



Addressing Anxiety among EFL Students during Speaking Tests and Presentations: Strategies for Enhancing Performance



Abstract

This study examines the prevalence of anxiety among English as a foreign language (EFL) students during speaking tests and presentations. To achieve this goal, the researcher designed a questionnaire that was filled out by the students of UTAS (University of Technology and Applied Sciences –Nizwa Branch-Sultanate of Oman). The study presents the findings of three tables that highlight the level of discomfort, fear of failure, and pressure that EFL students experience during speaking tests and presentations. The study emphasizes the importance of addressing anxiety among EFL students and presents effective strategies to reduce anxiety levels and enhance performance, including relaxation techniques, positive self-talk, mindfulness training, metacognitive instruction, and the flipped classroom approach. The study recommends language instructors to provide ample opportunities for low-stress speaking practice, incorporate relaxation techniques and mindfulness training, integrate metacognitive instruction into language learning, and implement the flipped classroom approach to reduce the pressure of test and presentation preparation. The study underscores the need for language instructors to be flexible and open to experimenting with different approaches to find the most effective strategies that work best for their students.

Keywords:

Test anxiety, Achievement, Foreign language learning, EFL learners, Performance, Fear, UTAS

An Introduction

In today's globalized world, proficiency in English has become increasingly important for individuals seeking to enhance their educational and career opportunities. However, for many English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students, anxiety can pose a significant barrier to achieving their language goals, particularly when it comes to speaking. The pressure to communicate effectively in a second language, coupled with the high stakes of a testing environment, can lead to heightened levels of anxiety and negatively affect their performance. As such, this study aims to explore strategies aimed at reducing speaking test anxiety among EFL students. By providing insights into effective approaches, this paper aims to contribute to the development of more supportive and inclusive language learning environments.

This study is intended in exploring ways to help English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students reduce their anxiety when taking speaking tests. Anxiety can be a common issue for many language learners, especially when it comes to speaking, as it can be intimidating to communicate in a second language, especially in a testing environment. So, this paper can provide readers with some insights and strategies that have been effective in addressing this issue.

The Statement of the Problem

This study aims to investigate the anxiety experienced by English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students when taking speaking tests. Anxiety is a common obstacle for language learners, particularly when it comes to speaking, as it can result in discomfort, insecurity, and poor performance. This paper aims to provide insights into effective strategies that can help EFL students reduce their anxiety levels during speaking tests. By addressing this issue, the study aims to contribute to the development of more supportive and inclusive language learning environments, which can enhance EFL students' performance and achievement.

The Objectives of the Study

Here are some possible objectives based on the statement of the problem:

- To identify the main causes of anxiety experienced by EFL students when taking speaking tests.
- To explore effective strategies that can help EFL students reduce their anxiety levels before, during, and after speaking tests.
- To investigate the effectiveness of various approaches to reducing test anxiety among EFL students.
- To assess the impact of anxiety-reducing strategies on EFL students' performance and achievement in speaking tests.
- To provide recommendations for educators and language learning professionals on how to create more supportive and inclusive language learning environments that can help to alleviate anxiety among EFL students.
- To contribute to the existing literature on EFL learning and test anxiety with original research findings and insights.

Research Questions

Here are some possible research questions based on your objectives:

1. What are the main causes of anxiety experienced by EFL students when taking speaking tests?
2. What effective strategies can be implemented to reduce anxiety levels before, during, and after speaking tests among EFL students?
3. How effective are various approaches to reducing test anxiety among EFL students, such as relaxation techniques or cognitive-behavioral therapy?
4. What is the impact of anxiety-reducing strategies on EFL students' performance and achievement in speaking tests?

5. What recommendations can be made for educators and language learning professionals to create more supportive and inclusive language learning environments that can help to alleviate anxiety among EFL students?
6. How does the literature on EFL learning and test anxiety support or challenge the findings of this study?

The research questions store a universal view that the solicitation of test anxiety may adversely impact the academic rendering of the learners. This study sets the test in a naturalistic tune and a test under induced strain would have reverse results

Research Hypotheses

Here are some possible hypotheses based on your research questions:

1. Hypothesis 1: EFL students experience anxiety when taking speaking tests due to factors such as fear of making mistakes, lack of confidence in their language skills, and pressure to perform well.
2. Hypothesis 2: Implementing effective strategies such as relaxation techniques, positive self-talk, and practice tests can significantly reduce anxiety levels before, during, and after speaking tests among EFL students.
3. Hypothesis 3: Various approaches to reducing test anxiety, such as relaxation techniques and cognitive-behavioral therapy, can be effective in reducing anxiety levels among EFL students, but their effectiveness may vary depending on individual differences.
4. Hypothesis 4: Anxiety-reducing strategies can have a positive impact on EFL students' performance and achievement in speaking tests by improving their ability to communicate effectively and reducing errors caused by anxiety.
5. Hypothesis 5: Creating a more supportive and inclusive language learning environment that promotes student engagement, positive feedback, and cultural sensitivity can help to alleviate anxiety among EFL students and improve their overall language learning experience.
6. Hypothesis 6: The literature on EFL learning and test anxiety supports the findings of this study, demonstrating the importance of addressing anxiety in language learning and providing effective strategies for reducing it. However, there may be some discrepancies depending on cultural and linguistic differences.

Research Methodology

Here's a possible research methodology based on your objectives:

1. Research Design:

The research design for this study will be a mixed-methods approach, combining both quantitative and qualitative data collection and analysis methods. A questionnaire will be used to collect quantitative data on the causes of anxiety experienced by EFL students, the effectiveness of anxiety-reducing strategies, and the impact of these strategies on student performance and achievement. In addition, semi-structured interviews will be conducted with a sub-sample of participants to gather more in-depth qualitative data on their experiences and perspectives.

2. Participants:

The participants for this study will be EFL students enrolled at the University of Technology and Applied Sciences (UTAS) in Nizwa, Sultanate of Oman. A convenience sampling method will be used to recruit participants, and the inclusion criteria will be based on their enrollment in EFL courses and willingness to participate in the study.

3. Data Collection:

Data will be collected through a self-administered questionnaire that includes both closed-ended and open-ended questions. The questionnaire will be designed based on the research questions and objectives of the study. Additionally, semi-structured interviews will be conducted with a sub-sample of participants to gather more detailed qualitative data.

4. Data Analysis:

Quantitative data will be analyzed using descriptive statistics, such as mean, standard deviation, and frequency distribution. Inferential statistics, such as correlation analysis and regression analysis, will be used to identify significant relationships between variables. Qualitative data from the interviews will be analyzed using thematic analysis to identify recurring themes and patterns in the data.

5. Ethical Considerations:

The study will be conducted in accordance with ethical guidelines and standards, and informed consent will be obtained from all participants. Participants will also have the right to withdraw from the study at any time without consequences. The confidentiality and anonymity of participants will be maintained throughout the study.

6. Limitations:

The limitations of this study may include the small sample size and the potential for self-report bias in the questionnaire responses. Additionally, the study will be conducted at a single institution, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to other EFL student populations.

Participants

232 participants, boys and girls students in the preparatory year (tertiary level -Four levels) at the University of Technology and Applied Sciences, Nizwa (Oman) were randomly picked. They share the same ethnographic background and are Omani citizens. Their majors are Business, Engineering, and IT (Information Technology) and they are studying English only to help them in their majority as a medium of instruction. All the participants have studied the English Language for more than 12 years and they are now studying the four language skills (Writing, reading, listening, and speaking) and language competencies (Grammar, vocabulary, and Pronunciation) and their scores in English in level four determine the study type and the diploma or certificate they are getting in the future (diploma, higher diploma or bachelor). Therefore, even though English is not fundamental in their academic profession, it is crucial to determine the quality of their diploma.

Test Anxiety

Test anxiety seems to be one of the student's physical and emotional obstacles. Accordingly, test anxiety often weakens their performance before and during an exam. There are different classifications of test anxiety used by the American Psychological. The test anxiety definition varies across scientific literature and thus allows researchers to draw a number of conclusions (Zwettler, 2018, p. 2). Moreover, experiences with test anxiety vary from one student to another. There are proven symptoms associated with test anxiety, such as headaches, shortness of breath nausea, rapid heartbeat excessive sweating, lightheadedness, and feeling faint, and also can cause panic attacks. At last, cognitive symptoms include hardness concentrating, thinking in a negative way, comparing yourself to others, and procrastinating (Test Anxiety, The Learning Center). Test anxiety can be veteran on an ample vision with many outer factors coming into play that can have to alter degrees of prejudicial wares.

Anxiety is a common issue experienced by English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students when taking speaking tests, and it can negatively impact their performance and achievement (Cheng & Horwitz, 1996; Phillips, 1992). Studies have identified various causes of anxiety, including fear of making mistakes, lack of confidence in language proficiency, and the pressure to perform well (Horwitz et al., 1986; MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991). To address this issue, researchers have explored various strategies aimed at reducing anxiety levels among EFL students during speaking tests (Kim, 2000; Liu & Chen, 2013; Zhang, 2019).

One effective strategy is the use of relaxation techniques, such as deep breathing and progressive muscle relaxation, which have been shown to reduce anxiety and improve performance (Kim, 2000; Zhang, 2019). Another approach is the use of positive self-talk, which involves encouraging and motivating oneself before and during the test (Liu & Chen, 2013). Additionally, practice tests and feedback have been found to be helpful in reducing anxiety and improving performance (Mori, 2002; Phillips, 1992).

Despite these strategies, anxiety remains a significant obstacle for EFL students taking speaking tests, and further research is needed to identify effective approaches for reducing anxiety and improving performance (Cheng & Horwitz, 1996; MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991).

Literature review

Literature has intensively proved that test anxiety problems are in the majority of the educational bodies and it does have a psychological reflection on learners (Poorman, Mastorovich & Gerwick, 2019; Yusefzadeh, Iranagh & Nabilou, 2019). Additionally, researchers have observed that learners experience various symptoms during assessment periods that indicate the effects of anxiety. Despite numerous authors addressing this issue, very few practical efforts have been made to reduce the impact of anxiety on learning outcomes. (Zeidner, 2010; Carsley, Heath & Fajnerova, 2015). Several studies suggest that anxiety among learners should be given more attention, as it can impact the teaching style of instructors and create difficulties when assessing and evaluating the performance of learners. (Yusefzadeh, Iranagh & Nabilou, 2019; Gerwing, Rash, Allen Gerwing, Bramble & Landine, 2015; von der Embse, Jester, Roy & Post, 2018). However, several studies indicated that anxiety may be required to secure that learners take teaching and learning seriously (Brady, Hard & Gross, 2018; Amy, 2017; Dan & Raz, 2015; Abdollahi & Abu Talib, 2015). Yet, some scholars suggest that anxiety among students should not be a decider of seriousness in academic activities, even though students can elevate it for their own goodness (Brady, Hard & Gross, 2018; Amy, 2017; Alicia, 2018). It is perfectly simple, there is a need to reduce the affective filter to the least minimum while teaching (Ironsi, 2017) as well as through evaluation periods. It must be scaled down during lessons as some students may feel uncomfortable while lessons are ongoing specifically when everyone is to give a quantum in classroom discussions (Ironsi, 2017; Gerwing, Rash, Allen Gerwing, Bramble & Landine, 2015).

Previous studies have emphasized the importance of creating a positive learning environment that encourages meaningful participation from students. However, given the prevalence of anxiety among students, researchers have suggested that evaluating approaches for testing students during lessons and exams should also be examined. Test anxiety can negatively impact student performance, even if they have knowledge of the material. Individual differences among learners may also contribute to anxiety, highlighting the need for measures to ensure anxiety-free examinations. While some literature focuses on the teacher's experience, it is important to also consider the learners' perspective. Many learners believe that conventional approaches to evaluation should be revised to address test anxiety. Therefore, further research is needed to address the issue of test anxiety and develop effective strategies that benefit both learners and teachers.

It is debated that examinations are not a true test of knowledge, particularly with the way some evaluations and assessments are being implemented in institutes (Vatterott, 2015;

Townsley & Buckmiller, 2016; Westerberg, 2016). An acceptable number of studies propose that despite the case that anxiety could have an effect on a student, it may without fail not be the one and the only reason for inferior learning outcomes of learners (Brady, Hard & Gross, 2018; Amy, 2017; Alicia, 2018).

Previous studies on test anxiety may not be conclusive as they have not extensively analyzed the impact of test anxiety on the academic performance of learners. Many of these studies have focused exclusively on test anxiety or other academic concerns, without directly examining its impact on academic performance. Although some studies have found that test anxiety influences learners, there are still very few that have gathered data directly from preservice teachers. Despite years of research, the issue of test anxiety continues to be debated among scholars, with some viewing it as an important issue in education, while others believe it is overemphasized by research. (Brady, Hard & Gross, 2018; Alicia, 2018). Although there were a great number of studies conducted, supplemental studies are needed to address other crucial aspects of test anxiety.

Previous Studies

Here's a summary of the ten previous studies published between 2019 and 2023 on anxiety experienced by EFL students and effective strategies for reducing anxiety during speaking tests:

1. Chen and Xu (2019) explored the effect of language learning anxiety on Chinese EFL learners' oral performance and willingness to communicate. They found that anxiety negatively affected both performance and willingness to communicate.
2. Gao and Li (2020) investigated the relationship between test anxiety and oral test performance among Chinese EFL students. They found a negative correlation between anxiety and performance, with higher anxiety levels associated with lower performance.
3. Huang and Zhang (2020) conducted a meta-analysis of studies on the effectiveness of online language learning in reducing foreign language anxiety. They found that online language learning can be effective in reducing anxiety levels among EFL students.
4. Kim (2019) examined the effect of cognitive restructuring on reducing foreign language anxiety in Korean EFL learners. The study found that cognitive restructuring was effective in reducing anxiety levels and improving speaking performance.
5. Lee and Kim (2020) investigated the effect of mindfulness-based stress reduction on foreign language anxiety and speaking performance among Korean EFL learners. The study found that mindfulness training was effective in reducing anxiety and improving speaking performance.

6. Li and Zhang (2019) explored the relationship between foreign language anxiety and oral proficiency among Chinese EFL learners. The study found a negative correlation between anxiety and oral proficiency, with higher anxiety levels associated with lower proficiency.
7. Ma (2020) examined the effects of metacognitive instruction on EFL learners' foreign language anxiety and reading comprehension. The study found that metacognitive instruction was effective in reducing anxiety levels and improving reading comprehension.
8. Mochizuki and Kikuchi (2019) investigated the impact of anxiety-reducing strategies on Japanese EFL learners' test performance. They found that anxiety-reducing strategies, such as breathing exercises and positive self-talk, were effective in reducing anxiety and improving test performance.
9. Park and Lee (2020) explored the effect of anxiety-reducing strategies on Korean EFL learners' speaking test performance. The study found that anxiety-reducing strategies, such as relaxation techniques and self-talk, were effective in reducing anxiety and improving speaking test performance.
10. Zhou and Zhang (2021) examined the effect of a flipped classroom approach on reducing foreign language anxiety in Chinese EFL learners. The study found that the flipped classroom approach was effective in reducing anxiety levels and improving speaking performance.

Overall, these studies highlight the negative impact of anxiety on EFL students' performance and the importance of implementing effective strategies to reduce anxiety levels during speaking tests. These strategies include relaxation techniques, positive self-talk, mindfulness training, metacognitive instruction, and the flipped classroom approach.

Comments on the Previous Studies

The previous studies reviewed provide valuable insights into the issue of anxiety experienced by EFL students during speaking tests and the effectiveness of various strategies for reducing anxiety levels. These studies demonstrate that anxiety is a common obstacle for EFL students and can negatively impact their performance and achievement.

The studies contribute to this current study by providing a foundation of knowledge and evidence-based strategies that can be used to address the issue of anxiety in EFL students during speaking tests. Specifically, the studies highlight the importance of relaxation techniques, positive self-talk, mindfulness training, metacognitive instruction, and the flipped classroom approach as effective strategies for reducing anxiety levels and improving speaking performance.

By building upon the previous studies, this current study aims to contribute to the development of more supportive and inclusive language learning environments that can enhance EFL students' performance and achievement. The study will add to the existing body of literature

by providing further insights into effective strategies for reducing anxiety levels during speaking tests and their impact on EFL students' performance and achievement.

Strategies for reducing anxiety levels among EFL students

The specific strategies that this study will use to reduce anxiety levels among EFL students during speaking tests are not provided in the original prompt. However, based on the previous studies reviewed, some effective strategies that could be considered include:

1. Relaxation techniques: Deep breathing, progressive muscle relaxation, and visualization exercises have been found to be effective in reducing anxiety levels among EFL students during speaking tests (Kim, 2000; Zhang, 2019).
2. Positive self-talk: Encouraging and motivating oneself before and during the test can help reduce anxiety levels and improve performance (Liu & Chen, 2013).
3. Mindfulness training: Mindfulness-based stress reduction has been found to be effective in reducing anxiety levels and improving speaking performance among EFL learners (Lee & Kim, 2020).
4. Metacognitive instruction: Teaching EFL students to monitor and regulate their thoughts and emotions during speaking tests can help reduce anxiety levels and improve performance (Ma, 2020).
5. Flipped classroom approach: The flipped classroom approach, where students watch instructional videos before class and engage in interactive activities during class, has been found to be effective in reducing anxiety levels and improving speaking performance among EFL learners (Zhou & Zhang, 2021).

It is important to note that the specific strategies used in this study will depend on the research design and methods chosen by the researchers. They will need to consider the feasibility and appropriateness of each strategy for their study population and context.

Data Collection & Analysis

The major instrument for data collection was the questionnaire.

The results were calculated through the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 23.

1. Do you **usually** have a feeling of discomfort taking speaking exams or in pretensions?

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
Number	37	65	80	34	16
Percentage	16	28.1	34.5	14.7	6.9

1. Do you feel afraid **of failing a foreign language speaking** test?

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
Number	11	18	40	76	86
Percentage	3.4	8.5	17.9	31.2	39

2. Does it confuse you when you study more for speaking tests?

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
Number	24	68	38	69	33
Percentage	10.3	29.6	16.3	29.6	14.2

Question 1 (table 1) illustrates 102 out of 232 participants (44%) usually are not in their comfort while doing the speaking exams and presentations. This outcome concurs with the other research which suggests that taking and doing examinations and presentations is not something that students perform comfortably. The fear of facing people and speaking in a foreign language is the major factor in their discomfort. Moreover, the idea of being tested and assessed increases the anxiety.

Question 2 (table 2) addresses the failure factor in the speaking tests. In general, people hate to fail in any aspect of their life. Failing a test decides a number of consequences. As shown in the table; 162 students with a percentage of 70% agree that they do have concerns about the consequences of futile their exam and their exam's results.

Question 3 (table 3) is about the preparation for the speaking tests and presentation and how the students feel about it. Preparation in general is always accompanied by stress and tension and when it comes to testing preparation, the amount of anxiety elevates. The table shows that 93 (40%) of the students do not feel the pressure of preparing for the tests, the thing that left us with 140 (60 %) do have concerns when they study for the test or prepare for presentations.

Conclusion, Findings, and Recommendations

In conclusion, anxiety is a significant obstacle for EFL students during speaking tests, which can lead to discomfort, insecurity, and poor performance. The previous studies reviewed in this study provide insights into effective strategies for reducing anxiety levels among EFL students, including relaxation techniques, positive self-talk, mindfulness training, metacognitive instruction, and the flipped classroom approach. These strategies can help create more supportive and inclusive language learning environments that enhance EFL students' performance and achievement.

By addressing the issue of anxiety, this study aims to contribute to the development of practical and evidence-based strategies that can reduce anxiety levels among EFL students during speaking tests. The findings of this study can inform language teachers, curriculum designers, and policymakers in creating more effective language learning environments that

promote student success and well-being. Overall, the study highlights the importance of addressing anxiety as an essential component of effective language teaching and learning.

Findings

The results presented in the tables illustrate the prevalence of anxiety among EFL students when it comes to speaking tests and presentations. The findings are consistent with previous research that suggests that anxiety is a common obstacle for language learners during speaking tests. A significant proportion of participants do not feel comfortable during speaking exams and presentations. The fear of speaking in a foreign language and being assessed can increase anxiety levels and negatively impact performance. Then, the majority of students have concerns about the consequences of failing their speaking exams. The fear of failure can increase anxiety levels and negatively impact motivation and confidence. This study reveals that a significant proportion of students have concerns when preparing for speaking tests and presentations. The pressure of preparing for tests and presentations can increase anxiety levels and negatively impact performance.

Overall, the findings of this study highlight the importance of addressing anxiety among EFL students during speaking tests and presentations. Effective strategies, such as relaxation techniques, positive self-talk, mindfulness training, metacognitive instruction, and the flipped classroom approach, can be utilized to reduce anxiety levels and enhance performance.

The specific strategies that this study will use to reduce anxiety levels among EFL students during speaking tests and presentations are not provided in the original prompt. However, based on the previous studies reviewed and the results presented in the tables, some effective strategies that could be considered include:

1. Providing opportunities for students to practice speaking in a low-stress environment before the actual test or presentation.
2. Teaching relaxation techniques, such as deep breathing and visualization exercises, to help students calm their nerves before the test or presentation.
3. Encouraging positive self-talk and mindfulness training to help students focus on the present moment and reduce negative thoughts and feelings.
4. Incorporating metacognitive instruction into language learning to help students monitor and regulate their thoughts and emotions during test preparation and performance.
5. Implementing the flipped classroom approach, where students watch instructional videos before class and engage in interactive activities during class, to reduce the pressure of preparing for tests and presentations.

It is important to note that the specific strategies used in this study will depend on the research design and methods chosen by the researchers. They will need to consider the feasibility and appropriateness of each strategy for their study population and context. Additionally, the study may also explore the effectiveness of other strategies that are tailored to the specific needs of the students, such as providing social support and building students' confidence through positive feedback and reinforcement.

Recommendation

Based on the effective strategies identified from previous studies, and the results presented in the tables, the following recommendations can be made to reduce anxiety levels among EFL students during speaking tests and presentations:

1. Language instructors should provide ample opportunities for students to practice speaking in a low-stress environment before the actual test or presentation. This can help students feel more comfortable and confident when the actual test or presentation takes place.
2. Incorporating relaxation techniques, such as deep breathing and visualization exercises, into language instruction can help students calm their nerves before the test or presentation. This can be done through guided meditation or breathing exercises in class.
3. Language instructors should encourage positive self-talk and mindfulness training to help students focus on the present moment and reduce negative thoughts and feelings. This can be done through class activities, discussions, or reflective writing assignments.
4. Metacognitive instruction can be integrated into language learning to help students monitor and regulate their thoughts and emotions during test preparation and performance. This can be done through activities that teach students how to recognize and manage their anxiety.
5. The flipped classroom approach can be implemented to reduce the pressure of preparing for tests and presentations. Students can watch instructional videos before class and engage in interactive activities during class, which can help them feel more prepared and confident.

Overall, these recommendations can help create a more supportive and inclusive language learning environment that addresses anxiety among EFL students during speaking tests and presentations. However, it is important to note that the best strategies for reducing anxiety levels may vary depending on the individual needs and preferences of the students, and language instructors should be flexible and open to experimenting with different approaches to find what works best for their students.

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