

## Investigating Public Speaking Anxiety Factors among EFL University Students through Online Learning

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**Abstract:** As in many other countries, universities in Indonesia have been closed since March 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown, and lecturers have been forced to adapt to online learning. Students in this online course admitted to feeling anxious when studying public speaking. The present descriptive quantitative study aims to analyze the potential factors (English oral proficiency, personality, lecturer's scoring criteria, classmates' responses, pronunciation, audience familiarity, unfamiliar speech topic, preparedness, English grammar, and vocabulary) affecting the students' public speaking anxiety at four different stages. The respondents of this study were 60 undergraduate students. A questionnaire adapted from McCroskey (1970) was used, and data were analyzed using descriptive statistics of IBM SPSS statistics 26 software. The findings of this study revealed that the factors affecting the students' public speaking anxiety through online learning varied by stages. Through online learning, English oral proficiency and topic familiarity could be the most influential factors on students' public speaking anxiety. The findings of this study are useful for educators in helping EFL students overcome their public speaking anxiety and enabling them to perform better in public speaking.

**Keywords:** Anxiety Factors, Covid-19, Public Speaking, Public Speaking Anxiety, Online Learning.

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## Introduction

Since the worldwide COVID-19 epidemic, all learning, including public speaking, has been done online at the high school and college levels. In this online learning, students looked they got anxious when they had to speak in front of a virtual audience in this online learning. When students are expected to give speeches or presentations in class or public, they become anxious (Krannich, 2004). They attempt to escape the circumstance of not appearing or speaking in public in various ways, but if it is unavoidable, they will feel pressure, embarrassment, voice shaking, fast heartbeat, uncomfortable, and insecure (Behnke & Sawyer, 2001; Sikandar, 2017). Furthermore, due to the fear of speaking in public, the individual's personal, social, and emotional life is affected (Brown, 2004). Lack of speaking practice, poor mastery of the issue, or a low self-image are some reasons behind this (Goberman, Hughes, & Haydock, 2011).

Anxiety over public speaking is caused by various circumstances, both internal and external to the speaker. Numerous researchers have reported how lack of strong public speaking skills, proficiency in foreign languages, and struggle to control emotional state are possibly the reasons behind this anxiety (Pribyl, Keaten, & Sakamoto, 2001). In addition, students are afraid of being judged by others (Coelho & Balaban, 2015) or being embarrassed by others when attempting to give a public speech (Panayiotou et al., 2017). Anxiety also interferes with normal language functioning, impairing public speaking ability (McNatt, 2019).

Indeed, public speaking skills are in high demand among students nowadays and after securing a job. From an early age, the ability to speak in public is critical for students' academic and professional success (Johnson & Szczupakiewicz, 1987). With these skills, students may live and develop in the values of openness, tolerance, and communication, which are the aims of global education today (Ivanova, Gubanova, Shakirova, & Masitoh, 2020). They will communicate their ideas effectively in various gatherings, meetings, seminars, and conferences in the workplace to succeed in their careers. In addition to sharing ideas effectively and systematically, exchanging ideas effectively and systematically is the primary need for obtaining good prospects in the professional environment (Pandey & Pandey, 2014).

Although there have been many previous studies that have examined public speaking anxiety (Bartholomay & Houlihan, 2016; Goberman et al., 2011; Hancock, Stone, Brundage, & Zeigler, 2010; Kalra & Sarit Siribud, 2020; McNatt, 2019; Rajitha & Alamelu, 2020; Shaquille, 2017; Sikandar, 2017; Yaikhong & Usaha, 2012), the study that covers online public speaking anxiety is still severely limited and needs to be investigated further. For example, Shaquille (2017) did a study

in which he attempted to assess the fear of male and female students toward public speaking in online and conventional classrooms. This study did not analyze further the factors affecting anxiety in different stages of public speaking. Furthermore, there is currently no research to explore the factors causing public speaking anxiety through online learning, particularly during Covid-19 at the Indonesian university level.

By recognizing the existence of public speaking anxiety and the numerous benefits of public speaking skills for students' lives, universities should strive to address the issues. Lectures as part of universities can reduce the primary factors of students' anxiety in public speaking and increase their productivity. As a result, universities must identify those who suffer from public speaking anxiety and implement programs to counteract it. This study intends to analyze the potential factors affecting the students' public speaking anxiety at a local university level during online learning. This research is critical for improving educational quality by resolving difficulties in the classroom and increasing the efficacy of learning processes and outcomes. Students are expected to understand the factors affecting their public speaking anxiety and identify the clear picture or remedy to alleviate the anxiety and maximize their potential.

## Literature Review

### *Public Speaking*

Public Speaking is described as an activity involving speaking in public, such as delivering a speech to a group, regardless of the group size (Breakey, 2005). A formal presentation by a speaker to an audience is referred to as public speaking (Sellnow, 2005). As a result, the goal of public speaking, which is to inform, persuade, or entertain the audience, can be achieved. Then to achieve that goal, students who are afraid of public speaking require comprehensive assistance in the form of practice and preparation (Grieve, Woodley, Hunt, & McKay, 2021).

Furthermore, Cllela (2007) adds that a person must prepare his speech, and a group would listen to it without disrupting him when it comes to public speaking. Public speaking activities differ significantly from regular conversations in that they need both physical and mental preparedness (Fujishin, 2018). As a consequence, a speaker will require physical health, mental calm and focus, comprehensiveness of public speaking components, completeness of the content, neatness of delivery, as well as a great deal of expertise and practice

In terms of public speaking components, there must be a speaker, a message to be delivered, listeners, and feedback when constructing speech material for public speaking (Gallo, 2014; German, Gronbeck, Ehniger, & Monroe, 2016). Furthermore, the context and

cultural values have a significant impact on the substance of a speech. A cultural context is a collection of shared social understandings and behaviors within a particular group or geographical location (Edvardsson, Tronvoll, & Gruber, 2011). Therefore, understanding the components of public speaking in depth will assist the speaker in appreciating the benefits of this communication skill.

The ability to speak in public is a market requirement nowadays when everyone needs to expose and promote themselves, ideas, points of view, thoughts, and solutions to specific problems. Public speaking skill is a significant asset in some occupations and careers, as it aids in developing strong connections, the resolution of conflict, and even the negotiation of contracts (Wörtwein et al., 2015).

### ***Online Learning***

Because of the covid-19 epidemic, educational systems and methods must adapt swiftly by incorporating online learning (König, Jäger-Biela, & Glutsch, 2020; Rajhans, Memon, Patil, & Goyal 2020). Nonetheless, online learning programs at the varsity level are a common event (Heeger, 2007). Because of the availability of computer and internet media, online learning may seem like offline learning. Computer technology and the internet provide verbal and nonverbal communication with face-to-face access online via video conferences such as Skype, Zoom, Google Chat, Whatsapp, etc. To meet the requirements of its students, higher education institutions have employed a variety of content delivery techniques, including traditional face-to-face classes, hybrid or web-facilitated courses, and completed online teaching courses (Xin, Kempland, & Blankson, 2015).

Teaching online provides advantages such as choosing a location (Fedynich, 2014), a flexible timetable, and organized communication (Magalhães, Ferreira, Cunha & Rosário 2020). Another advantage of online learning is the possibility for students to enhance their technical abilities and gain firsthand experience with online learning (Green & Wagner, 2011). In conclusion, online teaching allows for continuing teaching and learning and supports students' study progress and distance learning beyond boundaries.

### ***Public Speaking Anxiety***

Public Speaking anxiety is described as the fear of speaking in front of a group of people. The most frequent anxiety is public speaking anxiety (Bartholomay & Houlihan, 2016), and it may emerge as the most prevalent social psychological disorder (Ruscio et al., 2008). Thus, anxiety

is believed to be the most frequent mental disorder encountered by public speakers. As a result, studies on public speaking anxiety and its many types were performed in the Western world until recently.

Conceptually, Cillela (2007) distinguishes two types of public speaking anxiety: process anxiety and performance anxiety. Process anxiety refers to a speaker's worry while preparing a speech, such as writing a speech outline, organizing a speech, or conducting research. In contrast, performance anxiety refers to a speaker's worry while giving an actual speech, such as forgetting content while presenting. O'Hair, Rubenstein, and Stewart (2007), on the other hand, believe that they should be classified into more distinct phases rather than process anxiety and performance anxiety. According to them, when making a speech, the speaker might feel anxious at any moment. The anxiety can occur at four specific stages: 1) Per-preparation anxiety, which occurs when a speaker is aware that he or she will be required to deliver a public speech, 2) Preparation anxiety, which refers to the period when the speaker begins to prepare his or her speech, 3) Pre-performance anxiety, which occurs while the speaker rehearses their speech, and 4) performance anxiety, which refers to the moment when the speaker delivers the public speech.

### ***Level of Public Speaking Anxiety***

Every speaker experiences anxiety to varying degrees, depending on the internal and external variables that affect it. There are three levels of anxiety (Cizek & Burg, 2006). First, low-level anxiety refers to those who experience no fear or anxiety at all. On-campus, this type of person does not appear to be anxious about his upcoming examinations. Second, those with a moderate degree of anxiety, i.e., those who become a little anxious before a test. Third, there is a high level of anxiety. People who have high levels of anxiety will express concern and fear about specific tests.

In contrast, Basavanthappa (2007) classified anxiety into three categories: light anxiety, moderate anxiety, and panic level anxiety. Students who experience light anxiety must be encouraged to participate in activities to help them accomplish their learning objectives. Then, students appeared nervous at a moderate degree of anxiety and struggled to concentrate independently on specific tasks. Finally, panic level anxiety occurs when students are unable to perform anything, even when given guidance.

Regardless of the level of public speaking anxiety, the lecturer's role is to help his or her students minimize their anxiousness. However, if the lecturer is unaware of his or her students'

level of public speaking anxiety, the public speaking course may be useless (Gutgold & Grodziak, 2013). When students enroll in a public speaking course is determined by how comfortable they are speaking before an audience. Public speaking lecturers may need to modify their instruction depending on their students' level of communication apprehension. Simply being aware of students' degrees of public speaking anxiety might give lecturers a starting point for meeting students' problems in the learning process.

### ***Factors Affecting Public Speaking Anxiety***

Students have public speaking anxiety for various reasons, including a lack of public speaking abilities, a lack of proficiency in foreign languages, and inability to control their emotional state when speaking in public (Pribyl et al., 2001). Students are afraid of being judged and criticized by others when delivering a speech in public (Coelho & Balaban, 2015; Panayiotou et al., 2017). Furthermore, public speaking anxiety is closely related to other anxieties such as poor physical appearance, incompatibility with social circumstances and status, rejection from local authorities, uncertain cause, and anxiety of anxious anticipation (Rossi & Seiler, 1989). Based on the above references, various factors contribute to public speaking anxiety, including personality traits, second or foreign language proficiency, audience familiarity, lecturer assessment criteria, preparedness, and topic familiarity. These factors influencing public speaking anxiety are similarly expressed in McCroskey's (1970) Personal Report of Public Speaking Anxiety framework, which was later used in this study. Going through literature, the studies mentioned earlier have explored public speaking anxiety in students at various levels. The findings of these studies, however, cannot be generalized to the specificity of Indonesian students, notably during covid-19. As a result, it left unanswered the question of what the potential factors influencing students' anxiety during online learning are.

## **Methods**

### ***Design of the Study***

This study employs a quantitative descriptive method, with data presented descriptively. This study was conducted from May to August 2021 which involved Indonesian EFL students as the research population. This design was to enable the codification of answers into numerical data to describe the responses.

### ***Participants***

The researcher chose the target respondents using simple random sampling as a technique. There were 60 students from two different classes with the same level (intermediate level) at the fourth semester of the English Language Education study program, Faculty of Teacher Training and Education, Universitas Muhammadiyah Sumatera Utara. The respondents in this study were 45 female and 15 male students ranging in age from 20 to 21 years old.

### ***Instrument***

A questionnaire adapted from McCroskey's (1970) Personal Report of Public Speaking Anxiety framework was used to determine the factors affecting students' public speaking anxiety at four different stages. This questionnaire was tailored for public speaking to gain new insights into the social world (Kalra & Siribud, 2020). The questionnaire was peer-validated and had a Cronbach Alpha's Reliability value of 0.80. Two research scholars were given an electronic copy of the questionnaire to validate it. As a result, the questionnaire was deemed reliable enough to be used in the study. All of the items were recommended for use in this study. The questionnaire was divided into two parts. The first section included the respondent's personal information, such as name, gender, and age. Furthermore, the second section investigated the factors affecting the public speaking anxiety experienced by students. A factor checklist comprising ten factors affecting public speaking anxiety was provided. The students were asked to choose the three most dominant factors that caused anxiety at each stage. The questionnaire was written in both languages in English and Indonesian, to avoid misunderstanding the questions.

### ***Data Collection Procedure***

Before data collection, the researchers conducted observations on students during a public speaking lesson. When the lecturer invited the students to speak in public via a zoom application, many appeared anxious and nervous, with just around 20% of them looking confident. Furthermore, the lecturer asked whether they felt anxious while speaking in public, and all the students agreed that they felt anxious when speaking in public.

In this study, data was gathered by sending the link of a web-based questionnaire (google form) to the respondents on WhatsApp. The data was collected for eight weeks between June and July 2021. There was a periodic follow-up reminder given to the prospective respondents for the study. Data from the web-based questionnaire was downloaded in the .xlsx format and checked by the authors before further analyzing the data

### Method of Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using descriptive statistics of IBM SPSS statistics 26, using frequency count and simple percentage to find the most affecting factors of public speaking anxiety at four stages: pre-preparation, preparation, pre-performance, and performance. This method of analysis allows for simple interpretation of data and easy understanding.

### Results and Discussion

The key findings of the study conducted were presented according to data gathered from the respondents. Table 1 shows the factors affecting students' public speaking anxiety throughout the four different stages.

**Table 1.** Factors Affecting the Students' Online Public Speaking Anxiety at Four Different Stages

		Four Different Public Speaking Stages							
		Pre-Preparation		Preparation		Pre-Performance		Performance	
		F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%
Ten Factors	English Oral Proficiency	30	16.67	30	16.67	28	15.56	37	20.56
	Personality	24	13.33	10	5.56	22	12.22	11	6.11
	Lecturer's Scoring Criteria	16	8.89	12	6.67	8	4.44	18	10
	Classmate's Response During Public Speaking	15	8.33	22	12.22	25	13.89	25	13.89
	Pronunciation	8	4.44	9	5	10	5.56	20	11.11
	Audience Familiarity	12	6.67	15	8.33	16	8.89	7	3.89
	Unfamiliar Speech Topic	36	20	28	15.56	32	17.78	30	16.67
	Preparedness	20	11.11	15	8.33	15	8.33	8	4.44
	English Grammar	8	4.44	20	11.11	15	8.33	10	5.56
	Vocabulary	11	6.11	19	10.56	9	5	14	7.78

Based on the table above, the most dominant factor causing students' public speaking anxiety was English oral proficiency at both preparation and performance stages, as agreed by 30 (16.67%) and 37 (20.56%) students consecutively, followed by unfamiliar speech topics, namely approved by 28 (15.56%) and 30 (16.67%) students. However, at pre-preparation and pre-performance stages, the most dominant factor affecting students' public speaking anxiety



was unfamiliar speech topics, which 36 (20%) and 32 (17.78%) students consecutively indicated. Furthermore, the English proficiency factor, as indicated by 30 (16.67%) and 28 (15.56%) students at pre-preparation and pre-performance stages, was the second dominant factor in influencing the students' anxiety in public speaking virtually. Something surprising was that classmate's response during public speaking became the third most affecting factor to the students' anxiety at preparation agreed by 22 (12.22) students, at pre-performance stage approved by 25 (13.89%) students, and at the performance stage agreed by 25 (13.89%) students. Finally, the most negligible factor affecting students' public speaking anxiety differed at all stages, including pronunciation and English grammar at the pre-preparation stage, pronunciation at the preparation stage, lecturer's scoring criteria at the pre-performance stage, and audience familiarity at the performance stage. In connection with the findings of this study, there has been no previous research that discussed factors that affect student public speaking anxiety in online learning. Nevertheless, English oral proficiency becomes an anxiety source for students in the Thai context (Yaikhong & Usaha, 2012), even for many teachers (Liu & Wu, 2021). Furthermore, the unfamiliar topic was reported as a critical factor affecting EFL students' oral presentation anxiety (Hanifa, 2018; Kazemi & Zarei, 2015).

The primary findings of this quantitative descriptive study clearly revealed that the factors influencing students' public speaking anxiety through online learning differed by stage. The findings clearly demonstrated that many students' primary public speaking anxiety was associated with English oral proficiency, unfamiliar topics, and classmates' responses. This study also clearly indicated that English oral proficiency had a significant factor affecting students' public speaking anxiety at all stages of public speaking. As the findings show, English oral proficiency was the most crucial factor for students' public speaking anxiety during the preparation and performance. It was the second-most significant factor at the pre-preparation and pre-performance stages. Since then, it has been apparent that English oral proficiency has an essential part in all public speaking activities, as it is a major contributor to students' public speaking anxiety. This conclusion can be explained based on a variety of possible explanations. When students delivered a speech, they attempted to focus on all English oral skills such as vocabulary, pronunciation, stress and emphasis, intonation, or grammar to provide a better speech. This is similar to Bygate's (2005) findings, which show that EFL students are getting more challenging to utilize proper pronunciation, grammar, and vocabulary when compared to native speakers. Moreover, learners' English competence depends on their ability to use language forms correctly (Saunders & Obrien, 2006).

At two stages of public speaking, the pre-preparation, and pre-performance stages, the unfamiliar speech topic was the most significant factor impacting students' anxiety. The most striking finding from the data is unfamiliar speech topic was the most dominant factor at both stages, pre-preparation, and pre-performance. As a result, topic familiarity plays a significant factor in public speaking anxiety. One possible reason for this is that when students are assigned the speech assignments, particularly one on a topic about which they had no prior knowledge, they feel uneasy and stressed about handling the task, which might contribute to their speaking anxiety. When learners were required to give a speech without preparation, Kazemi and Zarei (2015) found that unfamiliar topics affected EFL oral presentation anxiety. This result happens because EFL learners must evaluate a range of linguistics and cultural aspects of the complex communicative process in English, and they should be familiarized with the speaking context. Beginning with familiar topics, students will feel more comfortable speaking a foreign language and gain greater confidence before going on to more difficult ones (He, 2013).

The classmate's response was another factor in students' public speaking anxiety, particularly at preparation, pre-performance, and performance stages. A classmate's reaction during a public speaking activity can substantially impact a student's anxiety. This factor could be because students are afraid of making a fool of themselves and being laughed at, especially if they are insecure about their English skills. The need to be correct and flawless and the fear of losing face are anxiety elements influenced by some characteristics of Eastern culture (Cheng, 2000). Another possible reason was that they believed other students were superior to them or felt inferior because they continually compared themselves to their peers. Such fear obstructed their linguistic and cognitive development, leading to a greater awareness of their shortcomings. As a result, they were anxious when they were asked to demonstrate their public speaking abilities. In a language class, they (Bekleyen, 2004; Young, 1991) discovered that students become nervous when comparing themselves to others. This finding is in line with a prior study (Rattine-Flaherty, 2014), which found that students usually lack confidence in their own skills to convey a message well in a public speaking situation because they fear their peers would judge them adversely, and they feel alienated. For many students, this will be their first experience giving a presentation in front of a group. Some students may postpone taking a public speaking activity until their senior year of college.

The least prevalent causes generating anxiety during the four stages of public speaking differed: pronunciation and English grammar at the pre-preparation stage, pronunciation at the

preparation stage, lecturer's scoring criteria at the pre-performance stage, and audience familiarity at the performance stage. These factors are intimately linked to the learners themselves, and the data revealed a variety of factors contributing to public speaking anxiety. Many variables have been recognized as contributing to anxiety among university students (Rajitha & Alamelu, 2020). This phenomenon happens because various factors such as society, culture, the teaching-learning setting, and the learners themselves can all impact anxiety. This conclusion supports the research finding of Rajitha and Alamelu (2020) that speaking anxiety is influenced by various internal and external variables.

## Conclusion

This study has added to the growing body of evidence showing a number of university students, especially in virtual public speaking, are afraid of speaking in front of others. In this study, the factors affecting the students' public speaking anxiety via virtual learning were investigated. The research findings show that factors affecting the students' public speaking varied. The anxiety manifested itself in four stages: the pre-preparation stage, the preparation stage, the pre-performance stage, and the performance stage. English oral proficiency was the most dominant factor that caused students' public speaking anxiety at both the preparation and performance stages. In contrast, the unfamiliar topic was the most dominant factor at both the pre-preparation and pre-performance stages.

Through the findings of the present research, this study motivates the lecturers to have a lot of effort to find the strategies to alleviate students' anxiety and encourage them to do well in a public speech (Hanifa, 2018). For example, the lecturer may assign students more public speaking assignments to practice and get more comfortable speaking in front of their classmates, friends, lecturers, and audience. Furthermore, the effort includes encouraging students to enhance their public speaking abilities by establishing English clubs or courses (Kalra & Sarit Siribud, 2020; Schiller, 2021).

Importantly, in terms of the need for public speaking support, the issue of how students perceived current support was not included in this study; this was an apparent limitation of this study. Indeed, the quality of the classroom atmosphere and its outcomes are influenced by a number of factors such as time, content, resources, curriculum, media, teacher and student personalities, and interpersonal relationships. Personality traits, particularly influence and closeness, do contribute considerably to the quality of teacher interpersonal interaction (Khodamoradi, Talebi, & Maghsoudi, 2020). Besides, cross-institutional communication and

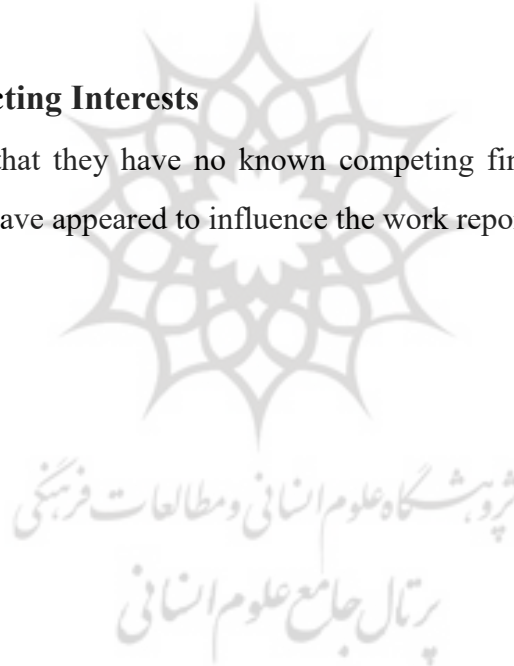
coordination, input from supportive services, library services, academic skills units, academic advisors, and particular initiatives will be required for adequate student support in public speaking. Additionally, only sixty male and female students' public speaking anxiety was investigated. Therefore, the findings clearly cannot be generalized for all Indonesian EFL students. One suggestion is that future research can involve a larger sample of students with and without public speaking anxiety to obtain more complete results. Future researches are also recommended to analyze the effective ways to overcome the EFL students' public speaking anxiety. The study of appropriate approaches to resolving or lowering students' public speaking anxiety is believed to be useful.

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The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.



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