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Students' strategies in dealing with presentation anxiety in English classrooms

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ABSTRACT

Fear or anxiety during oral presentations in English is a common issue faced by EFL students. This anxiety can negatively impact self-confidence, class participation, and communication performance among students. This study aims to identify various forms of anxiety experienced by students when delivering presentations in English and the coping strategies they employ to address it. The method used in this research is a descriptive qualitative approach, with data collection through semi-structured interviews with two non-English education study program students at Universitas Ahmad Dahlan who have experience in presenting in English. The data was analyzed using thematic analysis techniques. The results indicate that students experience anxiety both psychologically (nervousness, fear, worry) and physiologically (trembling, palpitations). Several factors that trigger anxiety include the fear of making grammatical mistakes, social pressure, and a lack of self-confidence. To address this anxiety, students employ cognitive strategies (memorizing key points, understanding the material), behavioral strategies (repetitive practice, simulation), and affective strategies. Repeated presentation experiences have also been proven to gradually reduce anxiety levels. In conclusion, students are not passive in facing presentation anxiety; rather, they actively develop strategies to manage it. A supportive learning environment and gradual speaking opportunities are essential.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The ability to communicate effectively in English has become an essential competence in this era of globalization, particularly for the students both in academic and workplace settings. Although there are many learning tasks, oral presentation is not only a valuable pedagogical practice but also one of the main sources of stress for EFL learners. This type of performance anxiety is typically marked by physiological symptoms such as a rapid heartbeat, trembling, and perspiration that interfere with students' ability to deliver their message and, in turn, affect their overall performance and confidence.

This issue is very important in academic environments, where oral presentations are used to assess not only language skills but also students' knowledge of the subject, critical thinking, and the ability to discuss or explain ideas. Unfortunately, many students find this task quite daunting. Learners in EFL situations not only face the typical challenges of public speaking but also the fears associated with the language. This dual-layered pressure makes oral presentations a unique task.

Empirical evidence suggests that anxiety significantly impacts students' communicative competence and classroom participation (Yulistiyanti et al., 2025; Gul et al., 2025). Common contributory factors also include fear of grammatical and pronunciation mistakes, poor vocabulary, negative self-concept, and cultural restraints against verbalization (Hamid et al., 2025; Johari et al., 2025). For example, Hamid, Fadillah, and Halim (2025) emphasize that fear of grammatical and pronunciation errors is the main precipitating cause of presentation anxiety. Meanwhile, students' discomfort with the English accent, pressure to deliver, and fear of peer criticism fuel the issue (Bilal & Driss, 2025).

Students use a repertoire of coping strategies for handling these challenges, and they are categorized into behavioral, cognitive, and affective categories. Cognitive strategies such as positive self-talk, visualization, and establishing a positive attitude have been shown to effectively curtail pre-presentation anxiety (Apriani et al., 2025). In addition, behavior techniques like rehearsing again and again, peer simulation, and application of computer-based aids like podcasts enhance the confidence of students (Mosquera & Gómez, 2024). Affective techniques like relaxation, deep breathing, and role-playing also support students in dealing with emotional tension (Perwitasari, 2025; Arifin & Sa'i, 2025).

Each type of strategy has distinct objectives that complement each other. For instance, cognitive strategies can assist students in changing their perspectives, allowing them to replace negative beliefs with positive affirmations. Students who struggle with uncertainty benefit from behavioral strategies as they provide structure and familiarity. Meanwhile, affective strategies address the emotional and physiological manifestations of anxiety, helping students manage their tension before and during presentations.

Although there are various coping techniques available, not all students benefit equally from these techniques. Individual characteristics such as personality traits, past experiences, and language competence all have an impact on which strategies are prioritized and how effectively those strategies are implemented. Additionally, social factors, such as peer relationships and classroom dynamics, affect a child's willingness to employ coping strategies. For instance, a student who is afraid of being judged by their peers may avoid practicing in public, even though practice has been shown to reduce anxiety.

Apart from personal strategies, the learning context is of core importance. A warm and encouraging classroom atmosphere, complemented by instructor feedback that is constructive in nature, allows students to feel more secure and are more likely to speak before others (Rahmati & Munawwarah, 2025). Scaffolding over time and support of an affective type may also facilitate students to deal with presentation difficulties with resilience and confidence (Johari et al., 2025).

Although various coping strategies have been recognized, more research is needed to be able to understand students' deployment of the coping strategies in varying social and institutional contexts. This present study attempts to explore the determinants of students' presentation anxiety in English and those specific coping strategies they employ to cope with it, particularly in the context of higher education for EFL learning.

2. METHOD

2.1. Participant Overview

This study used descriptive qualitative research, which aims to provide an accurate description of the phenomenon based on participants' perceptions, without manipulation of variables or hypothesis testing (Sandelowski, 2000), to gain an in-depth understanding of the experiences and strategies used by students in dealing with anxiety during English presentations. The main focus of this study was on students' perceptions, strategies, and experiences in a natural context.

2.2. Research Settings

This research was conducted in one day in June 2025 at Universitas Ahmad Dahlan. Interviews were conducted directly while still paying attention to the comfort and confidentiality of participants. Here are some points to be paid attention to.

2.3. Research Subject

The subjects in this study were students of the non-English Education Study Program at Universitas Ahmad Dahlan who had some experience in delivering English presentations. The determination of

subjects was carried out by purposive sampling, namely by selecting participants who were considered capable of providing relevant and in-depth information related to the research topic.

2.4. Data Collection Technique

The data collection technique used was semi-structured interviews, which allowed researchers to explore deeper information based on participants' responses. Interviews were conducted using an interview guide that had been compiled based on the formulation of the problem. Then, the entire interview process was recorded and transcribed verbatim for further data analysis purposes.

2.5. Research Instrument

As stated by Merriam & Tisdell (2016), in qualitative research, the researcher is considered the main instrument for data collection and analysis. This means that the researcher is directly involved in collecting information and interpreting the meaning of the participants' experiences. Then, the **interview guide** is used as a tool to collect the data to maintain consistency and focus in the data collection process.

2.6. Data Analysis Technique

As stated by Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006), thematic analysis is a method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) in the data. Braun Clarke said that in conducting thematic analysis, there are several steps, such as:

1. Transcription of interview results verbatim.
2. Open coding, identifying keywords and important statements from participants' narratives.
3. Axial coding, i.e., grouping the initial codes into interrelated categories or themes.
4. Thematic interpretation, namely compiling the main themes that describe students' strategies in dealing with English presentation anxiety.

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3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This section outlines the findings related to the research question regarding the strategies used by students in dealing with anxiety when presenting in English.

3.1. Participant Overview

This study involved two participants who had experience in delivering English presentations in a college environment. Both had faced challenges related to public speaking anxiety, particularly in the context of using English as a foreign language.

3.2. Findings

3.2.1. Initial Emotional Reactions to English Presentation

Both participants mentioned experiencing strong emotional discomfort when they first learned they had to deliver a presentation in English. Respondent 1 described her reaction as being *"nervous, more like nervous,"* followed by feelings of worry and anxiety. These emotions emerged even before any actual speaking activity took place. Similarly, Respondent 2 admitted that she felt *"confused first... then nervous for sure,"* as soon as she was informed of the upcoming English presentation task. These accounts demonstrate that anxiety did not merely surface during the performance itself, but was already triggered at the early stage of anticipation. The emotional intensity at this preparatory phase suggests the presence of anticipatory anxiety, which appears to be a common experience among EFL students facing public speaking tasks in a foreign language. This kind of anxiety often originates from imagined fears of failure, embarrassment, or being evaluated negatively by others.

3.2.2. Anxiety Triggering Factors

Respondent 1 expressed that a strong fear of making linguistic errors, specifically *"in vocabulary and grammar⋯ also fear of being compared to our friends who might be more influent."* These concerns

led to feelings of inferiority and heightened pressure to perform well. Respondent 2 pointed out *"Lack of confidence... afraid of saying the wrong thing... afraid that the material we convey will not reach the audience."* This general lack of confidence and concern that the message was not clearly conveyed to the audience suggests that anxiety in English presentations is not only rooted in linguistic competence, but also in students' self-perception and social dynamics. Both participants appeared to internalize fears related to language errors, audience judgment, and social comparison, indicating that speaking anxiety is influenced by complex, multifaceted triggers.

3.2.3. Physical Reactions to Anxiety

In addition to emotional and cognitive responses, both respondents described physical symptoms associated with anxiety. Respondent 2 mentioned experiencing mild tremors when beginning the presentation, characterizing the experience as *"just like a little tremor."* Respondent 1 also confirmed *"Nervousness is always there at the beginning... but after the presentation, it's normal,"* that nervousness was always present at the beginning of a presentation, although it subsided as the activity progressed. These physical manifestations reflect the body's stress response, particularly among individuals lacking confidence in their foreign language ability. Notably, both participants reported that these symptoms gradually diminished once they became engaged in delivering the content. This indicates that the act of speaking itself helped redirect their focus and alleviated some of the physiological tension they initially experienced.

3.2.4. Coping Strategies

To manage their anxiety, both participants employed a number of coping strategies. Respondent 1 explained *"I usually practice before the presentation... memorize the text... highlight some points," to aid recall. Respondent 2 reported "I will review the material... sort out the vocabulary that is suitable."* These preparatory actions served as mechanisms for increasing control and familiarity with the speaking task. Such strategies reflect an intentional effort to reduce uncertainty, boost confidence, and ensure clarity in communication. Their accounts suggest that active rehearsal and vocabulary planning function as effective tools for mitigating anxiety during English oral presentations.

3.2.5. Importance of Material Preparation

The importance of mastering presentation content was strongly emphasized by both participants. Respondent 1 stated that knowing the topic made it easier to determine the direction of the presentation *"If we know the topic, we know what direction we want to talk about."* While Respondent 2 noted that identifying key points helped her communicate more clearly and with greater focus, "it can help us deliver the material to the audience more focused." These insights suggest that content familiarity fosters confidence by reducing the risk of hesitation and confusion during delivery. A clear understanding of the material also appeared to shift their attention away from language production anxiety and toward the effective transmission of ideas. Thus, academic preparedness not only supports linguistic performance but also contributes to students' emotional regulation during speaking tasks.

3.2.6. Group Presentation Preference

Both participants expressed a clear preference for group presentations over individual ones, citing emotional support and shared responsibility as significant sources of comfort and confidence. Respondent 1 stated, *"I prefer group presentations... someone can back up if I forget,"* which suggests that having peers during the presentation provided a sense of security, especially in high-pressure moments where memory lapses could occur. She felt that the presence of teammates functioned as a psychological safety net that could reduce the fear of embarrassment. Respondent 2 reinforced this perspective by stating, *"With a group... the burden will be lighter than if we present alone,"* indicating that she felt less isolated and more supported when presenting collectively. This preference reveals an underlying belief that collaborative efforts not only distribute the cognitive load of delivering content but also alleviate affective burdens such as fear, nervousness, and performance anxiety. The experience of sharing the stage with others seemed to diminish the perceived threat of public evaluation and increased participants' willingness to engage in speaking tasks. In this sense, group presentation formats appear to function as an informal coping mechanism, offering both emotional reassurance and a practical fallback system. These insights underscore how social dynamics, especially peer collaboration, play a vital role in shaping learners' confidence and anxiety regulation in EFL speaking contexts.

3.2.7. The Effect of Experience on Anxiety

Both participants acknowledged that previous experience with English presentations played a significant role in helping them manage their anxiety, even though feelings of nervousness remained present. Respondent 1 explained, *"If it's more prepared, more prepared yes... but if it's nervous, it's always there at the beginning."* This statement reflects a recognition that while familiarity with the presentation process contributed to better preparation and a sense of control, the emotional response persisted to some degree. Nevertheless, the experience allowed her to anticipate what to expect and how to better organize herself beforehand, which resulted in a more composed delivery over time.

Similarly, Respondent 2 stated, *"We will feel a little more relaxed... but the anxiety is always there"* indicating that repeated exposure to presentation tasks helped reduce the intensity of her anxiety, even if it did not eliminate it entirely. This suggests that experience served as a desensitizing factor, where each subsequent presentation became slightly less intimidating than the previous one. Through repeated practice, the participants appeared to develop personal strategies and psychological readiness, enabling them to face the task with more confidence and less hesitation. While initial nervousness remained a consistent part of their experience, its disruptive impact seemed to lessen, pointing to the adaptive value of experience in reducing performance-related anxiety in EFL contexts. In this way, the participants' narratives highlight how gradual exposure and accumulated practice foster a more resilient mindset and better emotional regulation during future presentations.

Based on the interviews with both participants, it can be concluded that students experience anxiety during English presentations due to two factors, namely internal and external factors. Internal factors, such as lack of confidence and fear of being wrong, and external factors, such as social pressure. They then used coping strategies, which included practice, mastering the material well, and their preference for group work over self-presentation. Although anxiety does not completely disappear, continuous experience can help students be more prepared and calmer to face presentations, especially in using English.

3.3. Discussion

The findings confirm that English presentation anxiety among EFL learners begins long before the actual speaking task, reflecting a strong form of anticipatory anxiety. This anxiety does not simply emerge from the act of speaking but is closely tied to the psychological burden learners carry once they are aware they must speak in front of others using a foreign language. As noted by Yulistiyanti et al. (2025), such fear often stems from imagined failure, embarrassment, or negative evaluation, especially for students with low linguistic self-efficacy. This aligns with Tóth (2019), who identified early emotional reactions like nervousness, mental blocks, and avoidance behavior among tertiary-level EFL learners facing oral assignments. In particular, Gul et al. (2025) and Mohamad & Sazalli (2023) emphasized that the fear of being judged tends to amplify nervousness, especially in performance-focused academic settings. Additional triggers such as concerns about grammar accuracy, pronunciation, and language fluency (Hamid et al., 2025) further heighten this anxiety, particularly when students feel observed or compared. Peer comparison, as discussed by Johari et al. (2025) and Bilal & Driss (2025), also plays a significant role in shaping learners' self-perception and comfort level, particularly in collectivist cultures. Yunus et al. (2024) contribute to this argument by stating that fear of public embarrassment or ridicule often results in students avoiding oral tasks altogether or participating with minimal engagement.

To manage their anxiety, students employed personal coping strategies such as rehearsal, memorization, and content review, which gave them a greater sense of control over the speaking task. These strategies align with the findings of Apriani et al. (2025), who identified preparation, repetition, and mental visualization as effective tools in building learners' confidence and emotional regulation. Mosquera & Gómez (2024) also noted that regular practice can significantly reduce language-related tension. In this study, participants shared that mastering their presentation content helped reduce their fear of making mistakes, enabling them to focus more on clarity and delivery (Perwitasari, 2025). This cognitive readiness allowed them to speak more fluidly and recover more easily from disruptions, such as forgetting a word or facing an unexpected question. In addition to personal preparation, both participants preferred group presentations, which offered emotional reassurance and shared responsibility. This finding in line Rahmati & Munawwarah (2025) and Johari et al. (2025), who highlight the importance of collaborative environments in promoting speaking confidence and reducing individual

pressure. Moreover, Ayiz & Tauchid (2024) demonstrated that peer-teaching formats not only lowered anxiety levels significantly but also helped foster trust, shared accountability, and interpersonal support among learners, an essential component in reducing fear-based communication barriers.

These findings also reaffirm that anxiety in oral presentations is not a one-size-fits-all phenomenon. Students' strategies often evolve through trial and error, shaped by situational demands and emotional readiness. As Lee (2023) argues, self-regulated learning plays a key role in learners' ability to cope with language-related anxiety, especially when combined with emotional intelligence. Similarly, Zarei and Bahador (2023) emphasize the influence of metacognitive awareness on performance under stress. Supportive classroom cultures, where feedback is constructive rather than judgmental, also motivate learners to take linguistic risks (Rahmawati & Hidayat, 2024). Furthermore, culturally responsive teaching, as proposed by Chen & Derakhshan (2023), helps reduce anxiety among students from diverse linguistic and ethnic backgrounds by validating their identities. Teachers who embed scaffolding, peer mentoring, and reflective speaking journals may foster resilience and learner autonomy (Fitriana & Adnan, 2024; Nguyen & Tuan, 2025). These strategies not only reduce affective filters but also promote deep learning engagement.

Although anxiety remained an ever-present companion at the outset, prior presentation experiences clearly helped participants regulate their emotions more effectively over time. Their familiarity with the process, including how to structure their material, anticipate potential mistakes, and manage timing, contributed to a more composed mindset. As students became more experienced, their ability to anticipate what could go wrong was balanced by a growing sense of readiness and the knowledge that they had overcome similar challenges in the past. Wu (2024), in a longitudinal study, showed that repeated presentation exposure leads to significantly lower anxiety and increased willingness to communicate, suggesting that consistent practice builds desensitization. Rahmati & Munawwarah (2025) also argue that structured speaking opportunities help students transition from reactive, fear-driven behaviors to proactive, confident communication. Similarly, Ayiz & Tauchid (2024) found that peer-teaching not only enhanced oral performance but also created a low-pressure environment conducive to personal growth and collaboration. In line with this, Ahmad (2025) emphasized that teacher and peer support serve as critical buffers against high levels of speaking anxiety, particularly in environments where learners might otherwise feel exposed or judged. Taken together, these insights highlight that while nervousness may not disappear completely, it becomes more manageable through sustained exposure, effective preparation, and a supportive community that encourages learners to take communicative risks without fear of failure.

4. CONCLUSION

This study reveals that English oral presentation anxiety among EFL learners is a complex psychological phenomenon that begins long before the actual speaking task, rooted in anticipatory fears, linguistic insecurities, and sociocultural pressures. Emotional, cognitive, and physical symptoms of anxiety were evident, yet students developed coping strategies such as practice, memorization, and vocabulary review to manage their stress. Content familiarity and group presentation formats further reduced anxiety by enhancing confidence and providing social support. Moreover, repeated speaking experiences helped students gradually build emotional resilience and self-regulation. These findings suggest that addressing EFL speaking anxiety requires a multidimensional approach that includes pedagogical support, emotional encouragement, and consistent speaking opportunities to foster confident and competent communicators in academic contexts. Therefore, this study not only contributes to understanding EFL learners' anxiety in higher education but also encourages educators to adopt differentiated support systems. Future studies should investigate larger and more diverse samples to uncover gender differences, cultural influences, and digital factors (e.g., the use of AI or virtual platforms) in managing speaking anxiety. Moreover, integrating emotional regulation training into EFL curriculum could further equip students with tools to face public speaking challenges in academic and real-world contexts (Pratiwi et al., 2024; Saeidi & Motallebzadeh, 2023).

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We support GPELTL in maintaining high standards of personal conduct, practicing honesty in all our professional practices and endeavors.

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