their classmates for a significant accomplishment to avoid reverse impacts exerted. The reason is that nervous and reluctant students may regard such praise as a sign that their abilities are not trusted. Therefore, when it is the case, non-verbal praise, for example, a nod of the head should be used more often rather than direct verbal applause. For students with major improvements, incentives can be given, for instance, extra points can be accumulated in the class participation or small gifts would be effective too.

2. For students

Suggestions for students with the aim to alleviate anxiety in oral presentations are indeed not difficult to be applied. Most of them emphasize cognitive strategies, particularly rehearsal since practice makes perfect. In fact, through careful preparation, students can not only practice the grammar and pronunciation of the contents but also identify their weakness to be addressed, which gradually helps develop their self-confidence in using the language in presentation (Asnur, 2017). According to Pontillas (2020), when

students practice, they should do it in front of a mirror in order to get used to the feeling of being looked at, which is often the source of awkwardness and nervousness.

Besides, although the teacher is mainly responsible of the class's atmosphere, Alahem (2013) insists that students' role is important as well. Consequently, students should make an effort in adopting affective strategies – those related to emotions, motivations and attitudes. In particular, they should acknowledge that public speaking anxiety is a common experience for almost every learner of a foreign language; thus, they had better not consider it as a flaw and feel ashamed of themselves whenever they confront anxiety during a presentation. Moreover, Kumar et al. (2017) stress the importance of staying positive and patient with themselves as well as their friends since tackling anxiety is not at all a fast and easy process. It is suggested that giving positive statements for themselves or sharing their feelings with peers would be help them dispel their speaking anxiety. All in all, by consciously pursuing these strategies, students would have better control over their self, thence, boost their confidence and improve their public speaking skills.

V. Conclusion

It is unavoidable that English majors often suffer from a sense of stress, nervousness and tension in delivering oral presentations and demonstrating their public speaking skills. Such anxious state stems from various sources, including the

environment and the learners themselves. In order to allay public speaking anxiety, it is crucially important that both teachers and learners join hands together to foster a supportive atmosphere where they can enjoy giving presentations instead of dreading them. It is hoped that teachers can be aware of, in order to avoid, unintentionally bring about situations that may make students feel anxious; while learners can take into consideration the suggested strategies to refrain from provoking anxiety for themselves as well as their peers.

REFERENCES

1. Alahem, B. (2013). Using oral presentation projects to help EFL learners reduce speech anxiety. Retrieved from DSpace - A Turnkey Institutional Repository Application.
2. Ansari, M. S. (2015). Speaking anxiety in ESL/EFL classrooms: A holistic approach and practical study. *International Journal of Educational Investigations*, 2(4), 38-46.
3. Asnur, S. M. (2017). The students' anxiety in delivering English presentation. *ELITE: English and Literature Journal*, 40-54. ISSN: 2355-0821.
4. Chowdhury, S. (2014). *Learners' foreign language speaking anxiety: A tertiary level scenario in EFL class*. Retrieved from DSpace - A Turnkey Institutional Repository Application.
5. Gaibani, A. & Elmenfi, F. (2014). The role of gender in influencing public speaking anxiety. *International Journal of Gender and Women's Studies*, 2(2), 105-116.
6. Ibrahim, A. H. & Yusoff, Z. S. (2012). Teaching public speaking in a blended-learning environment. *International Journal of Social Science and Humanity*, 2(6), 573-576. DOI: 10.7763/IJSSH.2012.V2.175
7. Kayaoğlu, M. N. & Sağlamel, H. (2013). Students' perceptions of language anxiety in speaking classes. *Journal of History Culture and Art Research*, 2(2), 142-160.
8. Kumar, P., Kaur, J. & Thakur, N. (2017). Public speaking anxiety in relation to different demographic factors. *The International Journal of Indian Psychology*, 4(4), 41-55. DOI: 10.25215/0404.024.
9. Lin, E. Y. E, Azmi, N. H. N, Razak, I. F. A, Sahiddan, N., & Tarmizi, M. A. A. (2014). Fun learning activities: The antidotes of anxiety in public speaking classroom. *International Journal of Asian Social Science*, 4(2), 170-176.
10. Nino, P. K. J. (2009). Public speaking in EFL settings: the issue of overcoming fears. *Cuadernos de Lingüística Hispánica*, 12, 137-148. ISSN: 0121-053X
11. Pontillas, M. S. (2020). Reducing the public speaking anxiety of ESL college students through Popsispeak. *The Southeast Asian Journal of English Language Studies*, 26(1), 91-105.
12. Slater, M., Pertaub, D., Barker, C. & Clark, D. (2006). An experimental study on fear of public speaking using a virtual environment. *Cyber Psychology & Behavior*, 9(5), 627-633. DOI: 10.1089/cpb.2006.9.627}
13. Steward, F. & Tassie, K. E. (2011). Changing the atmos'fear' in the public speaking classroom. *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science*, 1(7), 9-13.
14. Thompson, T. (1997). Do we need to train teachers how to administer praise? Self-worth theory says we do. *Learning and Instruction*, 7, 49-63.
15. Widhayanti, Z. (2018). English Department Students' Learning Strategies to Overcome Speaking Anxiety. *RETAIN*, 6(2), 60-67.
16. Young, D. J. (1990). An investigation of students' perspectives on anxiety and speaking. *Foreign Language Annals*, 23(6), 539-553.