Proceeding Paper

Virtual Professional Communication Project Presentation: Examining Students' Speaking Anxiety in a Malaysian Public University [†]

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Abstract: ELS304 Professional Communication Exercise is a final semester course that the LG120 Diploma in English for Professional Communication students must complete before graduating and was offered for the first time in September 2020 via Open Distance Learning (ODL). For this, students are required to undertake a project that is related to their field of study and present it to a panel of examiners consisting of faculty lecturers and industry panel members. As carrying out the presentation in English was already stressful enough for the students, the presence of these external examiners could lead to a higher level of stress and anxiety. With this in mind, this study intends to examine the students' perceptions of communication apprehension, fear of negative evaluation and anxiety during the final course presentation and whether the presence of these two additional factors, the ODL method and the inclusion of external examiners could cause communication apprehension on the part of the students that could lead to additional emotional pressure, fear and anxiety. The purposive sampling method was used to obtain responses from 63 final semester LG120 Diploma in English for Professional Communication students from Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM) Cawangan Melaka and Johor who had recently completed the ELS304 Professional Communication Exercise course and had gone through the online presentation involving external examiners. The instrument for this study was administered using Google Forms, which utilized a 5-point rating scale for three components categorized as Communication Apprehension, Fear of Negative Feedback and Test Anxiety. The findings revealed that this group of LG120 students who conducted the presentation of their final project via ODL and in the presence of industry panel members generally experienced a moderate to high level of anxiety. Several other conclusions were made based on the findings. Overall, this study has shown that, although the mode of this assessment was changed to ODL, similar anxiety factors in public speaking that affect students remained a constant presence.

Keywords: communication apprehension; emotional pressure; speaking anxiety; test anxiety; public speaking; open and distance learning

1. Introduction

Speaking is one of the four skills that students are required to master when learning any language. However, out of the four skills—reading, writing, listening and speaking—learning to speak is regarded as the most difficult and often causes anxiety among students, especially undergraduates [1,2]. It can also be seen that when learning English as a second language, most students would face anxiety that could negatively affect their speech performance, whether inside or outside of the classroom [3,4].

To make matters worse, ever since the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic in late 2019 and the Movement Control Order (MCO) announcement made by the Government of Malaysia which started on 18 March 2020, the method of teaching and learning has shifted toward Open Distance Learning (ODL). This situation has presented new challenges for academicians and students as all forms of teaching, learning, and assessments must now be completed online.

Concerning the course of Professional Communication Exercise (ELS304), which is a final semester course for the LG120 English for Professional Communication diploma program at UiTM Melaka and Johor branches, the students are required to present their project not only to assigned examiners amongst faculty lecturers but also to external examiners from the industry in assessing their final project presentation. The external panel members are chosen based on the general areas covered by the LG120 program, such as Translation, Proofreading, Creative Writing and Desktop Publishing.

The presence of these external examiners could have added more unwelcomed stress on the students on top of the already present anxiety. This situation raises a question as to whether the students are able to cope with the anxiety of presenting their project both via the ODL method and with the presence of external examiners watching and evaluating the presentations. This issue needs to be studied as the presence of these two additional factors, the ODL method and the inclusion of external examiners from the industry, could cause communication apprehension on the part of the students that could lead to additional emotional pressure, fear and anxiety.

This research aims to understand the ELS304 Professional Communication Exercise students' perceptions of the methods employed to carry out the final course presentation and whether they have any anxiety or fear for carrying out their presentations online and in the presence of external examiners. For these reasons, the study examines the factors contributing to students' anxiety during their online final project presentation. The findings would allow researchers to understand better the factors leading to anxiety amongst students so that a more student-friendly environment can be created to ease the tensions.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Foreign Language Classroom and Anxiety

Anxiety among language learners can greatly impact on language learning, that could lead to avoidance of participation in the classroom [5]. In understanding how language learners are affected by anxiety, language teachers need to be sensitive to learners' communication apprehension, test anxiety, and fear of negative evaluation [6]. For this purpose, The Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) was developed to facilitate teachers and educators in identifying students who are experiencing negative anxiety that affects their language learning experience [5,6].

Anxiety is considered as a form of disorder associated with feelings of worry, tension and fright. This disorder is a prevalent form of mental disorder [7]. This happens when one tends to overthink what will happen in the future. This feeling can start to manifest when a person starts having mood disturbances or over-thinking and when there is a need to undergo changes in behavior or physiological activity [7]. As the world begins to move faster, this so-called disability is becoming a major health concern worldwide and becoming increasingly prevalent [8].

Another important factor concerning anxiety is that although it is known that this condition usually starts to develop during early adulthood, this group of people rarely get the support they need to overcome the issue [9]. It was projected that the number of college students who meet at least one of the diagnostic criteria of anxiety could be around 50% [10]. This projection puts college students in the high-risk category of experiencing anxiety. The stress and anxiety faced by students would put them at risk, as the psychological distress would have an unwanted effect on their academic performance [11].

The stress and anxiety could be attributed to many reasons. The common factors that lead to anxiety are biological factors, such as age and gender [12]. Further investigation also found that being a female would increase the possibility of a person suffering from anxiety [12]. Other anxiety-related reasons could be traced to financial burdens [13]. However, the best explanation for causes of anxiety amongst college students could very well be the pressure from examinations and workload [14]. Other factors include lack of leisure time for oneself, competition with other students and fear of not meeting the parents' expectations [14].

2.2. Fear of Public Speaking

Anxiety is one of the most common problems observed concerning language learning [15]. Many factors can contribute to this anxiety, lack of confidence or the fear of performing the public speaking itself. Language anxiety originates from the worry and negative emotional reaction aroused when learning or using a second language [16]. The fear of public speaking, or glossophobia, is quite common among those learning a second language, and some researchers found that as many as 77% of the world's population would face some form of anxiety when performing public speaking [17]. However, other researchers discovered that the situation existed even before the students participated in public speaking [16]. This anxiety could appear even days before the speaking task, leading some students to skip the task altogether [16]. These findings align with the claim that language anxiety is related to situational anxiety experienced in students' second language classrooms or the classroom setting [18]. This means that situations in the background are also contributing to the anxiety, aside from having to present in the second language itself.

Other studies relating to foreign language learning found three anxiety categories that contributed the second language speaking-anxiety which are: the learner (the learner's personal and interpersonal anxiety and the learner's beliefs about language learning), the teacher (the instructor's beliefs about language teaching and the instructor–learner interactions), and the instructional practice (classroom procedures and language testing) [19]. This further proves that the speaking anxiety faced by students goes beyond speaking in the target language alone and that the situation and environment in which the speech production is performed leads to the feeling of anxiety. This is in line with the theory that anxiety faced by second language learners could be attributed to communication apprehension, fear of negative evaluation and test anxiety.

It cannot be denied that other factors could contribute to speaking anxiety by second language learners, as pointed out by many researchers. A comparative study on anxiety-coping strategies between Malaysian and Japanese second language students found that second language learners were also concerned when they felt that the audience might judge the way they dressed, as well as their stage presence [20]. Furthermore, the fear of looking stupid in front of an audience would also create fear and anxiety since they became the center of attention [21]. On the other hand, most students become a silent crowd when any speaking activity is performed, while some would just stutter their responses [22]. While this could merely be due to a lack of confidence, other reasons could also be the students' lack of interest and unwillingness to participate in the conversation [22]. Whatever the reasons, it cannot be denied that some forms of anxiety are happening in the classroom environments which would directly affect the speech production of the students.

3. Methodology

3.1. Sample and Research Procedures

The purposive sampling method was used to obtain responses from 63 final semester LG120 Diploma in English for Professional Communication students from the Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM) Cawangan Melaka and Johor. These respondents were explicitly selected as they had recently completed the ELS304 course and had gone through the online presentation involving external panel members from the industry.

The data were collected virtually where respondents were asked to answer an online survey conducted via Google Forms in the final week of their study after they had completed the ELS304 presentation. The respondents were given one week to complete and submit the Google Forms for analysis. This was considered the best time to conduct the survey as the core aspect of this study is to understand the fear and anxiety that the students experienced while carrying out their presentation online and in front of external panel members from the industry.

The data obtained through the survey were analyzed using descriptive statistical analysis and interpreted through means and standard deviations.

3.2. Instrument

The instrument for this study was developed using Google Forms. The instrument for this study was adapted from the Students Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale [5], which utilized the 5-point rating scales from Strongly Disagree to Strongly Agree with the lowest score being for Strongly Disagree. The survey consisted of three components categorized as *Communication Apprehension, Fear of Negative Feedback* and *Test Anxiety.*

3.3. Data Analysis

Upon conducting fundamental data analysis, Cronbach's Alpha was performed to ensure the reliability of the data. Table 1 shows that the Cronbach's Alpha value for Section One: Communication Apprehension was 0.725, Section Two: Fear of Negative Evaluation was 0.751 and Section Three: Test Anxiety was 0.740. These indicate that the items are reasonably reliable for the respondents of the study.

Table 1. Cronbach's Alpha for Student's Speaking Performance Components.

Components	Cronbach's Alpha Value	No of Items
Communication Apprehension	0.725	13
Fear of Negative Evaluation	0.751	4
Test Anxiety	0.740	7

4. Results and Discussion

The study results obtained are presented based on the research questions through mean values and standard deviation. Descriptive statistical analysis of means and standard deviations were applied to measure and interpret the responses obtained from the 63 final semester LG120 students.

4.1. Students' Perception of Communication Apprehension Experienced While Carrying out Their ELS304 Final Presentation

Mean values and standard deviation of the students' perception of communication apprehension attributes/sub-attributes experience during the ELS304 Final Presentation are illustrated in Table 2. The highest mean score of 3.59 was recorded by '*feel anxious even if I am well-prepared to speak*'. High scoring means of 3.52 and 3.41 were also recorded for '*would feel comfortable to be around students with good oral proficiency*', and '*feel at ease preparing myself to speak well*', respectively. The next highest was for '*am panic to speak without preparation*' at 3.29. Seven of the 13 items listed under this category scored below 3.20. The lowest mean score recorded was for '*find myself thinking of things unrelated to the presentation*' at 2.40.

Table 2. Communication Apprehension.

Components	Mean	SD
Communication Apprehension		
"never feel quite sure of my speaking performance"	2.95	1.20
"tremble when I am asked to present my project"	2.73	1.21
"get so nervous that I forget what to say"	2.76	1.24
"get frightened/nervous when I don't understand what the panel says"	2.75	1.32
"find myself thinking of things unrelated to the presentation"	2.40	1.28
"feel more tense and nervous than my other presentations in other subjects"	3.21	1.17
"get nervous and confused when I am speaking"	2.68	1.13
"feel very sure and relaxed before the presentation starts"	2.94	1.06
"feel at ease preparing myself to speak well"	3.41	0.94
"am panic to speak without preparation"	3.29	1.34
"feel anxious even if I am well-prepared to speak"	3.59	1.03
"would not be nervous speaking to audience with good oral proficiency"	3.38	1.10
"would feel comfortable to be around students with good oral proficiency"	3.52	1.03

4.2. Students' Perception of the Fear of Negative Evaluation by External Panels While Carrying out Their ELS304 Final Presentation

The Fear of Negative Evaluation component's findings from the survey is shown in Table 3. All four items listed under this category show scores below 3.50, with the highest being 3.4 for '*get nervous to answer questions without preparation*'. This is followed by '*keep thinking that other students are better in English than I am*' at 3.38, and '*feel conscious speaking in front of audiences*' at 3.33. The lowest mean recorded was for the descriptor '*am afraid others will laugh at me when I am speaking English*' with a score of 2.54.

Table 3. Fear of Negative Evaluation.

Components	Mean	SD
Fear of Negative Evaluation		
"feel conscious speaking in front of audiences"	3.33	1.03
"keep thinking that other students are better in English than I am"	3.38	1.31
"am afraid others will laugh at me when I am speaking English"	2.54	1.32
"get nervous to answer questions without preparation"	3.40	1.20

4.3. Students' Perception of the Test Anxiety They Experienced While Carrying out Their ELS304 Final Presentation

Table 4 below illustrates the findings for the *Test Anxiety* component. Out of seven items, the highest score obtained here was for '*am worry about the consequences of failing the assessments*' at 4.08. This was followed by '*am afraid the panels will correct all my speaking errors*' with a score of 3.00. The remaining five items all scored below 3.00, with '*am usually at ease during the assessments*' at 2.97 and '*get upset for not understanding the panels' questions or comments*' with a score of 2.94. The lowest score obtained for this category is 2.30 for '*often feel like not presenting because of fear of failing the assessment*'.

Table 4. Test Anxiety.

Components	Mean	SD
Test Anxiety		
"am usually at ease during the assessments"	2.97	1.06
"am worry about the consequences of failing the assessments"	4.08	1.07
"get upset for not understanding the panels' questions or comments"	2.94	1.19
"am afraid the panels will correct all my speaking errors"	3.00	1.31
"get more confused when I study more for the assessments"	2.73	1.14
"feel overwhelmed by the number of rules to speak English"	2.70	1.12
"often feel like not presenting because of fear of failing the assessment"	2.30	1.16

5. Conclusions

The findings of this study suggested that this group of LG120 students who conducted the presentation of their final project via ODL and to industry panel members generally experienced moderate to high levels of anxiety. Based on the data analysis, while they are mainly driven by the anxiety to perform well and not fail the assessment, the findings indicated constant concerns when examined across communication comprehension, fear of negative evaluation and test anxiety.

Firstly, the students were nervous even when they believed they were well-prepared for the presentation. Despite indicating that they feel at ease with the audience and that they believe they have a good command of the language, they still feel anxious and nervous about the idea and action of presenting in front of others. The existing literature noted that students felt uncomfortable speaking in front of many people [23]. They do not feel confident and are under pressure as they worry about making mistakes during the presentation [23]. Their confidence in their ability to present and use the language was occasionally affected by the sense that they will make language or speaking errors and that these errors will impact on their presentation, grading and self-esteem.

Secondly, the respondents indicated a high anxiety level when faced with an unprepared situation. Students' anxiety levels increased when students were asked about an unfamiliar topic [24]. This will make the students feel uneasy and stressed about the question from the industry panel members as they do not have prior knowledge about the topic. Students are becoming panicked about speaking without preparation [25]. This area could be related to situations where they must address questions by the examiners and industry panel members. These queries about the students' projects often vary according to examiners and industry panel members, making it quite difficult for students to prepare the answers, thus affecting their anxiety level.

Several conclusions can be made based on the current study. Firstly, this group of students believes that they have a good grasp of the language and are confident in their presentation skills. However, their anxiety levels are heightened in situations in which they have no control and for fear of making language mistakes while presenting. Therefore, the students are encouraged to participate in collaborative work, and this will help the students to gain confidence in speaking [26].

Further research should be conducted to examine the factors that affect these types of students in handling the online mode of the presentation, focusing on the concerns of balancing the assessment and the online delivery platform. Another area worth looking into will be comparing students' anxiety levels while presenting their projects to familiar faculty lecturers with industry panel members with whom they have not previously engaged. Other than that, inferential analysis such as correlation and regression analysis can examine the relationship between speaking anxiety and academic performance. This study has shown that although the mode of this assessment was changed to ODL, similar anxiety factors in public speaking that affected the students remained a constant presence.

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