



Anxiety in a Public Speaking Course: A Case Study of Thai University Students

ความกังวลใจในวิชาการพูดในที่สาธารณะ: กรณีศึกษานิสิตมหาวิทยาลัยไทย

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(Received: 9 February 2022; Revised: 6 June 2022; Accepted: 14 June 2022)

Abstract

Although English public speaking courses have long been offered to Thai EFL undergraduates, student anxiety is still a problem in these courses. Therefore, measuring students' public speaking anxiety is essential since it can help students know the level of public speaking anxiety so that they will be able to manage their anxiety efficiently with specific anxiety-reducing techniques. As a result, this research aimed to investigate the levels of anxiety at four different stages of public speaking: pre-preparation, preparation, pre-performance, and performance, among Thai EFL students.

The participants in this study were 50 fourth-year English major students at Naresuan University. The research instrument used in collecting the data was a five-point Likert scale questionnaire adapted from PRPSA (McCroskey, 1970). Data were analyzed by means and standard deviations.

The findings revealed that the students who studied English public speaking courses had the highest anxiety at the performance stage ($\bar{X} = 3.65$) followed by at the pre-preparation stage ($\bar{X} = 3.42$), pre-performance stage ($\bar{X} = 3.24$), and the lowest anxiety at preparation stage ($\bar{X} = 2.95$). To be more precise, the respondents showed a high level of anxiety at the pre-preparation and performance stages and a moderately high level of anxiety at the stages of preparation and pre-performance. The findings of this study could be very useful for instructors in terms of helping EFL students overcome their public speaking anxiety and enabling them to perform better in public speaking.

Keywords: Public speaking, Speaking anxiety, English major students

Introduction

Nowadays, English is the language that is considered to be a global language, and some countries identify English as an official language or a second language. In addition, a large number of international organizations also use English as a tool of communication (Phinyadechasin, 2015). As a result, people with stronger English oral skills are likely to have greater job opportunities. Thus, different kinds of English-speaking courses, including public speaking, are offered in many universities in non-English speaking countries in order to enhance the English-speaking competence of students (Plangkhom & Porkaew, 2012). In Thailand, English public speaking courses have long been offered to English major students as both a required and an elective course in many universities. However, according to studies investigating English public speaking skills of English major students in Thai universities (Viwattanabunchong, 2017;

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Yaikhong & Usaha, 2012), English major students' performance in English public speaking is not yet satisfactory because anxiety prevents them from giving successful oral presentations. Plangkham and Porkaew (2012) claimed that Thai undergraduate students in private and governmental universities are afraid to give speeches in public even though it is just a speech presented in class. This conclusion has led researchers to find ways to decrease the public speaking anxiety that Thai English major students encounter.

Many scholars have become interested in exploring causes contributing to the anxiety of public speaking (Chinpakdee, 2015; Paranuwat, 2011; Tasee, 2009; Yaikhong & Usaha, 2012). They found that several variables contributed to the public speaking anxiety of students such as low English proficiency, lack of practice, audience familiarity, and topic difficulty, which might vary from context to context. Moreover, researchers such as Chaisawat (2006) and Noom-Ura (2013) explored the strategies which can be used to eliminate Thai English major students' oral presentation anxiety. However, there is no effective way to improve their ability in this respect (Kakandee & Al-Shabani, 2018). Additionally, some scholars investigated correlations between public speaking anxiety and gender (e.g. Aydin, 2008; Cagatay, 2015; Karatas, Alci, Bademcioglu & Ergin, 2016), age (e.g. Aydin, 2008; Ozuturk & Hursen, 2013), and language level (e.g. Karatas & Ergin, 2016). However, what they seemed to overlook is the levels of public speaking anxiety. O'Hair et al. (2004) said that to understand why most people prefer to avoid giving a public speech, there is a need to investigate their levels of oral presentation anxiety. According to O'Hair et al. (2004), anxiety can occur during any of the four periods of time, namely pre-preparation anxiety, preparation anxiety, pre-performance anxiety, and performance anxiety. By pinpointing the levels of public speaking anxiety in four stages, speakers will be able to manage their nervousness more efficiently with specific anxiety-reducing techniques (O'Hair et al., 2004). Thus, it is valuable to investigate the levels of public speaking anxiety that EFL students encounter to deal with their nervousness more efficiently and to eliminate any future problems caused by anxiety when they need to speak in public in their careers.

Literature Review

Theoretical framework

Public speaking anxiety (PSA) is "fearfulness when a speaker gives a speech in public" (O'Hair, Rubenstein & Stewart, 2004, p.155). When they face such situations, they endure extreme stress and anxiety (Hidayoza et al., 2019). Many elements result in public speaking anxiety such as inadequate experience, being unfamiliar with the audience, and an unwillingness to be the center of attention. O'Hair et al. (2004) said that to understand why people tend to evade situations where they have to give a speech in public, the first step is to understand their levels of anxiety in different stages of public speaking. They also described that when giving a speech, the speaker can be nervous at any time. Some people begin to feel anxious as soon as they realize that they are required to do public speaking in the future; some people are not nervous until they start to give a speech. By focusing on the levels of public speaking anxiety in different stages, speakers will be able to manage their anxiety promptly and efficiently with specific techniques. This will help them to become better public speakers. According to O'Hair et al. (2004), nervousness can occur during any of the following periods: pre-preparation anxiety, preparation anxiety, pre-performance anxiety, and performance anxiety. Below are more details about the four stages where anxiety can occur in the speechmaking process.

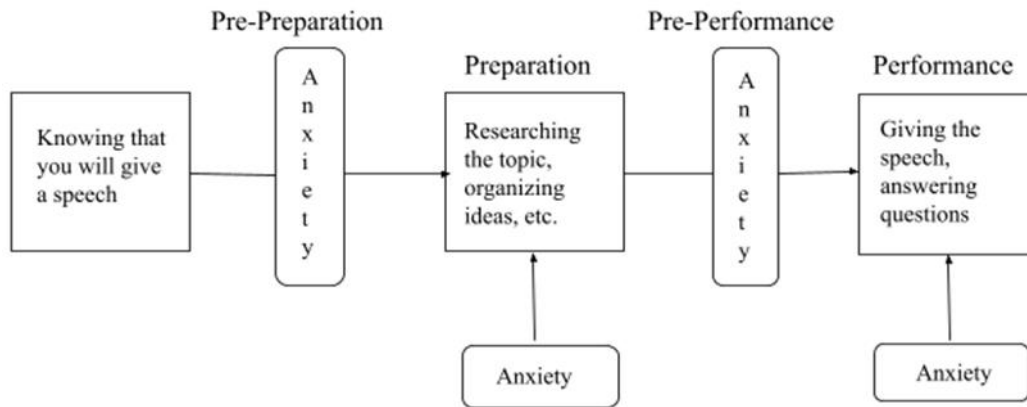


Figure 1 Where anxiety can occur in the speechmaking process adopted from O'Hair et al. (2004, p. 44)

Here are four major stages by O'Hair et al. (2004).

1. Pre-preparation anxiety

The first stage is pre-preparation anxiety which refers to the time when speakers know that they will have to present a public speech in the future. Having lots of anxiety at this first stage can cause many negative consequences for speakers. They may feel unwilling to prepare their public speech and try to delay planning. Then, they will feel more stressed because of missing crucial information needed to fulfill the speech assignment.

2. Preparation anxiety

Preparation anxiety is the time when the speaker starts to prepare the speech. The minority of people may feel nervous due to the limited time and planning required. Also, they may feel overwhelmed when they hit a roadblock that puts them behind schedule. Therefore, this pressure while preparing the speech contributes to anxiety because it produces a cycle of stress, procrastination, and outright avoidance.

3. Pre-performance anxiety

Pre-performance anxiety is the time when the speakers practice their speech. This stage tends to begin the night before the public speech. Most people think about what will happen when they give a speech in public. For example, they think about the reaction or facial expressions of the audience that will be watching and listening only to them. Moreover, they may be nervous about the content of their speech. For instance, they may feel that their ideas do not sound as interesting as they should. If the anxiety in this stage is too strong, they may decide to stop rehearsing.

4. Performance anxiety

The final stage is the time when the speaker does the actual public speaking. In other words, they feel anxious as soon as they utter the first words of the speech. A lot of people have the highest anxiety in this final time due to the audience's attention. Not surprisingly, the audiences that they perceive as negative usually cause them to feel more nervous than those that they feel positive or neutral.

To summarize, it is true that when one wants to overcome their fear or anxiety of giving a speech in public, the first step is to understand the different periods in which they could feel nervous. The four stages— pre-preparation anxiety, preparation anxiety, pre-performance anxiety, and performance anxiety—reflect anxiety that can occur in the



speechmaking process. If they know their levels of anxiety in different stages, they will be able to manage their anxiety efficiently with specific anxiety-reducing techniques.

Previous studies

In terms of public speaking anxiety for EFL students, it is very surprising that only a few previous studies dealing with the four levels of public speaking anxiety in English at different stages among EFL learners are available. These previous research studies were carried out with different participants and in different locations such as Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia, Taiwan, and Palestine. It was found that the research on public speaking anxiety employed questionnaires and/or interviews to examine the levels of public speaking anxiety among EFL learners. Moreover, the majority of EFL students experienced the highest anxiety level in the stages of performance. In Thailand, Plangkham and Porkaew (2012) investigated the level of public speaking anxiety at four different stages, namely pre-preparation anxiety, preparation anxiety, pre-performance anxiety, and performance anxiety in Thai EFL university students who studied English public speaking courses. The sample was 208 non-English major students who were studying an English public speaking course either as a required or elective course in six universities in Thailand. The findings revealed that the students experienced a high anxiety level at the stages of pre-preparation and performance while they showed a moderately high anxiety level at the preparation and pre-performance stages. Importantly, students had the highest anxiety at the performance stage. Furthermore, Plangkham and Porkaew (2012) claimed that the lectures need to add an extra effort on how to decrease the public speaking anxiety of their students even more. Besides, Viwattanabunchong (2017) also investigated the level of anxiety at four different stages of public speaking of 50 students in the CEIC program (Career English for International Communication) at Thammasat University. The results illustrated that students expressed a moderately high level of anxiety at the stages of pre-preparation, preparation, and pre-performance. However, students still showed a high level of anxiety at the performance stage. Another study by Hayaramae (2016) investigated the public speaking anxiety level of 30 EFL students taking a year-long public speaking course in Thailand. The result showed that the participants also had a high level of anxiety during performing a speech in public. Surprisingly, Kakandee and Al-Shaibani (2018) conducted a study on the level of Tourism students' public speaking anxiety at the performance stage. The participants in this study were 45 Thai EFL Tourism students from the Faculty of Business Administration who enrolled in the course, English for Tour Guides I. The result revealed that the majority of students had a moderately high level of anxiety while delivering a public speech. This indicates that students' anxiety level was not too severe for them to manage.

In related studies which did the data collection with non - Thai students, Toubot et al. (2018) investigated levels of public speaking anxiety of 300 EFL fourth-year students in three universities in Libya. The evidence from this study showed that students expressed a high level of public speaking anxiety at the performance stage and expressed a moderately high level of anxiety at the pre-preparation, pre-performance, and preparation stages. Moreover, Chen (2009) also found that 18 Taiwanese EFL freshmen students had a high level of public speaking anxiety while giving a speech. In addition, Chen (2009) claimed 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. In contrast, Sugiyati and Indriana (2021) surveyed public speaking anxiety at a pre-preparation stage. 34 third-semester EFL students from English speaking courses at Tidar University participated in this study; the findings indicate that the students experienced a low level of public speaking anxiety at the stage of pre-preparation. Also, Yahya (2013) shared the same results in that 104 EFL students enrolled in Speech Communication Course I at the Arab American University in Palestine were at a low anxiety level at the moment when the public speech was assigned in class.

In conclusion, the related studies reflected that the majority of EFL students have a high level of public speaking anxiety at the performance stage. Moreover, the previous studies were carried out in different places and contexts. Also, most of the related studies employed questionnaires and/or interviews to find out the participants' level of anxiety in public speaking. What makes the current study differ from the previous ones is that the earlier research studies focused only on non-English major students, not English major students. In addition, most studies of public speaking anxiety tended to deal with factors that cause public speaking anxiety or correlations between public speaking anxiety and other factors. For these reasons, the current study fills the gap by emphasizing the levels of public speaking anxiety at four different stages among fourth-year English major students at Naresuan University.

Research Methodology

This section gives an outline of the research methods, namely the participants, the research instrument that was used for data collection, and the procedures. The details of the three main parts are presented below.

Participants

The participants in this research study were 50 fourth-year English major students at Naresuan University. Their age range was 20 - 22, and their average length of English study was 16 years. The reason that this research used fourth-year English major students was that the purpose of this study focused on the anxiety levels in public speaking of EFL learners, particularly students studying in an English program that had experience giving speeches in public. In addition, the respondents were taking Public Speaking and Presentation course - a compulsory course in which students were required to perform different types of public speech in class such as an informative or persuasive speech.

Research instruments

A questionnaire was adapted from McCroskey (1970) study, which used PRPSA, Personal Report of Public Speaking Anxiety. There were 16 questions divided into four parts, covering the four stages of public speaking (O'Hair et al., 2007): pre-preparation anxiety stage, preparation anxiety stage, pre-performance anxiety stage, and performance anxiety stage. In each stage, there were four questions that the respondents were required to rate their anxiety in a five-point Likert Scale consisting of Strongly Disagree (1), Disagree (2), Undecided (3), Agree (4), and Strongly Agree (5). In addition, the tool used to gather research data was Google Form, and individual respondents spent about 15 minutes answering the survey (See Appendix for a complete questionnaire used in this study).

Data collection procedures

The 50 fourth-year English major students studying at Naresuan University were contacted individually via Messenger or Line. The researchers introduced themselves and communicated in a friendly manner with the



participants to make them comfortable. Then, the researchers sent the questionnaire link in their chat. To ensure that the participants understood how to do the questionnaire, the researchers explained the questionnaire instructions in Thai; they were asked to choose the appropriate choices for their opinion on each item. The data were quantitatively analyzed using means and standard deviations. For clear understanding, the data is tabulated.

Findings

To answer the research question 'What is the level of anxiety at four different stages of public speaking among fourth-year English major students at Naresuan University?', the findings are shown in Tables 1 to 5.

Table 1 Level of pre-preparation anxiety in English public speaking classes

Statement	Mean	SD		
1. I feel tense when I see the words "speech" and "public speech" on a course outline when studying.	3.34	1.08		
2. I get anxious when I think about a speech coming up.	3.05	1.07		
3. When the instructor announces a speaking assignment in class, I can feel myself getting tense.	3.13	1.17		
4. I feel anxious when the teacher announces the date of a speaking assignment.	3.11	1.13		
Total	N	Mean	SD	Interpretation
Pre-preparation anxiety	50	3.42	0.89	high

Table 1 describes the level of pre-preparation anxiety in English public speaking. It was found that participants experienced a moderately high anxiety level while seeing the words about speech on a syllabus, thinking about a speech coming up, hearing the instructor announces a speaking assignment in class and hearing the teacher announces the date of a speaking assignment, as indicated in the mean scores of 3.34, 3.05, 3.13, and 3.11, respectively. As a result, the overall response to the level of pre-preparation anxiety in the study had a mean score of $\bar{x} = 3.42$, which can be interpreted that the respondents showed a high level of anxiety at this stage.

Table 2 Level of preparation anxiety in English public speaking classes

Statement	Mean	SD		
1. While preparing to give a speech, I feel tense and nervous.	2.52	1.05		
2. I am unhappy when preparing a speech.	2.8	1.18		
3. I have trouble falling asleep the night before a speech.	2.78	1.1		
4. When preparing a speech, I feel anxious and have trouble concentrating on what I am doing.	2.66	1.31		
Total	N	Mean	SD	Interpretation
Preparation anxiety	50	2.95	1.12	moderately high



Table 2 illustrates the level of preparation anxiety in English public speaking. The study results revealed that the mean score of having anxiety and trouble concentrating on what they are doing was 2.52, reflecting that they had a low anxiety level. However, the mean scores of unhappiness while preparing to give a speech, sleep deprivation the night before a speech, and nervousness during preparing a speech were 2.80, 2.78, and 2.66, representing a moderately high anxiety level. Hence, the overall mean score for the pre-preparation anxiety of the participants in this study was $\bar{x} = 2.95$, revealing that students expressed anxiety in the pre-preparation stage at a moderately high level.

Table 3 Level of pre-performance anxiety in English public speaking classes

Statement		Mean	SD	
1. I feel anxious while rehearsing a speech.		3.28	1.11	
2. I feel uncomfortable and stressed while rehearsing a speech.		3.04	1.05	
3. I am in constant fear of forgetting what I prepared to say while rehearsing a speech.		3.36	1.04	
4. My heart beats very fast while I rehearse a speech.		2.92	1.33	
Total	N	Mean	SD	Interpretation
Pre-performance anxiety	50	3.24	0.95	moderately high

Table 3 shows the level of pre-performance anxiety in English public speaking. From this data, the mean scores of their nervousness, discomfort, and heart rate during rehearsing a speech were 3.28, 3.04, and 2.92, respectively. It can be interpreted that they had a moderately high anxiety level. Nevertheless, the mean score of fear of forgetting what they prepared to say was 3.36 showing a high anxiety level. The overall mean score for the pre-preparation anxiety of the students in this study was $\bar{x} = 3.24$, indicating that they had a moderately high level of anxiety in the pre-preparation stage of public speaking.

Table 4 Level of performance anxiety in English public speaking classes

Statement		Mean	SD	
1. My hands shake and some parts of my body feel very tense when I am delivering a speech.		3.4	1.14	
2. My heart beats very fast when I am giving a speech.		3.72	1.05	
3. While giving a speech, I get so nervous that I forget facts that I actually know.		3.74	1.16	
4. When I make a mistake while giving a speech, I find it hard to concentrate on the parts that follow.		3.34	1.28	
Total	N	Mean	SD	Interpretation
Performance anxiety	50	3.65	1.02	high



Table 4 presents the level of performance anxiety in English public speaking. The results indicated that most of the respondents agreed with all four statements at the stage of performance anxiety. The mean score of forgetting dialogue due to making a mistake was 3.34, and the mean score of physical tension while giving a speech was 3.40, showing a moderately high anxiety level. Nonetheless, their mean scores of having a rapid heartbeat and forgetting facts, which they knew, due to nervousness during delivering a speech were 3.72 and 3.74, which described that students had a high anxiety level. The overall response to the statements relating to performance anxiety showed a mean score of 3.65, which was interpreted to be a high level of anxiety.

Table 5 The comparative level of anxiety at the four different stages in English public speaking classes

Stage of anxiety	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	SD
Pre-preparation anxiety	50	1	5	3.42	0.89
Preparation anxiety	50	1	5	2.95	1.12
Pre-performance anxiety	50	1	5	3.24	0.95
Performance anxiety	50	1	5	3.65	1.02

Table 5 compares the level of anxiety at the four different stages in English public speaking. From the data in this table, it is apparent that the respondents had the highest anxiety at the performance stage ($\bar{x} = 3.65$) followed by at the pre-preparation stage ($\bar{x} = 3.42$), pre-performance stage ($\bar{x} = 3.24$), and the lowest anxiety at preparation stage ($\bar{x} = 2.95$). As can be seen, the majority of participants, who responded to these items, felt a high level of anxiety at the pre-preparation and performance stage while they expressed a moderately high level of anxiety at the other two stages, preparation and pre-performance.

Discussion

From the results, fourth-year English major students studying experienced a high level of public speaking anxiety at the pre-preparation and performance stage. However, they expressed a moderately high level of anxiety at the preparation and pre-performance stages.

In the pre-preparation stage of public speaking, participants showed a high level of anxiety. The majority of the students agreed that they were anxious when seeing the words “speech” and “public speech” on a course outline. In the present study, all students were required to enroll in the public speaking course, so they might have been worried due to a negative impression they acquired before actually taking this course. This might be because English is not their mother tongue, so learners felt anxious once they realized that they must get involved in any English-speaking course. The finding is in line with the study of Plangkhom and Porkham (2012) in which students showed a high level of anxiety when the public speech was assigned in class. Nevertheless, Toubot et al. (2018) and Viwattanabunchong (2017) claimed that students experienced a moderately high level in the pre-preparation stage. Besides, Sugiyati and Indiana (2021) and Yahya (2013) found that participants got low anxiety when they realized that they must get involved in English public speaking. This might be because they were familiar with public speaking, or they might have had



some experience in public speaking. Thus, they knew the steps of preparing a speech that was suitable for them. For this reason, they did not worry too much in this period.

The lowest level of anxiety in public speaking was found in the preparation stage. Students showed a moderately high level in this stage. They did not show many physical symptoms of anxiety such as not sleeping at night before a speech and not being able to focus on the task that they were doing during a speech preparation. There are several possible explanations for this result. It is possible that the preparation stage helped students to decrease their anxiety as they had a chance to prepare a speech; for instance, reviewing grammatical points or preparing this step systematically until becoming familiar with the speech script (Menzel and Carrell, 1994). Another explanation might be because students felt speech preparation might have made them more confident in the quality of speech, so they did not experience a high level of anxiety in this stage. This result was consistent with prior research, which showed that the level of state anxiety in the preparation stage was lower than the performance stage (Plangkham & Porkham, 2012; Toubot et al., 2018; Viwattanabunchong, 2017).

The findings revealed that like in the preparation stage of public speaking, in the pre-performance stage, the students also had a moderately high level of anxiety. In this stage, the students might have had time to rehearse a speech that they had already prepared. Therefore, their anxiety was not very high. In addition, it might be possible that speech rehearsal at the moment just before the students started to give a speech was important in building students' confidence and decreasing their anxiety level. The result is similar to those of Plangkham and Porkham (2012), Toubot et al. (2018) and Viwattanabunchong (2017), who revealed that students expressed a moderately high level in the pre-performance stage.

The highest level of anxiety in public speaking was found in the performance stage. Students had a high anxiety level in this period. Most of them agreed that they felt anxious when they performed an actual speech in class. As the students in the present study had taken only one English public speaking course, they might not have an adequate opportunity to practice English speaking skills. Therefore, this may lead to anxiety when they were required to give a speech in front of many people. This finding is congruent with previous studies showing that students showed a high anxiety level when performing a speech (Chen, 2009; Hayaramae, 2016; Plangkham & Porkham, 2012; Toubot et al., 2018; Viwattanabunchong, 2017). It can be seen that the results in the current study match those observed in earlier studies. However, the present study and that of Kakandee and Al-Shaibani (2018) differ in one point. While this study found that the students had a high anxiety level in giving a speech, Kakandee and Al-Shaibani (2018) claimed that Thai EFL students had a moderately high level of anxiety in delivering a public speech. This might be because respondents had an adequate chance to practice speaking skills. For this reason, although they had some excitement or anxiety, they could control it while giving a speech.

Conclusion

This research attempted to investigate the levels of anxiety at four different stages of public speaking among fourth-year English major students at Naresuan University. The results showed that the students demonstrated different levels of anxiety. Whereas they expressed a high level of public speaking anxiety at the performance and pre-



preparation stage, they had a moderately high level of public speaking anxiety at the preparation and pre-performance stages. Importantly, the performance stage showed the highest level of students' anxiety and was the most influential stage in public speaking anxiety. Furthermore, the preparation stage was rated as the stage that made students feel the least anxious. It is very important that the instructor should attempt to find ways to reduce students' speaking anxiety such as providing them with more English-speaking courses each semester in order to let students have more opportunities to practice and become more familiar with speaking in front of the audience.

Limitations

The limitation was the small sample size making generalization to the extensive community unreliable. The respondents of the study were fourth-year English major students at Naresuan University. Hence, the results obtained cannot be generalized to other English major students in other universities.

Recommendations

First, the data of the study were only gathered from fourth-year English major students at Naresuan University. Therefore, further research should be conducted at several universities with a variety of participants such as students from different year levels. Moreover, 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 to find ways to help students cope with their anxiety. Finally, the instrument in this survey was only a questionnaire. Further research should include different research methods such as in-depth interviews or tests in order to increase the reliability of the findings.

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