

# Anxiety Level in Students' Public Speaking: Causes and Remedies

Muhammad Darrin Zuhri<sup>1\*</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Pendidikan Bahasa Inggris, Universitas Madura, Pamekasan, Indonesia

\*[darrin@unira.ac.id](mailto:darrin@unira.ac.id)

**Abstract:** *Their assessments and appraisals are often not depictive of their professional competitiveness; therefore, it is important for students to overcome public speaking anxiety before they transit from academic life to professional life. The purpose of this study is to analyze the reasons behind the anxiety level in undergraduate students of a public speaking class and recommend strategies to overcome this fear. This study was entailed quantitative research paradigm on a sample of 50 students of English Department at Unira. The findings showed that students who fear public speaking can perform well if they use certain strategies to fight their fears. 75% participants admitted their fear of public speaking and 95% participants agreed that if proper counseling, instruction and coaching is provided, this fear can be overcome. Research revealed that exposure to virtual environment can facilitate student confidence and enables them to face audience irrespective of the size.*

**Keywords:** *anxiety, confidence, fear, public speaking.*

## INTRODUCTION

Professionals are expected to regularly keep on improving their communication skills. Verderber, Sellnow and Verderber (2011) state, "Public speaking, a sustained formal presentation by a speaker to an audience, is simply one form of human communication. So learning to be an effective public speaker will help you to be more effective in other communication settings as well" (p.2). A change in their confidence, speaking style, intonation pattern and the rest can result in a positive change in their professionalism and personality. As per the viewpoint of health care professionals, Tacheva (2013) asserts that "The verbal register, intonation, articulation, pronunciation, tone, rhythm, dialect define the character of the communicative impact as positive or negative depending on whether they facilitate or hinder the achievement of communicative purposes"(p. 605). People can overcome this problem by

practicing in small groups of peers and then moving on to larger audiences. Many people are shy or afraid of speaking in front of their peers or familiar people and this can be overcome by practicing in front of unfamiliar audiences. This will increase their confidence and help them reduce their anxiety level.

Anxiety is defined as a state of uneasiness and apprehension of fear caused by the anticipation of something threatening. According to Kirkwood and Melton (2002), anxiety disorders are among the most common mental disorders encountered by public speakers. People who feel anxiety while speaking in public generally tend to avoid situations where they have to perform, but when they encounter such situations, they suffer intense distress and anxiety. According to Kant (2000), people in general negatively assess and appraise those who demonstrate their fears towards public speaking and fail to make

a strong impression through confident gestures. These problems can act as hurdles in achieving ones goals that could be both personal and professional; hence speakers need to develop strong public speaking skills to enable them to become more confident.

The purpose of this study is to identify and investigate the causes behind the anxiety level of students of public speaking in undergraduate programs and recommend steps that could be adopted to overcome their anxiety level. This study presents the reasons behind the fear of public speaking in students and problems caused by their fear. It includes the detailed description of the results and findings of the research. Thus, the following research questions will be looked into.

#### **Research questions**

1. To what extent does there exist a fear of public speaking among the students of English Department at Unira?
2. What factors are responsible for the fear of public speaking among students of English Department at Unira?

#### **Objective of the Research**

1. To know the exist of fear of public speaking among the students of English Department at Unira.
2. To know the factors for the fear of public speaking among the students of English Department at Unira.

### **METHODS**

#### **Research Method**

This was a small scale exploratory research conducted to analyze the needs of students of public speaking class at

undergraduate level for formulating strategies that would overcome public speaking anxiety. The study was conducted using the quantitative descriptive research method. Creswell (1994) defines quantitative research as an explanation of phenomena by collecting numerical data that are analyzed using mathematically based methods. The methodology that was used to carry out the study included questionnaires as primary data collection tool.

#### **Instrument**

The data were collected using the self-administered questionnaires that were distributed to fifty undergraduate students of a reputable private sector business school. The questionnaire was constructed using relevant literature review and observations of the researcher that he had accumulated during the five years of teaching this course. The researcher; therefore, first bracketed his observations, which helped him to construct a very simple questionnaire, which consisted of five polar questions. The first question was regarding the fear of public speaking; the second question inquired if lack of confidence was the reason of fear, the third question looked into the impact of the number of audience on students' public speaking performance; question four inquired about how participating in public speaking activities help students deliver better presentations; and the last question asked whether they thought that their fear of public speaking can be overcome by using some strategies and seeking professional help.

#### **Sample**

The study was conducted with 50 students of English Department at Unira. Convenience sampling method was used as "In convenience sampling, the sample is restricted to a part of the population that is readily accessible" (Singh 7 Mangat, 1996, p.7).

#### **Data analysis**

The data was analyzed using sample testing for mean, standard deviation and variance, through data analysis tool pack of MS Excel.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

### **Instructor's observations**

The researcher bracketed his observations that helped him go through the relevant literature review to understand the study at hand in depth. Following are some of the observations. Lack of confidence was the most common reason of fear of public speaking because many students have a meek nature and they tend to feel uncomfortable while speaking in front of others. Burgess (2013, October 30)

Table 1 *Percentage responses given by the undergraduate students*

Questions	N	%age response 'yes'	%age response 'No'
Do you have fear of public speaking?	50	75	25
Do you think that this fear is due to lack of confidence?	50	50	50
Does the audience size play a role in your public speaking performance?	50	82	18
Do you think participating in public speaking activities more will help you perform better in presentations?	50	75	25
Do you think that your fear of public speaking can be overcome by using some strategies and seeking some professional help?	50	95	5

reports that according to a survey on common phobias, fear of public speaking was found to be a more pressing concern than death. Another reason discovered in the research was that students who had a good command over debates and speeches performed better in presentations. Even if a student fears public speaking, he can perform well by practicing and rehearsing quite rigorously. Public speaking if treated as a skill can be tremendously improved upon. The researcher play a vital role in giving support and confidence to the students and can help them overcome public speaking anxiety.

### **Questionnaire results**

This section of the study presents the results and analysis of the data collected. The results of these questionnaires were interpreted and conclusions were drawn. Table 1 showed the percentage responses given by the students.

The answer to the first question whether the students feared public speaking or not was that more than 75% of them surveyed feared speaking in front of an audience. Thus, the majority of them were found to be afraid of speaking in front of others, which is consistent with McCains' (2012) results that showed that, "Nearly 90% of people reported feeling shy or uncomfortable speaking in front of others at some time in their lives" (p.1). However, this observation differs from person to person, as different people have different beliefs and confidence level for familiar and unfamiliar audiences.

The second question inquired whether the students thought this fear was due to lack of confidence. The data analysis of second question showed that for more than 50% of the respondents lack of confidence was an important variable. Sjoberg (2006) suggests that learners, who lack confidence, need encouragement in the initial phase of learning so that they could be encouraged to participate in the class. Kelly and Watson (1986) also argue that confidence is one of the key contributors in the learning of speaking skills. The above studies give us a reason for the 50% of the students who felt that lack of confidence was the reason for them to be anxious during public speaking.

The third question explored whether the number of audience played a major role on students' performance during presentations. 82% respondents confessed that audience size has a strong impact on their performance and level of nervousness. The reason for

this impact is given by Gamston and Wellman (1992) and they conclude that, "Large audience often seems more intimidating than smaller ones" ( p. 35).The fourth question inquired whether more participation in public speaking activities help students perform an active part in public speaking activities will help them perform better in presentations. Those presenters, who appear confident and do not show any symptoms of nervousness, have only learnt the art of hiding their level of nervousness or have mastered the desensitization approach (Akin & Kunzman ,1974); therefore, constant exposure to a variety of audience will transform them into confident speakers.

## **CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTION**

To summarize, the research proves that fear of public speaking is a learned skill and can be overcome by practicing and rehearsing before presentations or speeches and people who experience public speaking anxiety can perform as well as those who have a good command over public speaking. The following techniques can help students overcome public speaking anxiety.

1. The researcher needs to help students realize that being stressful is natural.
2. Better preparation and understanding of the topic eliminates the chance of making a mistake or getting off track during a public speaking activity.
3. A moment of silence is nothing to be afraid of. If speakers lose track of what they are saying or begin to feel nervous, it is likely that the audience

will not mind a pause to consider what the speakers have been saying.

4. Practicing complete speech several times would certainly give the speakers an edge. They can practice it with a small number of people they are at ease with.
5. Speakers should seek feedback of the audience during practice sessions or can ask someone to record the talk. Watching it several times for self-criticism also helps facilitate the learning and improvement process.
6. Better preparation also helps speakers recover quickly if they go off track or get confused.
7. The speakers should anticipate audience responses and queries that may be generated during practice so that they could have confident answers.

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