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# Second or Foreign Language Public Speaking Anxiety in Higher Education

Po-Chi Kao<sup>1, 2, \*</sup>, Philip Craigie<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup>General Education Center, Chang Gung University, Taoyuan, Taiwan

<sup>2</sup>Linkou Branch, Chang Gung Memorial Hospital, Taoyuan, Taiwan

<sup>3</sup>Independent Researcher, Melbourne, Australia

## Email address

mk@mail.cgu.edu.tw (Po-Chi K.)

\*Corresponding author

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**Abstract:** This study critically and systematically reviewed studies of previous researchers and scholars in the investigation of public-speaking anxiety in second/foreign languages in academic settings. In this review study, four factors contributing to why individuals experience public-speaking anxiety were identified. Two interrelated and interacted forms of communication-bond anxiety were pinpointed. Then the unwillingness to communicate or speech anxiety in a second/foreign classroom is illustrated. In the end, several causes of academic oral presentation anxiety were found. It is the authors' hope that this review study could offer valuable discussion with important practical and theoretical importance to enhance the understanding of public-speaking anxiety using a second/foreign language in higher education.

**Keywords:** Public-Speaking Anxiety, Second/Foreign Language Anxiety, Communication Apprehension, Academic Oral Presentation Anxiety, ESL/EFL Education

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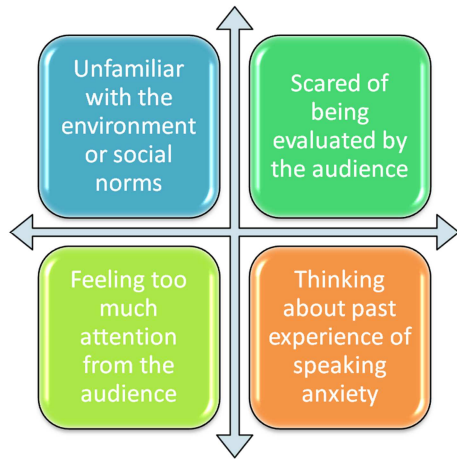
## 1. Introduction

This study aims to review the phenomenon of public speaking anxiety, in particular second/foreign language speaking anxiety and academic oral presentation in university and graduate courses. This study critically and systematically reviewed studies of previous researchers and scholars. Our data sources are mainly extracted from scholarly publications and academic online resources. It is hoped that this study would assist further understanding of public-speaking anxiety using a second/foreign language in academic settings, which could help with the development of comprehensive theoretical model of public-speaking anxiety for university students.

## 2. Public-Speaking Anxiety

Stage fright is another term for public-speaking anxiety [1]. Public speaking anxiety refers to the fear that people develop when giving a speech in public [2]. Horwitz and Young [2] said that individuals are likely to experience public-speaking anxiety when they are not familiar with the

environment or social norms, scared of being evaluated by the audience, and are feeling too much attention from the audience or thinking about past experience of speaking anxiety (See Figure 1). Important variables that may affect public-speaking anxiety have been revealed by studies on first language public-speaking anxiety. Two of such variables are considered in this study, and the first is associated with attention. According to Daly, Vangelisti, and Lawrence [3], speakers are likely to have more negative self-evaluation regarding their performance when they pay more attention to themselves than to the environment. The main cause of public-speaking anxiety among individuals can be traced to this negative self-focused cognition. Furthermore, it was suggested by Jones, Fazio, and Vasey [4] that performance is affected by public-speaking anxiety only for people with lower attention control. This implies that speakers would experience a higher level of public-speaking anxiety if they are easily affected by possible threatening elements in the environment. As a result, such individuals are likely to give shorter and poorer speeches.



**Figure 1.** Horwitz and Young's [2] conceptual model on why people experience public-speaking anxiety.

Second/foreign language learners find it difficult to focus their attention on themselves when speaking a second/foreign language in public because it is an unfamiliar language to many of these learners, which often threatens their self-identity [5]. The audience is another variable to be considered [6]. The audience is obviously an important issue in the study of public speaking anxiety either in the first language or in the second/foreign language because it forms a central aspect of a public speaking environment like the language classroom. The way the audience react or interact with the speaker has been shown in previous studies to be influential in determining the public-speaking anxiety of the speaker [6-7]. In addition, public-speaking anxiety may also be affected by the audience characteristics [1]. For instance, when speakers are exposed to an audience with an extremely large size [8] or expertise [9], they express more anxiety. Furthermore, speakers are likely to be more anxious when they get a negative response from the audience compared to when the audience responds positively [6, 9] or in neutral manner [10].

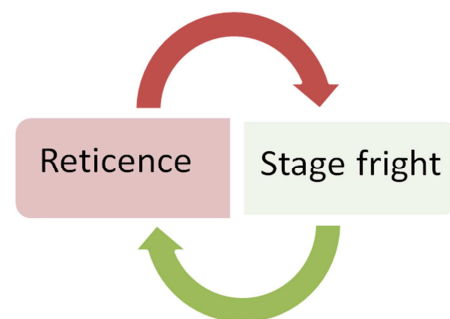
Second/foreign language speakers have also been found to experience public-speaking anxiety [11-12]. According to Lin [11], the public-speaking anxiety of second/foreign language speakers usually begins from the preparation stage of their speech and continues for up to one minute after the speech has begun. However, a complete picture of the public-speaking anxiety experienced by second/foreign language speakers was not provided in Lin's study [11], as it only focused on one speech task that was performed in an impromptu speech circumstance (i.e., a competitive and test related situation), which might cause the participants to express more test anxiety than public-speaking anxiety [5]. While Lin [11] only investigated the anxiety of EFL learners in junior high schools, Woodrow [12] discovered the existence of anxiety among university EAP (English for academic purposes) students. In-class oral presentations were discovered by Woodrow [12] to be the tasks that mostly caused anxiety in these advanced EFL students.

To sum up, research on public-speaking anxiety has revealed several factors contributing to it. These factors

included the speaker's personal characteristics, self-evaluation, as well as the environmental and audience variables. In the next section, literature on speaking anxiety in the context of second/foreign languages were reviewed and discussed.

### 3. Second/Foreign Language Speaking Anxiety

One of the key issues in oral communication is speaking anxiety which is usually discussed in terms of public-speaking anxiety or communication apprehension [5]. The notion of communication apprehension was conceptualized by McCroskey [13], who discussed various types and causes of communication apprehension. He stated that reticence (fear of participating in oral communication) and stage fright (fear of public speaking) are typical examples of communication-bond anxiety. It appeared that these two forms of communication anxiety may affect each other, leading to a vicious circle (See Figure 2). Thus, public speaking anxiety can be regarded as a form of communication apprehension [1]. It is more anxiety-provoking to speak in a second or a foreign language, as it is a language that is much less familiar to the learners. In fact, a lot of researchers believe that speaking anxiety forms a major part of second or foreign language anxiety [12, 14, 15]. In Phillips' [16] literature review, she also stated that anxious second language learners are the ones that suffer most from oral activities.



**Figure 2.** Illustration of communication-bond anxiety according to McCroskey [13].

Phillips [16] believed that greater anxiety was more likely to be generated by the evaluation involved in oral activities than other evaluative situations in language learning. A study involving 313 university students in Hong Kong was carried out by Mak [17], and he found out that the fear of negative evaluation and speech anxiety were largely responsible for in-class language anxiety. In comparison, Liu and Jackson [18] revealed that the unwillingness to communicate among Chinese EFL (English as a foreign language) learners was dominantly caused by low self-rating of foreign language proficiency and the fear of evaluation. According to these studies, a lot of second/foreign language learners are anxious because of the fear of evaluation when speaking in a second/foreign language in the presence of an audience [5].

The unwillingness to communicate or speech anxiety in a second/foreign classroom is illustrated in Figure 3.



**Figure 3.** A framework illustrating how speech anxiety or unwillingness to communicate occurs in a second/foreign language classroom.

Besides determining the causes of second or foreign language speaking anxiety, the effects of second/foreign language speaking anxiety on the speaking performance have also been examined by researchers [2, 3, 5, 19]. A high degree of second/foreign speaking anxiety has been shown by studies to possibly have a negative effect on learners' oral performance [5]. For example, second/foreign language learners with a higher anxiety level are more likely to refrain from speaking and communicate less information when speaking because they may underrate their speaking skill [20]. Similarly, second/foreign language speaking anxiety was revealed by Woodrow [12] to have a significantly negative impact on second/foreign language oral performance.

Nevertheless, there is no conclusion pertaining to the relationship between second/foreign language speaking anxiety and the speaking performance because different studies reported different results in this regard. For example, Young [21] discovered that the influence exerted by anxiety on foreign language oral proficiency scores was not as much as that exerted by ability, which is quite different from the findings of Woodrow [12]. Thus, Young [22] stressed that researchers should focus on how the effects of second/foreign language speaking anxiety vary with factors like learning environment, age and language proficiency of the subject when considering the impacts of these effects on speaking performance. The results of Young [22] were confirmed by the findings of Cheng [23]. In particular, Cheng [23] carried out research involving 308 college English-major students and found that there was a negative relationship between English speaking performance and English speaking anxiety

among first-year students and second-year students but there was no significant correlation among third-year students and fourth-year students.

Apart from the ones mentioned above, only few studies have been carried out on the effects of second/foreign language speaking anxiety on the second/foreign language achievement or performance. In fact, reducing English speaking anxiety was the main focus of most of the previous studies [24-27]. The behaviours of teachers play a key role in minimizing students' second/foreign language speaking anxiety. It was suggested by both Chou [24] and Yang [26] that English teachers could help reduce students' English speaking anxiety by giving them autonomy, correcting them in a soft and tender manner when they make mistakes as well as being patient, humorous, and friendly to them. Furthermore, an investigation on the learning behaviours of EFL students was carried out by Wright [25] and Yeh [27]. They discovered that providing more opportunities for students to interact and work together could help reduce the feeling of speaking anxiety among EFL students.

In summary, previous literature has documented the various types and causes of the second/public speaking anxiety. In addition, effects of second/public speaking anxiety on the speaking performance have also been recorded. To reduce its negative impact, teachers play a significant role in helping learners combat against the second/public speaking anxiety. In the next section, we reviewed previous literature and discussed a rarely explored arena in the public-speaking anxiety research – academic oral presentation.

#### 4. Academic Oral Presentation Anxiety

Oral presentation is a public-speaking task that is commonly assigned to students at the university level as well as other institutions of higher education [5]. The importance of oral communication among university graduate students was investigated by Kim [28], who found that formal oral presentation skills are very crucial for academic success in graduate programs. In many graduate-level courses in universities, students need to give oral presentations in class with the aid of posters or PowerPoint slides, either individually or as a group [5]. However, only students in foreign-language-related departments are mostly required to give presentations in a foreign language in university courses [5]. In these programs, the teachers are able to evaluate the students' overall understanding of the course contents through their oral presentations in a foreign language [5]. In addition, oral presentations can help students to improve their foreign language skills as well as help develop their abilities to organize information and deliver messages logically in a foreign language [5].

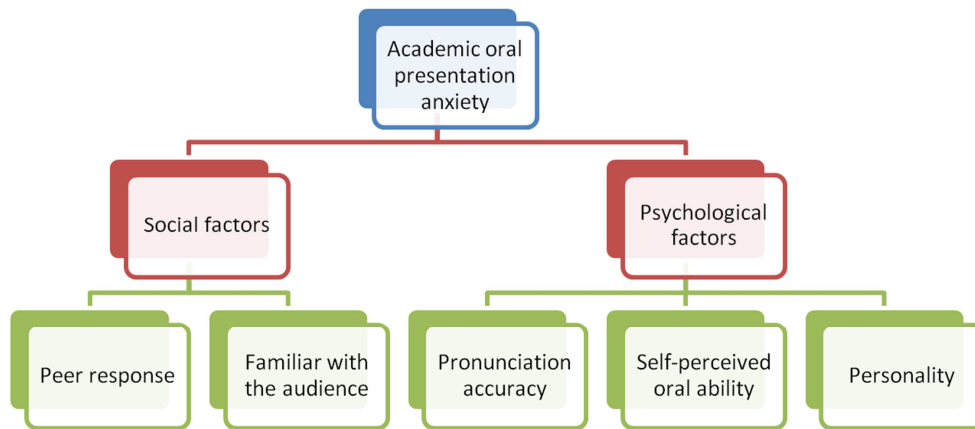


Figure 4. Chen's [29] structural model of academic oral presentation anxiety.

Although there are a handful of studies on EFL learners' anxiety towards academic oral presentation, the study done by Chen [29] to investigate the academic oral presentation anxiety among English-major graduate students is the most relevant one. Chen [29] found out in the study that the graduate students had a moderate level of anxiety which they were able to cope with, and this anxiety was attributed to both social and psychological factors. In particular, peer response and being familiar with the audience (which the researcher referred to as social factors) as well as pronunciation accuracy, self-perceived oral ability, and personality (which the researcher called psychological

factors) were discovered to affect the presenters' anxiety (See Figure 4). In a similar study, Tsai [30] examined the level of English presentation anxiety among university students. He found out that the main sources of anxiety during the midterm presentations are the complexity of presentation tasks, peers' response, and performance expectancy, while previous success or failure experiences, time pressure and partner variables were discovered to be the causes of anxiety for students during their final presentations (See Figure 5). Nevertheless, the researcher did not examine why different sources were linked to anxiety in different presentation tasks.

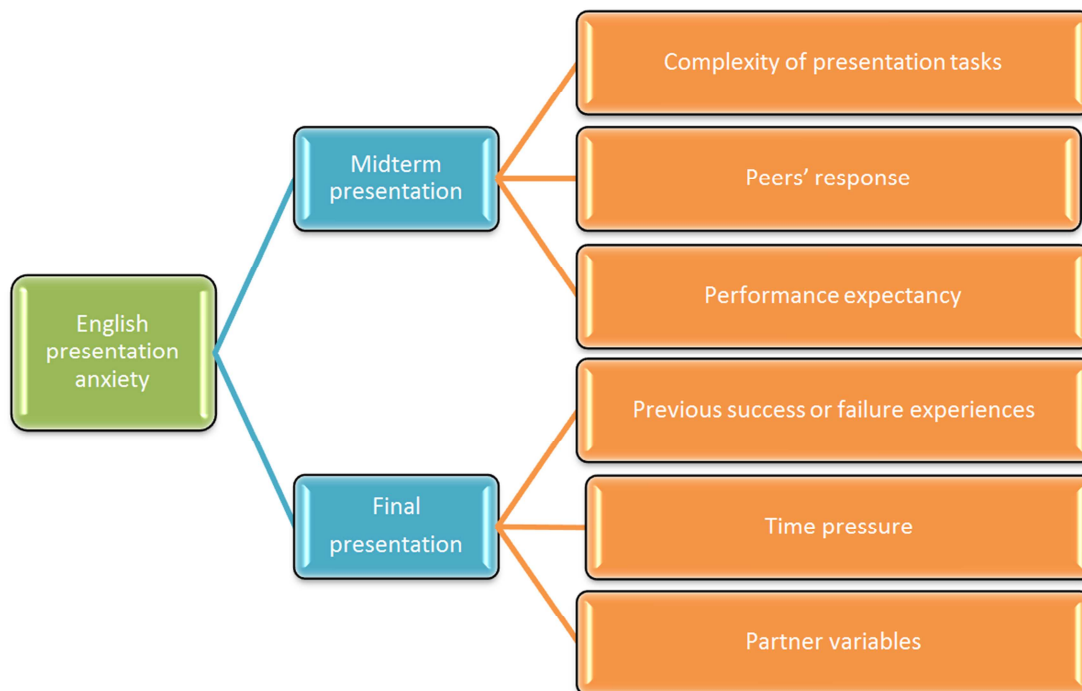


Figure 5. Sources of English presentation anxiety according to Tsai [30].

Scholars have also discovered that university students consider oral presentation to be the most stressful of all English speaking tasks given in class [12]. Hence, it's imperative to further explore the sources of this anxiety as well as how to cope with it. In higher education particularly,

English majors are usually expected to present orally in English [5]. As a result, oral presentation is more responsible for students' English speaking anxiety than other oral tasks [5]. Thus, it is important for future studies to continue examining the anxiety regarding English academic oral

presentations among EFL learners.

## 5. Conclusion

This study reviews extensively the work and findings of previous researchers and scholars about public speaking anxiety, second/foreign language speaking anxiety, and academic oral presentation anxiety. The complicated nature of oral speaking anxiety in the context of second/foreign languages and academic oral presentations were explored, critiqued, reviewed, and analyzed. Moreover, various scholars' conceptual frameworks and structure models were also presented and discussed. It is expected that this study would shed light on the public speaking anxiety research and guide both teachers and students through the experience of oral communication apprehension.

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