PUBLIC SPEAKING ANXIETY AND STRATEGIES TO OVERCOME THROUGH PUBLIC SPEAKING SKILL TRAINING

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Abstract. Public speaking is recognized as one of the most essential skills in the 21st century, playing a crucial role in assessing students' speaking abilities and overall communication competence. This is especially important for EFL university students, who face significant challenges in mastering public speaking. This study aims to investigate the causes of public speaking anxiety and examine the effects of workshops on improving students' public speaking skills. Data were collected through questionnaires with 135 university students in Can Tho city. The findings indicate that the strategies introduced in workshops have a positive impact on students' public speaking abilities, with fear of negative evaluation identified as the primary source of anxiety. The study also provides pedagogical implications for lecturers and school administrators.

Keywords: public speaking, soft-skill workshops, university students, anxiety.

1. Introduction

Public speaking is an action in which the speaker has the goal of conveying a message orally to the audience [1]-[3] Public speaking anxiety, a fear of speaking in front of an audience, is a common phenomenon that afflicts people of all ages and backgrounds [4]. From students delivering presentations in classrooms to professionals giving business pitches, this fear can significantly impact one's confidence, career prospects, and overall quality of life [3], [5]. According to Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope (1986), being fearful of negative evaluation is one of the elements of foreign language anxiety [6]. While the fear of public speaking has been well-documented, there remains a need for a deeper understanding of the underlying causes and effective strategies to address this issue, particularly among students since with appropriate strategies, presenters can overcome the fear and perform more successfully [3], [4], [6]. While numerous studies have explored public speaking anxiety, there are still gaps in the literature. For example, while we know that factors such as fear of negative evaluation and lack of preparation can contribute to anxiety, little is known about the specific cognitive processes involved [7]. Additionally, while there is evidence that training programs can effectively reduce anxiety, there is a need for more research on the long-term effects of these programs and the optimal components of such training.

The current study aims to address these gaps by exploring the primary causes of public speaking anxiety among students. It examines the impact of factors such as anxiety, fear of judgment, and low self-esteem on public speaking ability. Furthermore, the study will analyze the effectiveness of a series of soft skills workshops in reducing public speaking anxiety through skill training. Finally, the research will propose practical strategies to help students overcome their fear and develop confident public speaking skills. By conducting this research, we hope to contribute to the existing body of knowledge on public speaking anxiety and provide valuable insights for educators, trainers, and students alike.

This study seeks answers to the following three research questions:

1. What is the level of public speaking anxiety among students participating in the workshops?

2. What factors contribute to public speaking anxiety among students participating in workshops?

3. To what extent do students' public speaking skills improve after participating in a series of workshops?

2. Content

2.1. Theoretical Frameworks

The theoretical frameworks used in this study provide important insights into the psychological and behavioral elements of anxiety regarding public speaking and performance, including *(1) Social Anxiety Theory, (2) Self-efficacy Theory, and (3) Stress Inoculation Theory*.

2.1.1. Social Anxiety Theory (SAT)

Social Anxiety Theory (SAT) [8]-[12] informed the assessment of participants' anxiety, highlighting concerns about being judged by others during public speaking. In the context of public speaking, this theory helps to understand why some individuals feel heightened levels of anxiety when they are required to speak in front of an audience.

2.1.2. Self-efficacy theory

Self-efficacy theory [13]-[17] provided insight into participants' perceived capacity to manage stress related to public speaking. According to this theory, participants with higher self-efficacy are more likely to believe they can prepare effectively, manage their anxiety, and deliver a competent presentation.

2.1.3. Stress Inoculation Theory

Stress Inoculation Theory (SIT) [17], [20] was applied to evaluate participants' beliefs in the effectiveness of the strategies taught during the workshop. SIT is a cognitive-behavioral framework that helps individuals build resilience to stress by teaching them how to anticipate, manage, and cope with stressors. In the context of public speaking workshops in this study, SIT is applied to evaluate how participants perceive the effectiveness of the strategies taught to manage their anxiety and enhance performance.

2.2. Methodology

2.2.1. Participants

This study collected data from 135 students who enrolled at universities in the South of Vietnam. All students participated in the series of workshops "Shine confidently on stage" and agreed to complete a survey. In the context of the present university, workshops are held to equip participants with the knowledge and skills necessary for public speaking during semesters.

Workshops allow participants to listen to shared experiences, practice, and learn from their experiences. The following tables depict the characteristics of participants.

Table 1. The demographic of respondents

Profile	Categories	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender	Female	71	52,5
	Male	64	57,5
	Total	**135**	**100**
Year of Study	First-year	82	60.7
	Second year	15	11.1
	Third year	4	3.0
	Final year	34	25.2
	Total	**135**	**100**
Major	English Studies	44	32,6
	English Teaching Education	41	30,3
	Law	15	11,1
	International Business	14	10,5
	Tourism Administrative Management	10	7,4
	Vietnamese Studies	5	3,7
	Soil Management	3	2,2
	French Studies	3	2,2
	Total	**135**	**100**

2.2.2. Instruments

A quantitative questionnaire was designed and used to seek the answers to the three questions. Edwards (1991) highlights that a questionnaire is beneficial as "*respondents will have time to ponder privately before they reply, especially if questionnaires can be taken away and returned later*" [21]. Furthermore, Dörnyei (2003) emphasizes that questionnaires are effective tools for gathering an overall understanding of the characteristics of a large population sample [22]. This study used a questionnaire survey with 12 five-point Likert scale items, ranging from "1-Strongly Disagree" to "5- Strongly Agree". The layout of the questionnaire is presented in

Table 2. The layout of the questionnaire

Cluster	Research Content	Items
Cluster 1	The level of public speaking anxiety among students participating in the workshops	Items 1-2
Cluster 2	Factors contributing to public speaking anxiety among students participating in workshops	Items 3-9
Cluster 3	Participants' self-perceived effect of participating in the workshop on their public speaking skills	Items 10-12

To ensure the reliability of the questionnaire, a multi-faceted approach was implemented throughout its development and administration. Initially, a pilot test was conducted with a group of 30 participants to identify any ambiguities or inconsistencies in the items, allowing for necessary refinements. Internal consistency was assessed using Cronbach's alpha, which yielded a value of 0.72, indicating acceptable reliability for the items within each cluster. Additionally, clear instructions were provided to participants to minimize variability in responses due to misunderstandings, further enhancing the overall reliability of the data collected.

Table 3. Reliability Statistics of the Questionnaire

Cronbach's Alpha	Cronbach's Alpha Based on Standardized Items	N of Items
.71	.802	12

Several strategies were employed throughout its development and evaluation to ensure the validity of the questionnaire. Content validity was established by consulting experts in public speaking and anxiety management, who reviewed the items to ensure they adequately captured the constructs being measured. Additionally, the questionnaire was designed to align with established theoretical frameworks, such as Social Anxiety Theory, Self-Efficacy Theory, and Stress Inoculation Theory, which provided a strong foundation for the relevance of the items.

2.2.3. Data Collection Procedure

Data collection occurred after the workshop, where participants were informed about the purpose of the study. Those who volunteered were invited to complete the questionnaire, allowing them to share their experiences and insights related to public speaking anxiety and the effectiveness of the workshop. This approach ensured that participants understood the study's objectives and could contribute their feedback voluntarily, fostering a sense of engagement and willingness to provide honest responses.

2.2.4. Data Analysis

Data analysis involved quantitative methods to understand participants' experiences comprehensively. For the quantitative data analysis, SPSS (Statistical Package for Social Sciences) version 20 for Windows was employed. Several descriptive statistics were calculated to summarize the levels of public speaking anxiety and the perceived effectiveness of the workshop. Internal consistency was assessed using Cronbach's alpha, which yielded a value of 0.72, indicating acceptable reliability. Additionally, exploratory factor analysis was performed to confirm the structure of the questionnaire and validate the identified clusters.

2.3. Results and Discussions

2.3.1. The level of public speaking anxiety among students participating in the workshops

The data from the questionnaire indicates a significant level of anxiety among students regarding public speaking, as reflected in the table below.

Table 4. The level of public speaking anxiety among students participating in the workshops

		Mean	Min	Max	Std. Deviation	V.I.
The extent of students' anxiety in public speaking among students participating in workshops		3.61	1	5	.92	High
Statements	1. When it comes to speaking in public, I am totally nervous.	3.79	1	5	.89	Agree
	2. I usually avoid speaking in public.	3.51	1	5	1.11	Agree

The data indicates a significant level of anxiety among students regarding public speaking, as reflected in the overall mean score of 3.61, categorized as "high." The specific statement assessing nervousness in public speaking has a mean of 3.79, suggesting a strong agreement among participants that they feel nervous in these situations. Additionally, the statement regarding avoidance of public speaking, with a mean of 3.51, further supports the notion that students tend to sidestep these opportunities. The relatively high standard deviations for both statements imply a notable variation in individual experiences, highlighting that while many students struggle with anxiety, there may also be those who feel more comfortable. Overall, the findings underscore a prevalent anxiety about public speaking that could be addressed through targeted interventions in workshops.

The overall mean score of 3.61, categorized as "high" anxiety, and the specific mean of 3.79 for nervousness strongly align with Social Anxiety Theory. It suggests that students are experiencing substantial fear of negative evaluation, which is a core aspect of social anxiety. The data also indicates a tendency to avoid public speaking (mean of 3.51), reinforcing the idea that anxiety significantly impairs students' willingness to engage in speaking opportunities. This highlights the need for workshops to directly address these fears and provide students with strategies to cope with the anticipated judgment of others.

2.3.2. Factors contributing to public speaking anxiety among students participating in workshops

The results from the questionnaire depict several factors contributing to public speaking anxiety among students participating in workshops, as following table.

Table 5. Factors contributing to public speaking anxiety
among students participating in workshops

Factors	Mean	Min	Max	Std. Deviation	V.I.
1. Fear of Negative Evaluation	4.01	1	5	1.06	Agree
2. Overestimation of Consequences	3.70	1	5	1.03	Agree
3. Self-Perception	3.72	1	5	1.00	Agree
4. Social Comparisons	3.65	1	5	.93	Agree
5. Lack of Experience	3.41	1	5	.92	Agree
6. Physiological Responses	3.66	1	5	.88	Agree
7. Cognitive Distortions	3.30	1	5	.86	Moderate Agree

The data reveals several key factors contributing to public speaking anxiety among students participating in workshops, with the mean scores indicating varying levels of agreement. The highest mean, 4.01, corresponds to "Fear of Negative Evaluation," suggesting that students are significantly worried about how others perceive them during public speaking. This is followed by "Self-Perception" at 3.72 and "Social Comparisons" at 3.65, indicating that students' own views of themselves and their comparisons with peers also play a considerable role in their anxiety. The factors "Overestimation of Consequences" and "Physiological Responses" both have means around 3.66, highlighting that students may exaggerate the potential negative outcomes of their performances and experience significant physical symptoms of anxiety. Conversely, "Lack of Experience" (3.41) and "Cognitive Distortions" (3.30) are associated with lower levels of agreement, suggesting these factors, while still relevant, may have a lesser impact on students' anxiety. This suggests that focusing too heavily on these areas may not yield as significant results in reducing anxiety levels. Overall, the findings suggest that addressing fears related to evaluation and self-perception could be critical in reducing public speaking anxiety in students.

Social Anxiety Theory suggests that individuals experience anxiety primarily due to fears of negative evaluation from others. The high mean score of 4.01 for "Fear of Negative Evaluation" aligns closely with this theory, indicating that students' anxiety in public speaking is significantly influenced by concerns about judgment. This fear likely contributes to their reported avoidance of public speaking opportunities, as reflected in the data.

Following this, "Self-Perception" (3.72) and "Social Comparisons" (3.65) also indicate that students' self-assessments and comparisons with peers contribute substantially to their anxiety levels. Self-efficacy theory (Bandura, 1977) provides a useful lens here, as students with lower self-efficacy may struggle to manage their anxiety effectively. This suggests that enhancing students' confidence in their public speaking abilities could mitigate anxiety, reinforcing the need for positive feedback and skills development in workshops. The results align with several previous studies, indicating that Public Speaking Anxiety can be caused by various sources [8], [19]-[20], [23-24].

The factors of "Overestimation of Consequences" and "Physiological Responses," both averaging around 3.66, indicate that students often exaggerate potential negative outcomes and experience significant physical anxiety symptoms. This aligns with Stress Inoculation Theory (Meichenbaum, 1977), which posits that teaching coping strategies can help individuals reframe their thoughts about stressors. By incorporating practical strategies into workshops, instructors can help students develop more realistic perceptions of public speaking outcomes and manage their physiological responses more effectively [23], [24].

2.3.3 Participants' self-perceived effect of participating in the workshop on their public speaking skills

The results from the questionnaire depict the extent to which students' public speaking skills improve after participating in workshops as self-perceived by the participants, presented in the following table.

Table 6. The extent to which students' public speaking skills improve after participating in workshops as self-perceived by the participants

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	V.I.
The extent to which students' public speaking skills improve after participating in workshops, as self-perceived by the participants	135	3.72	.85	Agree

Table 7. Participants' self-perceived effect of participating in the workshop on their public speaking skills

	N	Mean	Min	Max	Std. Deviation	V.I.
1. Having the ability to apply what is trained	135	3.73	1	5	1.10	Agree
2. Having confidence in Public Speaking	135	3.73	1	5	1.09	Agree
3. Having Ability in Public Speaking	135	3.70	1	5	1.12	Agree

From Table 7, the data illustrates that participants perceive a positive impact of workshops on their public speaking skills, with an overall mean of 3.72, indicating general agreement regarding improvement. As depicted in Table 8, specific factors further support this perception: "Having Ability in Public Speaking" scored a mean of 3.70, suggesting that students feel they have developed essential skills. Similarly, "Having the ability to apply what is trained" and "Having Confidence in Public Speaking," both with means of 3.73, indicate that students believe they can effectively utilize the techniques learned during workshops and feel more confident in

their abilities. The close scores reflect a consistent sentiment among participants that the workshops not only enhance their skills but also boost their confidence, highlighting the workshops' effectiveness in fostering growth in public speaking. Overall, the data underscores the value of these workshops in improving students' public speaking capabilities and self-assurance.

Self-efficacy theory (Bandura, 1977) posits that an individual's belief in their ability to succeed influences their approach to challenges. The improvement in public speaking skills, with a mean score of 3.72, and the related factors - particularly "Having Ability to Apply What is Trained" and "Having Confidence in Public Speaking," both at 3.73 - suggest that students' perceptions of their abilities were enhanced through the workshops. This aligns with Bandura's theory, as increased self-efficacy may lead to greater willingness to engage in public speaking despite initial anxieties.

Stress Inoculation Theory (Meichenbaum, 1977) emphasizes the importance of coping strategies in managing stress. The positive perceptions regarding the applicability of techniques learned in the workshops indicate that students believe these strategies effectively reduce anxiety and improve their performance. The consistent mean scores across related factors suggest that the workshops successfully equipped participants with tools to cope with public speaking stress, thereby validating the principles of this theory.

3. Conclusions

This study provides valuable insights into the psychological factors contributing to public speaking anxiety and evaluates the effectiveness of public speaking training in overcoming this fear. The findings can be applied to enhance the content and teaching methods in soft skills workshops, particularly those aimed at improving students' public speaking abilities. Furthermore, the study offers practical strategies to help students overcome their fear of speaking in front of audiences, thereby boosting their confidence in communication and fostering their career development.

For lecturers, this study emphasizes the importance of addressing the psychological aspects of public speaking anxiety in soft skills training. Practical strategies, such as gradual exposure to speaking tasks, personalized feedback, and anxiety-reducing techniques, can help students build confidence [9], [25], [26]. Given the limitations of short-term effects observed in the study, lecturers should consider incorporating follow-up sessions to encourage long-term retention and mastery. According to the study, due to students' fear of being assessed negatively by others, lectures should consider using a blend of assessment methods - like peer feedback and video analysis [9], [27].

School administrators, recognizing the significance of public speaking in career development, can support these efforts by investing in regular soft skills programs [28]. By establishing low-stakes practice environments such as public speaking clubs, administrators can offer students continuous, pressure-free practice [25]. Additionally, to better understand training outcomes, administrators could promote broader, more inclusive research initiatives, gathering data across diverse student groups and employing long-term assessment strategies to refine workshop content and support sustained skill development.

This study, while providing insights into the causes of public speaking anxiety and the effectiveness of workshops in improving students' public speaking skills, has several limitations. First, the sample is limited to 135 university students from Can Tho city, which may restrict the generalizability of the findings to a broader population of EFL learners. Additionally, the data were collected solely through questionnaires, which rely on self-reported responses and may be subject to biases such as social desirability or inaccurate self-assessment. The study also focused on the short-term effects of the workshops without exploring long-term retention or skill

development. Future research could address these limitations by including a more diverse sample, employing a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods, and conducting longitudinal studies to better understand the sustained impact of public speaking training on EFL students.

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