An Investigation into the 2nd Year English Majors' Anxiety in Oral Presentation

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Abstract. Feelings of anxiety or nervousness are common expressions of second/foreign language learners when giving a presentation or even speaking in the target language. These feelings are considered to cause a potentially negative effect on communication in the target language. This study has attempted to discover the factors that anxiety can stem from when English major second-year students at a university in Vietnam give presentations and has recommended a variety of solutions to cope with it. By using questionnaires and interviews, the data were collected from 50 English major second-year students and 4 teachers. The data collected reflects factually three main issues in this study: the levels of speaking anxiety of students, the causes of anxiety, anxiety coping strategies. The findings suggested that anxiety can originate from a variety of causes and numerous solutions to virtually eliminate difficulty and anxiety from the process of giving any presentation were provided. These findings will hopefully be useful for those who are interested in the topic and for further research.

Keywords: English major, English presentation, anxiety, anxiety coping strategies, university students

Introduction

Currently, presentation is one of the basic and important soft skills students study. This skill is very significant for students of English major in particular and students of foreign languages major in general because learning a foreign language requires learners' development of confidence and enhances initiative; additionally, it is a skill valuable for application in future jobs and of course in daily life. However, the problem is that many English major students, especially second-year students are not confident when delivering presentations. This study is conducted to discover the reasons for the problem and it also aims at finding some effective solutions.

The ability to show your thoughts to other people is really important. According to the Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary (2008), the term "competence" is defined as "the ability to do something well". "Presentation skill competencies" refers to the skills involved in giving a presentation. Zaremba (2012) also mentioned some presentation skill competencies. He stated that a competent presenter should have the ability to do the following things: (1) Analyze audiences; (2) Structure message; (3) Deliver a message; (4) Address speaking anxiety; (5) Use visuals complement, and (6) Develop and evaluate the persuasive argument. It is strange but often people have some problems when delivering a presentation. Several authors are pointing out common problems when a presentation is given. Zaremba (2012) also identified 5 common problems with presentations namely: Influence, Power, and Responsibility. He stated out lack of organization, over-or underestimating the audience, reading off the PowerPoint Slides, using junk words like Ums, Ers, Ahs and You knows, time are regularly identified in a presentation.

Public speaking anxiety is often referred to speech anxiety. Speech anxiety is "the fear of public speaking or of speaking in general." (Fritscher, 2020, p.6). Experiencing speech anxiety is normal and it seems that almost everyone feels anxious or nervous when they have to give a speech or a presentation. A study has shown that 70% of the population experiences moderately high to very high speech anxiety (Richmond & McCroskey, 1989; North & Rives, 2001). Burnley et al. (1993, p.29) states that, "Approximately 85% of the general population

report experiencing some level of anxiety about speaking in public." Additionally, public speaking anxiety is very common among both college students and the general population. Rossi and Seiler (1989, p.53) indicate that, "Public speaking or stage fright has been investigated and studied since the mid-1930's". Individuals with public speaking anxiety most often experience a variety of symptoms in a public speaking situation, including palpitations, sweating, gastrointestinal discomfort, diarrhea, muscle tension, and confusion. (North & Rives; 2001). Who is affected by public speaking anxiety? Public speaking anxiety even outranked such fears as going to the dentist, heights, mice, and flying. It was showed about 85% of the population fears public speaking (Motley, 1991). Moreover, according to McCroskey (1984), many students, even at higher levels of study, experience some level of fear and anxiety when asked to communicate, especially in public. That status indicates that speech anxiety or public speaking anxiety is a common issue. It is also important to know that "Our sense of public speaking anxiety is closer to what psychologists and psychiatrists refer to as a phobia rather than a free-floating anxiety" (Ayres & Hopf, 1993, p.61). It is an anxiety-based response not unlike the wide range of phobias that can be found in the areas of psychology and psychiatry.

It is clear that if we know how a thing works, we are more likely to find out how to control or even use it somehow. That may be why a great number of scientists, researchers, psychologists, linguists and language teachers have to try to figure out the causes of speech/public speaking anxiety for ages. There are various causes of speech anxiety. Ayres (1986) indicated that "the fear of public speaking emerges from a personal assessment that one's speaking abilities fall short of audience expectations." It is clear that the audience is one of many factors of anxiety. If someone thinks that his/her ability of speaking is good or can meet audience expectations, of course, he/she will be more confident about his/her performance otherwise he/she will experience anxiety. That the things Ayres found out and mentioned in his paper. He said, "as people's perceptions of their abilities exceed audience expectations, the likelihood they will experience some degree of stage fright decreases, and conversely, as their view of their abilities falls below their perceptions of audience expectations, the likelihood they will experience some degree of stage fright increases.". Young (1991) says that the greatest source of anxiety for students in the language classroom is the face-to-face interaction and evaluation that often occurs with peers and instructor and that all language anxiety can usually be associated in some way with the learner, the instructor, and/or the instructional practice. Other speaking activities that usually cause language anxiety were pointed out by Frantzen and Magnan (2005) who made a list of anxiety-inducing language activities, some of which include: spontaneous role play in front of the class, presenting a dialogue in front of the class, writing on the board, oral presentations and skits, speaking in any way in front of the class, and oral exams.

Some recent research works have been conducted to find out sources of anxiety in speaking as well as strategies to cope with anxiety during presentations. According to Wu (2004 cited in Chia, 2011), there is the existence of a positive correlation between a student's language anxiety and English speaking proficiency. Horwitz & Young (1999) also affirmed that having a good atmosphere or a non-threatening environment to encourage students, a peer supportive atmosphere is said to have successfully reduced students' anxiety levels. Some also mentioned that using group work or utilizing a cooperative way of learning is a good way to reduce stage fright (Clément, Dörnyei, & Noels, 1994 cited in Chia, 2011).

Methods

This study aimed to answer the three following questions:

1. How anxious are students when they give a presentation?
2. What are the common factors that cause anxiety when giving presentations?
3. What strategies do students often use to reduce anxiety?

The study involved 50 random English major second-year students at a university in Thai Nguyen, Vietnam. They study some subjects that require presentations. The fact is that many English major students, especially second-year students feel anxious when delivering some kinds of presentations. From the experiences in giving presentations, English major second-year students would provide real causes of anxiety and the things they would do to cope with anxiety.

In addition, in order to suggest solutions for virtually eliminate anxiety from the process of giving any presentation. Four English lecturers from the same university were also chosen as the subjects of this study.

Three questionnaires were used to discover the levels of personal public speaking anxiety, to collect the causes of anxiety and the strategies coping with students' anxiety. These questionnaires consisted of three main parts: a survey to measure the level of public speaking anxiety of students and questionnaires to collect data about the causes of anxiety and strategies to cope with anxiety. In the first questionnaire, students will have to indicate whether they strongly disagree or strongly agree with the provided items. Next, students were asked to fill out the questionnaire consisting of 16 possible causes of anxiety when giving a presentation. Finally, students were asked to fill out the questionnaire consisting of 20 anxiety coping strategies. Students will have to indicate whether or not they disagree, uncertain, or agree with each strategy in the third questionnaire. the study uses the adapted version of McCroskey (1970) PRPSA (Personal report of Public Speaking anxiety) surveys; a validated scale strictly tailored for public speaking anxiety. PRPSA is a 5-Likert (1932) scaled survey with an alpha reliability of higher than 0.90.

Five semi-structured interview questions were also used to collect the causes of anxiety as well as solutions for coping with anxiety, from English lecturers who are teaching the students.

Results and Discussion

Students' Level of Speaking Anxiety

As can be seen in Table 1 and Figure 1, there were three levels of anxiety, namely low anxiety, moderate anxiety and high anxiety. After scoring as the instruction, a significantly great number of students reported *moderate level of anxiety* (78%). With the same way of scoring, 16% of those questioned have *low level of anxiety*. Only 6% of students participating in the survey have *high level of anxiety*.

It is clear that all respondents get anxious when giving a presentation but with different levels of anxiety. Just a small number of students may feel quite confident when giving a presentation. More than three fourth students experienced from moderate to high levels of anxiety. The fact indicated that this is practical and necessary.

Table 1. PRPSA scores of students

	Number of students	Percentage
Low anxiety	8	16%
Moderate anxiety	38	76%
High anxiety	4	8%

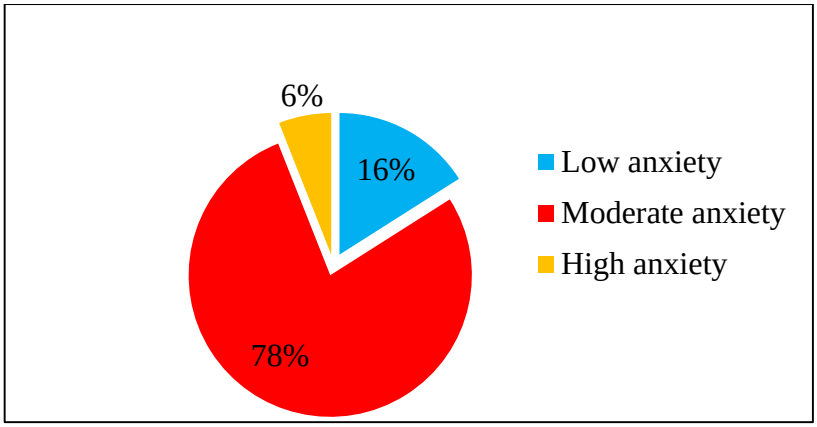

Figure 1. Levels of anxiety

Causes Contributing to Anxiety

As can be clearly seen from Figure 2 and Figure 3, the major cause of anxiety was a lack of English proficiency with 82,0% of respondents indicating a similar answer. This result showed that students were weak in English, some were weak in terms of grammar, pronunciation and arranging of words, and also there was a lack of knowledge about the topic presented. The second cause was lack of preparation, with 76% of respondents who had the same answer. Good preparation is the key to success. However, many students did not consider preparation as an essential step before giving a presentation. The next factor that could be identified was individual characteristics where 71,3% of respondents agreed that this factor also caused anxiety. There was something natural inside their body that created a mental block. This made students often feel nervous when giving a presentation or even talking in front of a group of unfamiliar people. Perception of others also contributed to anxiety when more than half of the total students agreed on the same answer. More than half of the students were concerned about various kinds of evaluative situations in which their knowledge and performance of English would be monitored by people around them. They were conscious of the facial expressions of other students and also of the teachers. They were afraid of being embarrassed in front of their friends especially if their answers were criticized when making mistakes. They were afraid if their audiences look bored and confused, and cannot understand the information they are trying to deliver. The last cause was studying the environment with 49,3% of the respondents responding the same idea. This indicated that the teacher plays a quite important role of creating anxiety. If the teacher's instructions are not clear, the learners - instructors' interactions will be poor. If teachers' facial expressions are friendly, students will feel more free and comfortable. Studying in an uncomfortable classroom also created anxiety for students. In conclusion, there were both objective factors like preparation, lack of English proficiency and studying environment along with subjective factors namely perception of other and individual characteristics that could cause anxiety for students in the process of giving presentations.

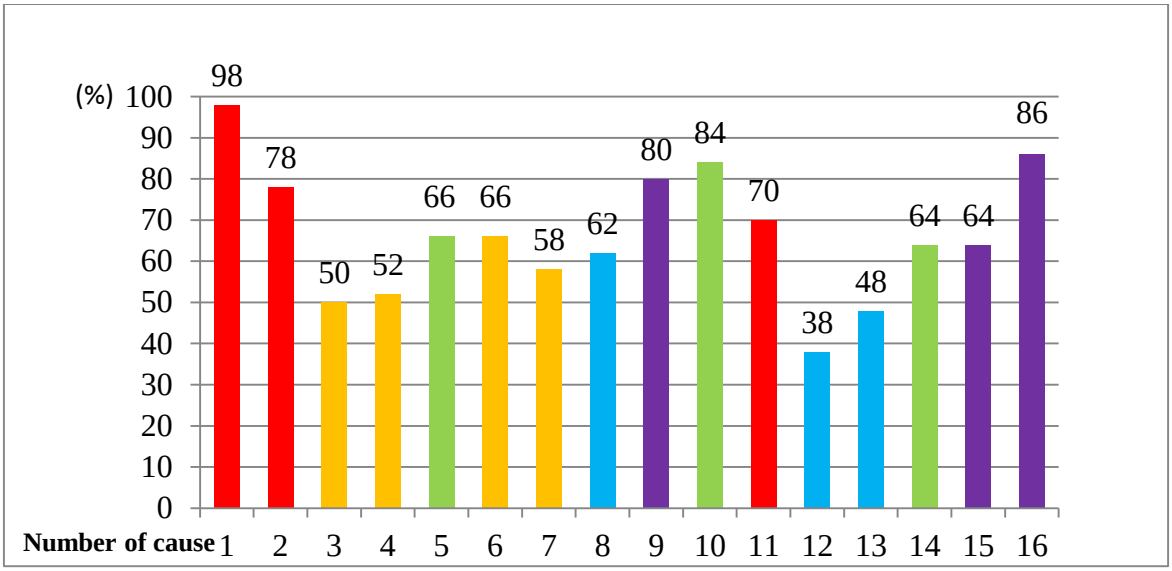

Figure 2. Causes of anxiety

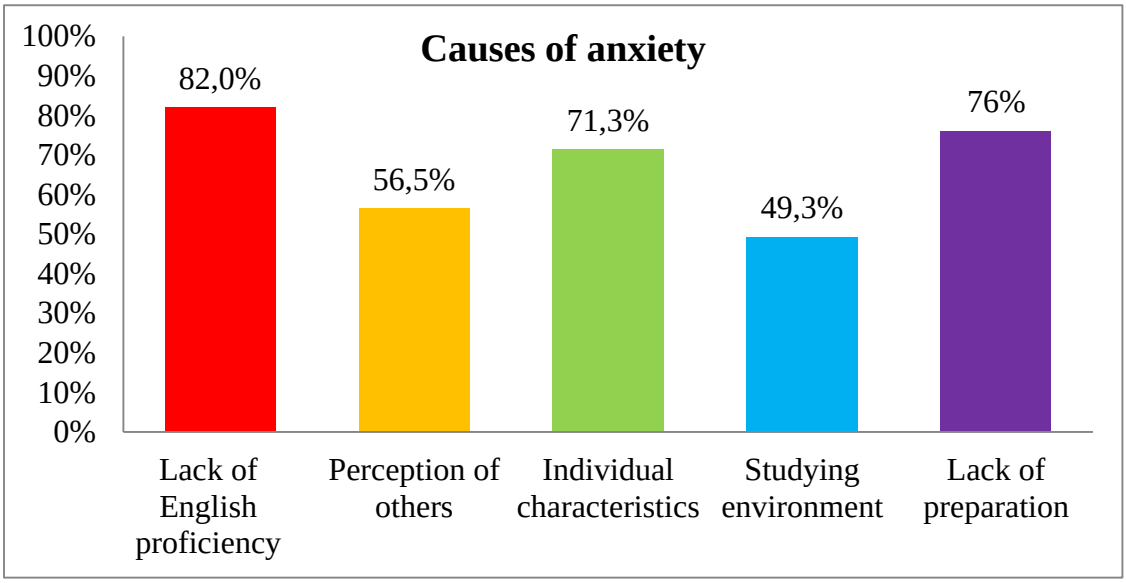

Figure 3. Percentage of 5 groups of causes of anxiety

Strategies for Coping with Anxiety

The analysis of anxiety coping strategies, as described in Figure 3, showed that there were 4 groups of strategies that students often use to deal with their anxiety, namely preparation, positive thinking, relaxation and peer correction. Of these four groups of strategies, relaxation was used by the majority of students in their attempt to reduce anxiety when they give a presentation followed by peer correction. The next effective way of reducing anxiety was preparation followed by the last one – positive thinking.

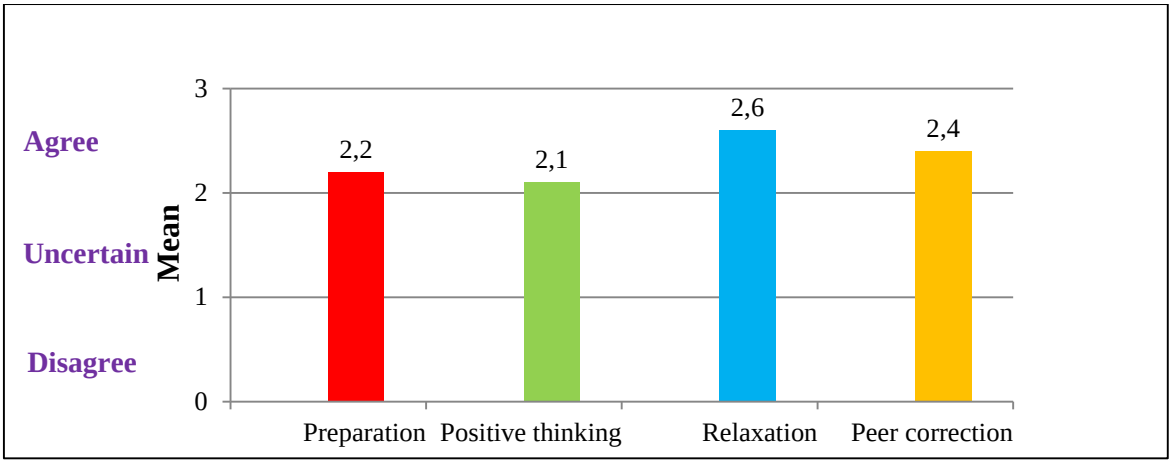

Figure 4. Anxiety coping strategies

Causes Contributing to Anxiety from English Lecturers

The results were shown in Table 2 illustrating 6 common causes of anxiety that teachers have been found so far. It can be clearly seen from the table that there were some causes that were the same as the ones collected from students like causes #1, #3, #4, #5, #6. There was only another factor, that was, technical problems. According to the teachers interviewed, students often got into trouble with the projector, laptop, speaker, or software like PowerPoint because they did not work correctly somehow.

Table 2. Causes of anxiety

	Causes of anxiety
1	Lack of practice
2	Technical problems (problems with projector, laptop, speaker)
3	Characteristic of students
4	Teachers' instructions
5	Fear of making mistakes
6	Fear of teachers

Suggested Strategies for Coping with Anxiety

As can be seen from Table 3, first of all, there were various ways for coping with anxiety that have been suggested by teachers. Of the five strategies given, there were things for students like strategies #2, #4, #5 to do. Besides, teachers also played important roles in reducing anxiety by giving positive feedbacks and clear instructions. From their real teaching experiences, teachers agreed that compliments like 'Good job', 'Great' would really make students feel more confident and have motivation to do things better. Teachers should not just pay attention to criticize students when they perform poor things or make mistakes. In addition, the fact was students would really feel anxious when they did not understand the instruction of teachers. That was why the teacher should instruct students in a simple and clear way.

Table 3. Strategies coping with anxiety

	Strategies coping with anxiety
1	Teacher should give positive feedbacks.
2	Students have to practice much more.
3	Teachers should give clear instructions.
4	Students should use peer corrections.
5	Students should pay more attention to technical problems.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the study provides insightful information into language anxiety of university students at a university in Thai Nguyen, Vietnam.

First of all, the results of this study clearly indicated that almost all students feel anxious and nervous while speaking English in front of others with different levels of anxiety. Feeling of anxiety or nervousness of students was a common issue within the context of foreign language learning in general and English learning in particular.

Second, common factors that cause anxiety when giving presentations were identified. From data collection and analysis, causes of anxiety were gathered from both students and teachers. What makes students experience different levels of anxiety when giving presentations was clearly pointed out, they were: lack of English proficiency, perception of others, individual characteristics, studying environment, lack of preparation, technical problems, teachers' instructions and fear of teachers. This result was the satisfactory answer for the second research question of the study: "What are the common factors that cause anxiety in second-year English majors when giving presentations?".

Finally, to answer the question "What strategies do second-year English majors often use to reduce anxiety?". Results from questionnaires and English lecturers' interviews showed that preparation, positive thinking relaxation and peer correction were 4 groups of strategies students often use to cope with anxiety when giving presentations. Lecturers give positive feedbacks and clear instructions. Students also stated that it will be effective if they use peer corrections, pay more attention to technical problems and practice much more.

Base on the findings and conclusions drawn, the following are hereby recommended:

As students reported the major cause of anxiety is a lack of English proficiency, practice is the key to improve English. Practice will make perfect. Practice speaking English with friends or teachers, or even text messaging them in English which will also help to increase the level of proficiency in English thus indirectly, it will reduce the level of second language anxiety. It will be great if all students can consider English as their favorite breakfast so they can 'eat' their breakfast' every morning. That way may easy to do because with the fast development of the internet, it has been easier for 'netizens' to get access to this inexhaustible source of information. It is recommended that students make use of online websites to practice pronunciation as well as practice grammar and speaking English every day. Using the library for studying purposes is another good way to increase the level of efficiency in the English language. Learning Resources Center (LRC) is a great suggestion.

The technical problem is one of the factors contribute to anxiety so it is unforgettable to learning and researching IT skills and of course how to apply learned skills to the real situations. Google is an incredible tool for searching. Let's start in an easy way by tying something like 'how to use projector', 'how to make an impressive slide for a presentation' or just simple 'how to use PowerPoint'. Simple things can make great differences. Moreover, information technology is becoming more and more accessible to people in not only Vietnam but also the world, so you cannot be the blind in technologies.

Teachers have a great role in teaching students how to present, especially, how to constrain their anxiety effectively. First of all, teachers should acknowledge the existence of the feeling of anxiety in learning and particularly speaking English language and then should take initiatives for its effective reduction. They should identify students with signs of anxiety and should apply appropriate strategies to help them counteract these feelings. To do that, it is recommended that there should be some specific teachers training courses on language anxiety in order to make teachers aware of this complicated issue and, hence, alleviate it. Besides, if the teachers want their students to learn presentation skills successfully, their lectures should be of many types such as video samples, tapescripts, modeling and from different sources like the Internet, newspapers, or authentic books. Finally, teachers should be ensured that students

are provided friendly, informal and learning-supportive environments. This can be done by teachers' friendly, helpful and cooperative behavior as well as clear and simple instructions which will make students feel comfortable when speaking in the class. To encouraging students to feel successful in using English, teachers should avoid setting up activities that enhance the chances for them to fail. As students appear to be really sensitive to fear of making mistakes, teachers should encourage students to learn from mistakes and to be confident to make mistakes in order to acquire communication skills. It is also essential that positive feedback to students should be used more often.

In terms of preparing the presentation, students should know their audience. If possible, greet some of the audience as they arrive and chat with them. It is easier to speak to a group of friends than to a group of strangers. Then, knowing their materials, if they are not familiar with their material or are uncomfortable with it, their nervousness will increase. Practice the speech or presentation and revise it until they can present it with ease. Also, it is very important to recommend students rehearse their presentation standing up with visuals. As the results of this study showed, peer correction was used by many students. So it is suggested that students should use various ways of peer corrections such as giving presentations in front of friends and then ask them for comments and corrections. Recording presentations and then watching it back is an effective way of practice. Another good one is just practicing giving a presentation in front of a mirror.

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