

## **Anxiety in English Public Speaking Classes among Thai EFL Undergraduate Students**

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### **Abstract**

English public speaking courses have long been offered to Thai EFL undergraduates; however, student anxiety is still a problem in these courses. This research aimed to investigate the level of anxiety at different stages of public speaking, which were pre-preparation, preparation, pre-performance and performance, among Thai EFL undergraduate students in English public speaking classes. The participants in this study were 208 undergraduate students from both private and governmental universities who completed a questionnaire. It was found that most students had different levels of anxiety in English public speaking courses. Nevertheless, the study results revealed that the highest level of anxiety was found in the performance stage of public speaking.

**Keywords:** English public speaking, anxiety, Thai EFL students, undergraduate students

## **1. Introduction**

At present, it is unquestionable that oral fluency skills in English are very essential for people around the world. Due to the importance of English-speaking proficiency, the demand for workers who are proficient in English oral skills has been increasing; as a result, people with stronger English oral skills are likely to have greater job opportunities. Therefore, different kinds of English speaking courses, including public speaking, are offered in many universities in non-English speaking countries in order to increase students' English speaking competence. Although there have been many research studies on English speaking for English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners, there has been little research done on English public speaking focusing on Thai EFL undergraduate students.

In Thailand, English public speaking courses are offered to EFL undergraduate students as both a required and an elective course in many universities. However, most students avoid enrolling in this course because they are afraid to give a speech in public, even though it is just a speech presented in class. As a result, when students graduate from universities without good oral skills, they may face problems when making presentations in their workplace. Therefore, it is valuable to investigate the public speaking anxiety that Thai EFL undergraduate students encounter when they have to give a speech in public speaking classes in order to eliminate any future problems caused by anxiety when they need to speak in public in their careers.

## **2. Research Question**

The research question is:

What is the level of anxiety at different stages of public speaking among students in English public speaking classes?

## **3. Objective of the study**

The objective of this study is to investigate the level of anxiety at different stages of public speaking among students in English public speaking classes.

## **4. Scope of the study**

The study investigated the level of anxiety at different stages of public speaking for students in English public speaking classes.

The participants were 208 undergraduate students from both private and governmental universities who were enrolled in English public speaking classes.

## **5. Review of Literature**

### **5.1 Communication and public speaking**

Communication can be defined as “the process of people sharing thoughts, ideas, and feelings with each other in a commonly understandable way” (Hamilton

and Parker, 1996, p. 4). Public speaking is one form of communication (Sellnow, 2005), which occurs when one prepares and performs a speech in front of an audience without being interrupted and which aims to inform, persuade or entertain the audience (Jaffe, 2007). McKerrow, Gronbeck, Ehninger and Monroe (2003) maintain that when speech skills are learnt and practiced, speakers will be able to take part in public events with minimal oral skill problems.

## **5.2 Anxiety**

As cited in Kendall, Chansky, Kane, Kim, Kortlander, Ronan, Sessa and Siqueland (1992), Morris and Kratochwill (1985) define anxiety as “apprehension, tension, or uneasiness related to the expectation of danger, whether internal or external. Anxiety may be focused on an object, situation or activity that is avoided, as in a phobia, or it may be unfocused” (p. 1). Anxiety can be categorized into two types, state anxiety and trait anxiety. Reiss (1997) states that “state anxiety, which is situational in nature, is often observed through behaviors, physiological events, and cognitive symptoms, while trait anxiety, which relates to the personality of an individual, is often not observed” (p. 204). As cited in Finn, Sawyer and Behnke (2009), the two works by Bhenke and Sawyer (1998) and Sawyer and Behnke (1999) mention that “speaker trait anxiety has been shown to be generally stable from one presentation to another, while speaker state anxiety fluctuates considerably before, during, and following performances” (p. 418).

### **5.2.1 Foreign language anxiety**

MacIntyre & Gardner (1991) explain the foreign language anxiety students experience can be clearly defined as foreign language classroom anxiety (FLCA). They state that FLCA is viewed as situational anxiety occurring in the foreign language classroom. Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope (1991) conceptualize FLCA as “a distinct complex of self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings, and behaviors related to classroom language learning arising from the uniqueness of the language learning process” (p.31).

Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope (1986) found that students express their foreign language anxiety when they avoid interpreting complicated messages in foreign language, when they show their lack of confidence, and when they forget vocabulary or grammar that they have learned before. Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope (1991) discovered that students with foreign language anxiety find it difficult to listen and speak in class despite being well prepared to give a speech. Prince (1991) examined students’ language anxiety in class. The results confirmed that all students were anxious when they had to speak a foreign language in front of other students.

### **5.2.2 Public speaking anxiety (PSA)**

O’Hair, Rubenstein and Stewart (2007) state that public speaking anxiety (PSA) is fearfulness when speakers give a speech in public. There are many elements resulting in PSA: inadequate experience, being unfamiliar with the audience and an unwillingness to be the center of attention. A speaker can be nervous at any time

when giving a speech and the nervousness can occur during any of the following four periods of time: pre-preparation anxiety, which occurs when a speaker realizes that he/she is required to do public speaking in the future; preparation anxiety, which occurs when a speaker starts to prepare a speech; pre-performance anxiety, which occurs when a speaker rehearses his/her speech; and performance anxiety, which occurs when a speaker does the actual public speaking.

With regard to the example of the research study on English public speaking focusing on EFL students, Chen (2009) conducted research on EFL undergraduate students' English oral presentation anxiety. The purpose of the study was to investigate the level of graduate students' anxiety and the sources of anxiety for academic oral presentations. The participants were 18 graduate students. Her findings showed that Taiwanese EFL students' public speaking anxiety was at a moderate level, indicating that students' anxiety level was not too severe for them to manage.

## **6. Research Methodology**

### **6.1 Participants**

The participants in this research study consisted of 208 undergraduate students from both private and governmental universities who took public speaking as either a required course or an elective.

### **6.2 Material**

The questionnaire was adapted from the Personal Report of Public Speaking Anxiety developed by McCroskey (1970) and was divided into four parts, constituting the four stages of public speaking. In each part, there were four statements designed using a five-point Likert scale to find out the participants' level of anxiety in public speaking. Then, the questionnaire was pilot tested with three people comparable with the research participants and adjusted before being distributed to the respondents.

### **6.3 Procedures**

The questionnaires were distributed to the 208 participants, who were asked to complete them within 20 minutes. Then, upon completion, they were required to return them to the researcher in class.

### **6.4 Data analysis**

The data obtained from the questionnaires were analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) program. Descriptive statistics of mean and standard deviation were used. The mean values of the data derived from each statement in the questionnaire were interpreted as having the following levels of anxiety.

Very high	=	4.21 – 5.00	points
High	=	3.41 – 4.20	points

Moderately high	=	2.61 – 3.40	points
Low	=	1.81 – 2.60	points
Very low	=	1.00 – 1.80	points

## 7.Results

The results of this research study are divided into two parts, which are the personal information of the participants and the level of anxiety at different stages in English public speaking classes.

### 7.1 Information of the participants

Regarding participant demographics, it was found that the majority of students who enrolled in English public speaking classes were female (76.9%). Most students were third year students (70.7%), followed by fourth year students. A few participants were first (1.4%) and second year students (1.0%). Regarding students' majors, it was found that most students were English majors (86.1%), while the rest were non-English major students (13.9%). Most students had taken less than two English speaking subjects each semester (43.3%), with most of their grade point averages ranging between 3.00-3.59 (38.0%).

### 7.2 Levels of anxiety at different stages in English public speaking

Regarding the data obtained from the questionnaires, the participants showed different levels of anxiety at different stages in English public speaking.

Table 4.1 shows the level of anxiety at the pre-preparation stage of English public speaking. The overall mean score for the level of pre-preparation anxiety of the participants in this study was  $\bar{X} = 3.60$ , showing that students had a high level of anxiety in the pre-preparation stage of public speaking.

**Table 4.1: Level of pre-preparation anxiety in English public speaking classes**

Statement	N	Missing	Mean	Mode	Minimum	Maximum
1. I feel tense when I see the words “speech” and “public speech” on a course outline when studying.	208	0	3.37	4.00	1.00	5.00
2. I get anxious when I think about an upcoming speech.	208	0	3.80	4.00	1.00	5.00
3. When the instructor announces a speaking assignment in class, I can feel myself getting tense.	208	0	3.57	4.00	1.00	5.00
4. I feel anxious when the teacher announces the date of a speaking assignment	208	0	3.67	4.00	1.00	5.00
Total	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	SD	
Pre-preparation anxiety	208	1.00	5.00	3.60	.90	

Table 4.2 illustrates the level of preparation anxiety in English public speaking classes. The overall mean score for the preparation anxiety of the participants in this study was  $\bar{X} = 3.06$ , revealing that students expressed anxiety in the preparation stage at a moderately high level.

**Table: 4.2 Level of preparation anxiety in English public speaking classes**

Statement	N	Missing	Mean	Mode	Minimum	Maximum
1. While preparing to give a speech, I feel tense and nervous.	208	0	3.44	4.00	1.00	5.00
2. I am unhappy when preparing a speech.	208	0	3.00	3.00	1.00	5.00
3. I have trouble falling asleep the night before a speech.	208	0	2.72	2.0	1.00	5.00
4. When preparing a speech, I feel anxious and have trouble concentrating on what I am doing.	208	0	3.08	4.0	1.00	5.00
<b>Total</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>Minimum</b>	<b>Maximum</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>SD</b>	
Preparation anxiety	208	1.00	5.00	3.06	.81	

Table 4.3 presents the level of pre-performance anxiety in English public speaking classes. The overall mean score for the pre-performance anxiety of the participants in this study was  $\bar{X} = 3.24$ , which indicates that students had a moderate level of anxiety in the pre-performance stage of public speaking.

**Table 4.3: Level of pre-performance anxiety in English public speaking classes**

Statement	Valid	Missing	Mean	Mode	Minimum	Maximum
1. I feel anxious while rehearsing a speech.	208	0	3.22	4.00	1.00	5.00
2. I feel uncomfortable and stressed while rehearsing a speech.	208	0	3.20	4.00	1.00	5.00
3. I am in constant fear of forgetting what I prepared to say while rehearsing a speech.	208	0	3.63	4.00	1.00	5.00
4. My heart beats very fast while I rehearse a speech.	208	0	2.91	2.00	1.00	5.00
<b>Total</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>Minimum</b>	<b>Maximum</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>SD</b>	
<b>Pre-performance</b>	208	1.00	5.00	3.24	.87	

Table 4.4 describes the level of performance anxiety in English public speaking classes. The overall mean score for the performance anxiety of the participants in this study was  $\bar{X} = 3.85$ , indicating that students experienced anxiety at a high level in the performance stage.

**Table: 4.4 Level of performance anxiety in English public speaking classes**

Statement	Valid	Missing	Mean	Mode	Minimum	Maximum
1. My hands shake and some parts of my body feel very tense when I am delivering a speech.	208	0	3.75	4.00	1.00	5.00
2. My heart beats very fast when I am giving a speech.	208	0	3.98	4.00	1.00	5.00
3. While giving a speech, I get so nervous that I forget facts that I actually know.	208	0	4.00	4.00	1.00	5.00
4. When I make a mistake while giving a speech, I find it hard to concentrate on the parts that follow.	208	0	3.64	4.00	1.00	5.00
Total	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	SD	
Performance anxiety	208	1.00	5.00	3.85	.76	

Table 4.5 explains the comparative levels of anxiety at different stages in English public speaking. As can be seen, most participants had the highest anxiety at the performance stage ( $\bar{X} = 3.85$ ) followed by anxiety in the pre-preparation, pre-performance and preparation stages, respectively ( $\bar{X} = 3.60$ ,  $\bar{X} = 3.24$  and  $\bar{X} = 3.05$ ). This could be interpreted that students showed a high level of anxiety in the pre-preparation and performance stages, while they expressed a moderate level of anxiety in the preparation and pre-performance stages.

**Table 4.5: The comparative level of anxiety at the four different stages in English public speaking classes**

Stage of anxiety	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Pre-preparation anxiety	208	1.0	5.0	3.60	.90
Preparation anxiety	208	1.0	5.0	3.06	.81
Pre-performance anxiety	208	1.0	5.0	3.24	.87
Performance anxiety	208	1.0	5.0	3.85	.76

## 8. Discussion

### 8.1 Pre-preparation anxiety

As seen in Table 4.5, most students had a high level of anxiety in the pre-preparation stage of public speaking. Most of them agreed that they felt anxious when they realized that they must get involved in English public speaking. The finding is similar to that of Behnke and Sawyer (1999), who found that the highest level of speech state anxiety occurred when students were assigned a public speaking task in class. Behnke and Sawyer (1999) claimed that once students anticipated anxiety related to an upcoming public speaking situation in class, they would express avoidance behavior, such as dropping the course or skipping the speaking task.

In the present study, most students were required to enroll in the speaking course, so it is possible that they may have been worried due to a negative impression the students acquired before actually taking the course. This might have been because English is not their mother tongue, so learners felt anxious once they realized that they must get involved in any English-speaking course.

### **8.2 Preparation anxiety**

In the preparation stage of public speaking, it was found that students showed a moderately high level of anxiety. This finding was congruent with the study of Behnke and Sawyer (1999), who found that the levels of trait and state anxiety of students in the preparation stage were lower than anxiety in the pre-preparation and performance stages. Menzel&Carrell (1994) mentioned that the speech preparation stage showed some positive relationship with the quality of the speech. That is, the more students prepared for their speech, the better speech performance they could achieve.

In the present study, anxiety in the preparation stage was not high; thus, it may be possible that students did not feel much anxiety as their speech preparation might have made them more confident in the quality of their speech.

### **8.3 Pre-performance anxiety**

The findings revealed that like in the preparation stage of public speaking, in the pre-performance stage, students also had a moderately high level of anxiety. In the pre-performance stage, it was possible that students had time to rehearse a speech that they had already prepared so their anxiety was not very high. It may be possible that speech rehearsal was important in building students' confidence in public speaking and decreasing their anxiety level. This supports the study of Menzel and Carrell (1994), which showed that oral rehearsal contributes to students' success in their actual speech performance.

### **8.4 Performance anxiety**

The highest level of anxiety in public speaking was found in the performance stage. Most students agreed that they felt anxious when they performed an actual speech in class. This finding was similar to the findings of Behnke and Sawyer (1999), which revealed that students showed the highest level of anxiety when performing a public speech.

Interestingly, as most students in the present study had taken less than two English speaking courses, it is possible that the number of English speaking courses might have contributed to the anxiety students felt when performing a speech as they did not have an adequate chance to practice English speaking skills; this may have then led to anxiety when they were required to speak English in any academic speaking course, such as a public speaking course.

## **9. Implications of the study**

Since the present study revealed that Thai EFL undergraduate students showed anxiety in different stages of public speaking, it is important that public speaking



course instruction take students' unique level and type of anxiety in each stage of public speaking into consideration.

In terms of the pre-preparation stage of public speaking, it is important that the teacher find ways to change students' attitude towards English public speaking courses. For instance, the teacher or the course developer might provide students with a course orientation so that they can have a more positive attitude towards English public speaking courses. To motivate students to enroll in English public speaking courses, the teacher could invite professional public speakers to explain the importance of English public speaking skills so that students might have a better impression of English public speaking courses.

Regarding the performance stage of public speaking, in which students showed the highest level of anxiety, it is very important that the teacher find ways to decrease students' anxiety when they perform an actual speech in English public speaking classes. For example, the university should provide them with more English speaking courses each semester to enable them to have some practice in English oral skill; this might be able to minimize students' anxiety when they actually enroll in an English public speaking course.

Although the students did not show a high level of anxiety in the preparation and pre-performance stages, teachers still need to focus on both stages. In the preparation stage of public speaking, the teacher should give students more speech preparation time and offer instruction on how to prepare for a speech. For example, the teacher should teach students how to manage the timeframe for their speech preparation step by step so they will understand the proper way to effectively prepare for a speech. In addition, in the pre-performance stage of public speaking, the teacher should assist students by giving advice on the proper way to rehearse a speech. For instance, the teacher might suggest rehearsing without reading the script, while at the same time trying to memorize some important content so they can speak naturally during the actual speech. With the teacher's advice, students can eventually reduce their anxiety in English public speaking classes.

## **10. Recommendations for further research**

Based on the findings and conclusion of this study, the following recommendations are presented for future research.

- The number of participants in this study was limited to only 208 undergraduate students from the central part of Thailand. Therefore, more participants from other parts of Thailand and from other levels of education are needed so as to increase the generalizability of the research results.
- As this study investigated only the level of anxiety at different stages of public speaking, further research on the methods that students use to manage their anxiety is needed in order to find ways to help students cope with their anxiety; this will lead to effective English public speaking among Thai students in the long run.

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