A STUDY ON THE CHALLENGES FACED BY EFL STUDENTS IN PUBLIC SPEAKING AND THE PROPOSED SOLUTIONS

HO THI HIEN[1], NGUYEN THI DIEM THI[1], NGUYEN THI THUY LOAN[1], TRAN KIEU MY AN[1]

[1] *Faculty of Foreign Languagues, Industrial University of Ho Chi Minh City*
Correspoding author: hothihien@iuh.edu.vn

Abstract. This study aimed to investigate the factors that limit the public speaking ability of English major students and propose practical solutions for improvement at a Vietnamese university. As stated by Van Emden & Becker (2004), good presentation skills equip learners with abilities and qualities that are highly valued in the labor market such as critical thinking, management skills, leadership skills and professional communication skills. In order to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the research problem with in-depth personal viewpoints, the study utilized two primary instruments: a structured questionnaire completed by 141 participants and semi-structured interviews with 10 participants. The results revealed the multifaceted challenges faced by EFL students in public speaking which are related to preparation and experience, presentation of physical, visual and story messages, as well as other external factors such as classroom environment, teaching methods and peer pressure. Based on the findings, proposed solutions, such as structured practice, targeted workshops, and supportive tools, are believed to significantly enhance learners' public speaking proficiency. Although the study is limited due to its sample size and time constraint, it suggests avenues for future research, including longitudinal studies with observations and self-reported instruments to assess how sustained use of technology-based platforms influences public speaking performance over time.

Keywords: *public speaking, challenge, presentation*

1. INTRODUCTION

Public speaking is an important skill that many students need to develop in order to succeed in both academic and professional settings. Practicing public speaking skills helps learners overcome fear and dare to express their personal opinions (Lucas, 2015). Learners will therefore be more confident and communicate more effectively. In addition, good communication enables students to expand their relationships through easier connection and interaction with others, not only helping students achieve high results in their studies but also being a key factor in career development. Therefore, practicing presentation skills to gain experience and knowledge is essential for students. Furthermore, for language students, public speaking helps them have a flexible vocabulary and the ability to use language fluently. Good speaking skills are essential across nearly every profession, as they support effective communication, collaboration, and the ability to convey ideas clearly and persuasively. When presenters can effectively convey their views and messages in a speech, they are more likely to gain recognition and appreciation from their audience. With the advancement of technology today, the application of many presentation support tools also helps to maximize presentation effectiveness (Reynolds, 2008).

Although public speaking skills are very important, many students, including English majors, still face significant challenges in developing this skill. Learners encounter many obstacles in their efforts to present effectively due to a lot of objective and subjective factors. These problems include lack of confidence, fear of being judged, inadequate preparation, unattractive presentations, limited presentation experience, and unprofessional presentations (Johnson & Szczupakiewicz, 1987; Blote et al., 2009). The researchers further emphasized that public speaking anxiety is a distinct subtype of social anxiety, both qualitatively and quantitatively different from other forms. Many studies have been conducted not only to understand the difficulties learners encounter in developing presentation skills but also to explore possible solutions to these problems (Phan & Bui, 2022; Nguyen & Tong, 2024). Although these studies provide valuable insights into the psychological and motivational aspects of public speaking, as well as focus on the difficulties students encounter when presenting in front of a crowd, there is still a gap in understanding the specific factors that hinder students' performance in public speaking tasks. Addressing this gap is necessary and extremely important to develop effective solutions for improving students' public speaking skills.

This study aimed to investigate the factors that limit the public speaking ability of English major students at the Faculty of Foreign Languages, Industrial University of Ho Chi Minh City (FFL-IUH), and propose practical solutions for improvement. It examined both the objective and subjective factors contributing to students' difficulties. Additionally, target strategies for enhancing presentation skills were recommended based on the results obtained. Ultimately, this study provided insights that could benefit other departments at IUH and other universities, aligning with the trend of integrating soft skill development into academic programs.

The study focused on the two key research questions:
1. What challenges do English majors at IUH face in developing public speaking skills?
2. What are the causes of these challenges?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Public Speaking

Public speaking is traditionally characterized as a formal, face-to-face interaction where a speaker addresses a group in a deliberate and organized manner (Ceneciro et al., 2023). Besides, Liu (2011) highlighted that each instance of public speaking serves a distinct purpose, leaving the audience with a key takeaway designed to be memorable. Thus, public speaking can be defined as the act of delivering a structured and purposeful presentation to an audience, with such primary aims as informing, persuading, or entertaining. In contemporary settings in which technology has influenced every aspect of life, public speaking has evolved to include various digital platforms and enabled speakers to connect with wider global audiences in diverse formats.

Significance of public speaking skills

Public speaking fosters a wide range of essential skills that contribute to both academic and professional success. At universities, it equips students with the ability to articulate ideas clearly and confidently during presentations in the courses of their curricula and thesis defenses, while simultaneously building critical thinking and analytical skills (Dansieh, 2021). Professionally, public speaking is indispensable for leadership and effective communication in diverse contexts, empowering individuals to organize, deliver, and manage the flow of communication with confidence (Savellon et al., 2024). Furthermore, Hostetler and Kahl (2017) highlighted its ancient roots as a fundamental art form representing humanity's desire to connect and engage with others. Beyond technical communication skills, public speaking enhances a person's ability to read and understand audiences, fostering emotional intelligence and interpersonal awareness (Corray, 2019). Therefore, it turns out to be a critical competency for personal empowerment, academic achievement, and career advancement.

Challenges for EFL students in public speaking

Although public speaking is considered an essential skill for students to succeed in both academic and professional tasks, for many EFL students, speaking in public presents significant challenges. One of the most common ones for EFL students is the fear of public speaking. This fear arises from various factors, including anxiety, shyness, and the fear of making mistakes or being judged by others (Tran & Dang, 2019; Raja, 2017). Especially, the anxiety can feel even more intense, as speaking in front of an audience is frequently viewed as one of the most stressful tasks they face (Dwyer & Davidson, 2012). Moreover, research has shown that there are two main clusters of difficulties contributing to students' anxiety: social and psychological factors. Social factors include peers' responses and audience familiarity, while psychological factors encompass self-perceived oral proficiency, pronunciation accuracy, and personality traits (Morita, 2000; El Enein, 2011). In the Vietnamese context, Nguyen and Tong (2024) found that fear of making mistakes and fear of being observed were major barriers for English-major students, which could significantly lower their confidence.

Linguistic limitations also pose significant obstacles for EFL students. For instance, students cannot articulate their thoughts clearly with a limited vocabulary, lack of grammatical understanding, and inadequate preparation (Tran & Dang, 2019; Dansieh et al., 2021). Besides, pronunciation difficulties, unfamiliar cultural content, and anxiety stemming from speaking a second language also contribute to communication problems (Zhou, 2004, as cited in El Enein, 2011). Students often struggle with heavy accents, lack of fluency, and difficulty organizing ideas. Similar linguistic challenges, including limited vocabulary and grammatical understanding, inadequate preparation, and difficulty elaborating on ideas, were also highlighted by Phan and Bui (2022). These limitations can exacerbate anxiety and degrade students' public speaking performance.

The environment in which EFL students learn public speaking greatly influences their experiences. Challenges like unsupportive learning settings, inadequate preparation time, and limited opportunities to practice speaking in class are commonly reported (Hibatullah, 2019; Phan & Bui, 2022; Seli & Santosa, 2023). Many students also find that their public speaking practice tends to emphasize grammar and formulas over practical communication skills, leaving them less confident when faced with real-world speaking situations (Handayani, 2018). Besides, Zhou (2004, as cited in El Enein, 2011) noted that learning English as a second language is often the most challenging obstacle for students during their academic studies. This challenge is compounded by unfamiliar cultural content and anxiety caused by limited exposure to authentic speaking experiences. Therefore, Nguyen and Tong (2024) emphasized the importance of peer support and structured practice in helping students overcome these contextual barriers.

Evaluation of a presentation

Although there are a limited number of rubrics for public speaking evaluation published in academic literature, the assessment of public presentations has been a topic of interest for scholars over time (Schreiber et al., 2012), with concerns about competencies and frameworks that define effective public speaking. Previously, Quianthy and Hefferin (1999) highlighted that "effective oral communication involves generating messages and delivering them with attention to vocal variety, articulation, and nonverbal signals" (p. 28). Based on this argument, they outlined seven essential competencies for effective oral communication, divided into two categories: message composition and message delivery. Message composition included the competencies for determining purpose, selecting an appropriate topic, constructing oral discourse with a clear thesis, supporting material, strategic word choice, and transitions. Meanwhile, message delivery was about employing vocal variety, articulating clearly, using language effectively, and demonstrating nonverbal behavior. The authors further emphasized that successful speakers should exhibit interpersonal adaptability, self-awareness, and a conversational approach that ensures the message resonates with the audience.

Scholars have also proposed several rubrics and evaluation tools to assess public speaking with further evolving pedagogical and practical insights. For instance, the Competent Speaker Speech Evaluation Form (CSSEF) developed by Morreale et al. (2007) includes eight items evaluated on a 3-point scale. These items assess such competencies as purpose determination, organization, vocal expression, language use, and physical behavior. The authors' rubric aligns with Quianthy's (1990) competencies to determine purposes, select topics, organize ideas, articulate and use vocal variety, nonverbal behaviors, language, and supporting material. Besides, Thomson and Rucker (2002) identified a 20-item rubric in the Public Speaking Competency Instrument (PSCS), which categorizes competencies into seven groupings (speech introduction, organization, supporting material, speech conclusion, verbal and nonverbal delivery, and general competence). In The Art of Public Speaking (2007), Lucas proposed a 22-item speech evaluation form, which aligns closely with the PSCS in terms of content and assessment approach. Lucas's (2007) 5-point-scale items are grouped into five categories: introduction, body, conclusion, delivery, and overall performance.

Beyond rubrics, specific elements critical to impactful presentations have also been highlighted. For example, it is emphasized that effective presentations involve crafting emotionally resonant narratives rather than simply conveying information, and visuals should be used to enhance, rather than overshadow, the message (Duarte, 2010). Speakers also need to ensure a clear presentation structure (introduction, body,

and conclusion) with logical transitions, an impactful opening, and a memorable closing to effectively capture and maintain the audience's attention (Lucas, 2015). Similarly, Gallo (2014), in Talk Like TED, identified emotional connection, novelty, and memorability as the three core elements of impactful presentations and emphasized the balance between logical structure and emotional appeal, noting that effective presentations inspire as well as inform.

To provide beginners with a practical evaluation framework, Harrington and LeBeau (2009) simplified the complexities of public speaking by categorizing presentations into three "messages": physical message (delivered through non-verbal communication, such as gestures and posture), visual message (communicated via slides and visuals that support the spoken message), and story message (focused on narrative structure and content). This framework provides a practical foundation for learners as it simplifies the complex elements of presentations into manageable components, allowing learners to systematically enhance and perfect each element of their presentation skills. Harrington and LeBeau's (2009) framework also aligns well with previously established competencies and evaluation models. For instance, the components reflect and integrate the broader competencies identified by Quianthy and Hefferin (1999), particularly in message delivery and composition. The physical message, which is related to nonverbal behaviors such as gestures and posture, was emphasized in both Quianthy's (1990) framework and rubrics like the PSCS and Lucas's (2007) evaluation form. Besides, the visual message complements the use of supporting materials and visuals discussed by Duarte (2010), and finally, the story message closely aligns with Gallo's (2014) emphasis on storytelling as a tool to create emotional connection, novelty, and memorability, as well as Duarte's (2010) focus on crafting resonant narratives. By distilling these elements into manageable parts, Harrington and LeBeau (2009) provided a practical approach that mirrors the foundational principles of earlier frameworks while offering clarity and accessibility for beginners to craft impactful presentations and deliver effective speeches that resonate with diverse audiences.

While considerable research has been conducted on strategies to enhance language learning, there remains a significant gap in addressing the specific challenges EFL students face in developing public speaking skills, particularly within the Vietnamese higher education context. Existing studies often emphasize general language acquisition, fostering student motivation, and encouraging creative and critical thinking, but limited attention has been given to the factors influencing public speaking performance or the pedagogical approaches required to address these challenges. This highlights the need for research that identifies the specific difficulties students encounter in public speaking, examines the factors affecting their performance, and proposes comprehensive solutions to improve their skills. By exploring these areas, this study aims to contribute to the development of evidence-based teaching strategies tailored to the Vietnamese context, supporting both the structured development of public speaking skills and effective learning outcomes for EFL students.

3. METHODOLOGY

Research design

This study adopted a mixed-method approach to investigate the challenges faced by English-majored junior students in public speaking and potential solutions to overcome these challenges. The combination of quantitative and qualitative methods was intended to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the research problem by integrating statistical trends with in-depth personal viewpoints. While the quantitative survey captured generalizable trends in students' challenges and perceptions, the qualitative interviews allowed for in-depth exploration of students' personal experiences and contextual insights. Together, these approaches complemented each other and enhanced the validity of the findings through triangulation.

The research design was grounded in the convergent parallel mixed-methods model (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018), in which both qualitative and quantitative data were collected simultaneously and analyzed independently. The findings were then compared and interpreted together to form a holistic understanding of the phenomenon. This design was particularly suited for the study as it allowed the researchers to identify patterns from a broad sample and simultaneously explore the underlying reasons behind those patterns through qualitative insights.

Research instruments

The study utilized two primary instruments: a structured questionnaire and semi-structured interviews. The questionnaire, which included four sections, was designed to gather data from English-majored junior students, offering a broad perspective on their experiences and challenges with public speaking. In particular, section one collected demographic information such as age, gender, and prior exposure to public speaking; section two focused on identifying the challenges students face when speaking in public, including fears, physical message issues (such as posture and gestures), visual message difficulties (such as the use of slides and imagery), and story message challenges (such as structuring and transitioning ideas); section three sought students' suggestions for improving their public speaking skills and the final section explored students' usage of TED Talk videos, including the frequency of viewing, purposes for using the videos (e.g., learning delivery techniques, improving pronunciation), and perceived benefits.

In addition to the questionnaire, semi-structured interviews were conducted to explore more deeply students' overall public speaking performance, subjective and objective factors that influence their public speaking skills, and their experiences with watching and imitating TED Talk speakers. The interview questions were designed by Researcher 1 and then reviewed by Researchers 2, 3, and 4.

Participants and research context

The participants of this study were English-majored junior students enrolled in a Bachelor of English Language program at a public university in Vietnam. As part of their curriculum, they had taken a Public Speaking course, which is typically offered in the third year of study. This is a selective course of the program and is designed to help students develop essential presentation skills. In this 2-credit course, students are trained to effectively deliver three different messages to the audience, which are physical, visual, and story messages. The majority of the participants were female, and most of them were around 20. They were selected using a convenience sampling strategy due to its practicality and efficiency, allowing the researchers to gather data from students who were both available and willing to share their experiences (Etikan et al., 2016).

In the data collection, a total of 143 students participated in the survey; however, two responses were excluded due to insufficient answers. The final number of participants providing complete responses to the questionnaire was 141. In addition to the survey, 15 students who had taken a Public Speaking class were invited to take part in interviews, and 10 of them confirmed their willingness to join semi-structured interviews to provide the study with more in-depth insights into their learning experiences. Participation in the interviews was voluntary, and consent was obtained in advance. The participants were given the option to choose the interview format, either face-to-face or online. All of them opted for the online format via the Microsoft Teams meeting conference platform, citing convenience and the high quality of audio communication as their reasons for preference.
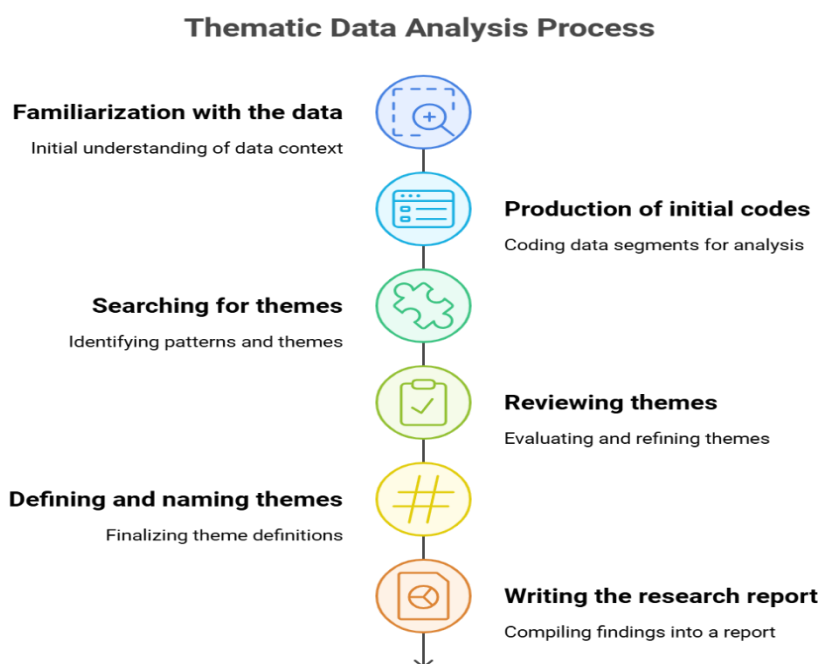
Data collection and analysis

Firstly, the questionnaire was distributed online to ensure accessibility and convenience for all students and to achieve a high response rate. The participants were given clear instructions and adequate time to complete the survey. Both the link and QR code were sent to four Zalo groups of four public speaking classes taught by different lecturers, and then 143 responses were collected. Two responses were excluded due to incomplete data, leaving 141 valid responses. After that, the semi-structured interviews were conducted one-on-one on the MS Teams at the participants' convenience in a comfortable setting to ensure participants felt at ease sharing their experiences. Each interview lasted approximately 30 minutes and was audio-recorded with the participants' consent for accurate transcription and analysis.

The quantitative data from the questionnaire were analyzed using SPSS software (Version 26.0), which facilitated statistical analysis and identification of patterns, correlations, and trends. This analysis provided a foundation for understanding the general challenges students face and the potential solutions they consider effective (Pallant, 2020). A Cronbach's alpha test was conducted to analyze the reliability of the questionnaire items. Then the Independent samples test was used to compare the perceived challenges

between male and female students. Besides, qualitative data from the interviews were analyzed using thematic analysis, as it is a systematic and flexible method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting themes within data (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Javadi & Zarea, 2016). Moreover, this approach provides a comprehensive understanding of the participants' experiences and perceptions by outlining concrete themes and subthemes (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Morse, 2008; Vaismoradi et al., 2016). After looking thoroughly at the provided data, themes and subthemes were identified in accordance with the framework of public speaking structure suggested by Harrington and LeBeau (2009). In this study, the researchers adapted the process of thematic data analysis outlined by Braun and Clarke (2022). The stages are illustrated in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Thematic data analysis process (adapted from Braun and Clarke, 2022)

Thematic Data Analysis Process

Familiarization with the data
Initial understanding of data context

Production of initial codes
Coding data segments for analysis

Searching for themes
Identifying patterns and themes

Reviewing themes
Evaluating and refining themes

Defining and naming themes
Finalizing theme definitions

Writing the research report
Compiling findings into a report

The themes and subthemes were identified based on the components of a public speech as formulated by Harrington and LeBeau (2009). EFL learners encounter serious challenges in public speaking, which were classified into five key thematic analyses: preparation and prior experience, physical message, story message, and external challenges, with subthemes included as described in Table 1.

Table 1: Themes and sub-themes

Themes	Sub-themes
1. Challenges in preparation & prior experience	● Script preparation ● Rehearse
2. Challenges in physical message	● Eye Contact ● Gesture ● Posture ● Voice Inflection
3. Challenges in visual message	● Choosing Visuals ● Explaining Visuals

4. Challenges in story message	● Transition ● Introduction ● Body ● Conclusion
5. External challenges	● Environmental factors ● Teacher's teaching styles ● Practice opportunities in class ● Teacher's feedback ● Topic difficulty

4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

Gender differences in public speaking challenges

Table 2: Participants by gender

Group Statistics					
	Gender	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Fears	Male	42	2.4365	.80476	.12418
	Female	99	2.2896	.65620	.06595
Phy_Mes	Male	42	2.8363	.79080	.12202
	Female	99	2.7033	.72878	.07324
Vis_Mes	Male	42	2.9762	.71443	.11024
	Female	99	2.9865	.78315	.07871
Sto_Mes	Male	42	3.2302	.84340	.13014
	Female	99	3.2054	.90188	.09064

Table 3: Independent Samples Test

Independent samples test									
		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means					
		N	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
								Lower	Upper
Fears	Equal variances assumed	141	.120	1.135	139	.258	.14695	.10912	.40301
Physical Message	Equal variances assumed	141	.311	.966	139	.336	.13303	-.13917	.40523
Visual Message	Equal variances assumed	141	.686	-.074	139	.941	-.01034	-.28834	.26765
Story Message	Equal variances assumed	141	.872	.152	139	.879	.02477	-.29746	.34701

The data were collected from 42 male (30%) and 99 female (70%) participants. The T-test results show no significant differences between male and female learners across all constructs: fear (p = 0.258), physical message (p = 0.336), visual message (p = 0.941), and story message (p = 0.879). This lack of significant

differences indicates that genders do not play a substantial role in the challenges faced by learners in public speaking.

Challenges that students face when speaking in public

Table 4: Descriptive statistics of challenge types

Descriptive Statistics			
	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Fears	141	2.33	.70401
Physical Message	141	2.74	.74743
Visual Message	141	2.98	.76081
Story Message	141	3.21	.88194

Descriptive statistics suggest that EFL learners experience significant challenges in public speaking due to fear (mean = 2.33), physical message limitations (mean = 2.74), visual message difficulties (mean = 2.98), and structural message challenges (mean = 3.21).

Table 5: Fears and challenges of public speaking performance

	Descriptive Statistics	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Fears1	I am often worried about what people think.	141	2.38	.908
Fears2	I fear of standing up in front of a group of people who are focusing on me	141	2.34	.999
Fears3	I often worry that people are not interested	141	2.37	.840
Fears4	I fear that people will laugh at me	141	2.67	1.086
Fears5	I fear of making mistakes.	141	**2.24**	.917
Fears6	I fear of forgetting parts of what I need to say	141	**1.99**	.866
Phy_Mes1	I can NOT maintain eye contact with the audience.	141	2.70	.992
Phy_Mes2	I do NOT know how to use various gestures.	141	2.84	.966
Phy_Mes3	I know how to use gestures for public speaking, but I CANNOT remember to use them.	141	2.52	.923
Phy_Mes4	I do NOT know how to change my voice effectively.	141	2.67	1.033
Phy_Mes5	I know the voice inflection, but I CANNOT use them effectively.	141	2.51	.915
Phy_Mes6	I do NOT know how to have good posture.	141	2.90	1.051
Phy_Mes7	I know how to have good posture, but I CANNOT remember to apply it.	141	2.72	1.029
Phy_Mes8	I find the lessons about physical message in public are NOT PRACTICAL.	141	3.08	1.096
Vis_Mes1	I don't know how to choose the suitable visuals for the content	141	2.88	.882
Vis_Mes2	I don't know the types of visuals to choose	141	2.91	.902
Vis_Mes3	I don't know many resources to find high-quality visuals	141	2.77	1.003
Vis_Mes4	I don't know what good visuals mean	141	3.02	.922
Vis_Mes5	I don't know how to explain the chosen visuals in a short and clear way	141	2.74	.997
Vis_Mes6	I don't know how to interact with the visuals when I explain it	141	2.82	1.016
Vis_Mes7	I don't know how to INTRODUCE a chart	141	3.30	.939
Vis_Mes8	I don't know how to EXPLAIN a chart	141	3.24	.978
Vis_Mes9	I don't know how to EMPHASIZE a chart	141	3.17	.971
Sto_Mes1	I don't know the overall structure to organize the ideas of a presentation.	141	3.03	.992
Sto_Mes2	I don't know what to include in the INTRODUCTION.	141	3.26	.967
Sto_Mes3	I don't know what to include in the BODY.	141	3.32	.981
Sto_Mes4	I don't know what to include in the CONCLUSION.	141	3.32	.995
Sto_Mes5	I don't know how to use TRANSITIONS AND SEQUENCERS appropriately.	141	3.12	.996
Sto_Mes6	I don't know how to explain the main points in the body	141	3.23	.990

The first challenge is fear-related, where learners express concerns about audience judgment, fear of making mistakes, forgetting parts of their speech, and being laughed at. Notably, the fears of making mistakes (mean = 2.24) and forgetting what to say (mean = 1.99) stand out as prominent concerns. Regarding physical message challenges, learners struggle with maintaining eye contact (mean = 2.70), using effective gestures (mean = 2.84), and adopting good posture (mean = 2.90). Compared to fear-related challenges, participants acknowledge that while challenges related to gestures, posture, and voice modulation are present, they are not as significant as fear-related issues. In terms of visual message challenges, the most significant difficulties include selecting appropriate visuals (mean = 2.88), explaining charts (mean = 3.24), and emphasizing visual points (mean = 3.17). Finally, for story message challenges, learners face difficulties in effectively structuring presentations, such as organizing ideas logically (mean = 3.03) and deciding what to include in the introduction, body, and conclusion (mean = 3.32).

Qualitative data analysis shows aligned challenges with the quantitative results. However, more insights were provided by the interviewees on the challenges they actually faced during public speeches.

Challenges in preparation and past experience

One of the constant challenges for EFL learners is insufficient preparation and insufficient practice. Most interviewees shared that without good preparation, they get "*lost*" in their presentation and fail to achieve what they want. According to Interviewee 8, "*Preparation of content is of paramount importance to me. When I don't prepare, I lose my confidence and my audience*." The limited exposure to public speaking in earlier stages of education aggravates all these difficulties, thus leaving learners unprepared for the challenges created by formal presentations. Also, Interviewee 6 commented on the same lines: "*I didn't get a good chance to practice in high school, so I came to college knowing I wasn't ready*."

Challenges in delivering physical message

Mastering the physical aspects of public speaking—such as body language, gestures, and voice modulation—remains a significant obstacle. Eye contact emerged as a particularly challenging area, with learners citing anxiety and fear of judgment as key reasons for avoiding it. Interviewees 1, 7, and 8 admitted, *"The most difficult thing is eye contact because when I'm so nervous I tend to look at the ceiling or floor."* Additionally, ineffective gestures—either overused or absent—detract from their delivery; as Interviewee 4 described, *"I often scratch my fingers together instead of using purposeful gestures, and it feels awkward."* Especially interviewees 2 and 6 asserted that they *"could use limited gestures"* or *"struggle to make meaningful gestures"* or they *"did not remember to use the learnt gestures."* In terms of posture, interviewees 3 and 6 noted that they sometimes had problems with posture, such as stiffness or blocking the audience's view. Interviewee 10 added that she "*did not know how to use up and down voice*" to attract the audience better; instead, she kept using flat or monotonous speech patterns.

Challenges in delivering visual message

Learners frequently struggled to choose a suitable template for a PowerPoint presentation or choosing the right type of visuals and how to explain them effectively. Many interviewees (4, 5, 6) expressed difficulties in slide creation, often producing cluttered or inconsistent visuals that failed to align with their message. Interviewee 8 noted, *"I don't know how to design beautiful slides, and they often look cluttered."* Explaining visuals also poses a challenge, as Interviewee 3 shared, *"I feel anxious when I have to explain visuals because I don't know how to connect them with my points."* Interviewee 4 noted she had *difficulty finding relevant images*, while Interviewee 5 mentioned *challenges in arranging visuals properly.* Moreover, technical barriers, such as embedding videos or managing animations, hinder their ability to utilize visuals effectively.

Challenges in delivering story message

The findings from responses of interviewees indicate that many students struggled with selecting appropriate contents to speak about, especially with unfamiliar or academic topics that they did not have much experience and knowledge of (Interviewees 2, 6). Moreover, weak transitions between sections of their presentations make the presentation unsmooth, as Interviewee 7 admitted, *"I always feel nervous during transitions and end up stalling or losing my place."* Many learners also struggled to craft engaging openings and impactful conclusions, as Interviewee 2 noted, *"I want my ending to inspire everyone, but it's hard to craft something memorable."* Overloading the main body with excessive information is a common issue, causing presenters to lose their audience's attention.

External Challenges

Beyond the classroom, external factors such as peer pressure, environmental distractions, resource limitations, the classroom environment, and teachers' teaching styles create additional obstacles. Learners frequently cited fear of judgment from peers as a major source of anxiety; as Interviewee 6 noted, *"Peer pressure makes you feel intimidated when others are more confident."* Noise, overcrowding, and limited access to practice spaces or affordable tools were also noted as barriers to effective preparation and performance. Additionally, learning environment and instructional methods have a significant impact on the learners' public speaking. Overcrowding in classrooms offers little opportunity for individual practices, making the learners feel underprepared. Interviewee 9 explained that *"large classrooms make it hard for me to practice effectively or get feedback from the teacher*." Instructors offering little constructive, actionable feedback is not helpful in furthering a learner's improvement. Relating to this, he mentioned, "*The teacher's style has a huge impact, and detailed feedback really helps a lot*."

The problems EFL learners have with public speaking range from preparation level and physical delivery to dynamics within the classroom environment and even further, constraints emanating from outside. These are critical issues that further call for structured training, supportive environments, and accessible resources that might help learners surmount such barriers and feel more confident in their public speaking ability. By addressing these thematic areas, educators and institutions can significantly enhance their support for EFL learners on their journey toward achieving both competency and confidence as effective public speakers.

The causes of the public speaking challenges faced by EFL learners

Results from qualitative data show that the causes of public speaking challenges are multifaceted.

Subjective causes

Most of the problems with public speaking, as perceived by EFL learners, occur due to internal factors: anxiety, lack of confidence, or self-consciousness. These issues all stem from *a fear of judgment* that inhibits a student's ability to relate well with the audience. As Interviewee 1 claimed, "*I think my fear of judgment is the main reason I can't maintain eye contact*." Likewise, Interviewee 8 expressed that this *self-cautious feeling, which was driven by peer pressure*, prevented public speakers from engaging the audience effectively. The outcome of the feelings of insufficiency and fear of evaluation is that the body language becomes restricted, such as not maintaining eye contact or suppressing gestures during the presentation, which in turn amplifies their anxiety.

However, more frequently, learners struggle with the *presentation of visual information*. What was pointed out by all the interviewees was the *lack of training in either the choice or elaboration of relevant visual aids.* As Interviewee 9 mentioned, "*I never learned how to design slides effectively, so I struggle to make them visually appealing*," Interviewee 7 expressed the same concern, referring to the substantial number of options for visuals available on the Internet: "*There is too much information and types of visuals online; it was overwhelming for me to pick the right visual aids to illustrate my message*." Lack of instruction about the principles of visual design is the major cause of their difficulties in making clear and effective slides to support their oral presentations.

Against such subjective challenges, a number of interviewees still proposed practical solutions. For overcoming apprehension to improve physical delivery, Interviewee 1 suggested "*practicing in front of the mirror or with friends*." This, she said, would help the speaker in "*improving eye contact and improving*

delivery." On the same lines, Interviewee 5 proposed thorough preparation before entering the presentation room. She was particularly focused on fluency and body language. Students were also encouraged to make use of modern technologies, such as AI tools (ChatGPT, Poe, or Gemini), to support them in preparing and structuring presentations. According to Interviewee 7, "*AI can act as a mentor, providing feedback anytime, anywhere, without feeling annoyed*," thus helping learners to refine the content and build confidence.

Objective Causes

Major barriers to surmounting the public speaking challenges were found to involve external factors, especially instructional practices and classroom environments. In the case of large or overcrowded classes, there is a lack of structured opportunities for practice, which limits the amount of individual attention each student can receive. As Interviewee 10 explained*, "Large classes ensure that each student gets minimal practicing time and feedback.*" Environmental conditions, such as heightened noises or overcrowding, on the other hand, deter students from focusing and planning, which in turn ultimately diminish their development throughout the course. Furthermore, the feedback given by educators was not quality enough. Several students expressed dissatisfaction with generalized or non-specific feedback. According to Interviewee 2, *"Constructive feedback becomes an essential guide for students by pointing them in the right directions toward improvement*." The general emotional climate within the classroom is another important signifier in relation to whether learners can even take risks and improve their performance. In this respect, an uncritical environment helps mitigate anxiety in students. Expanding on this point, Interviewee 3 explained that it's easier to take risks if the classroom is non-judgmental. The participants felt more low-stakes presentations might enable them to get past the anxiety barrier and, accordingly, enhance their levels of confidence. With such objective challenges, the interviewees suggested a number of remedies: smaller class sizes or breakout groups would allow most of the individualized attention and frequent practice opportunities that students need. Furthermore, emphasis should be placed on enhancing the teaching of presentation skills in slide design and effective communication.

In addition, the interviewees highlighted the need for training on how to create clear presentation materials and foster supportive motivation in the classroom. Interviewee 7 stated, "*I'd wish to learn how to produce clean and consistent slides and clarify them more appropriately in my speech*." Regarding classroom dynamics, equal and supportive feedback to all learners was called for. For example, "*Favoritism in providing feedback may lower the self-confidence of some students and make them lose their motivation, especially the shy learners*." "*Teachers should enthusiastically encourage the shy students to speak out and provide generous feedback that motivates them to do better*," said Interviewee 4.

To sum up, fear originates from a lack of self-confidence, past unpleasant experiences, and perceived high expectations from the audience. Physical message issues stem from insufficient training in non-verbal communication techniques and a lack of real-life public speaking practice. Visual message difficulties arise from limited exposure to tools and methods for effectively incorporating visuals. Conversely, story message problems are linked to a lack of knowledge about how to organize content logically and use transitions appropriately.

Suggested solutions for better performance in public speaking

Table 6: Perceived solutions for better public speaking skills

Descriptive Statistics			
	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Rehearse many times before giving the presentation	141	1.93	.753
Practice presenting to a partner	141	2.04	.797
Practice presenting to a small selection of people	141	2.15	.828
Record a rehearsal presentation to view myself	141	2.10	.864

Take breathing exercises beforehand	141	2.10	.730
Attend workshops related to public speaking.	141	2.34	.901
Learn how to organise the ideas logically	141	1.93	.781
Write the script for the whole presentation and learn by heart	141	2.33	1.026

The table indicates that the suggested solutions for overcoming challenges in public speaking have low average levels, meaning most respondents agree or strongly agree with the proposed strategies to boost confidence. Specifically, the most effective strategies include regular rehearsal and practice (mean = 1.93) and practicing with peers (mean = 2.04), which are instrumental in building confidence. Engaging in relaxation techniques, such as breathing exercises before presentations (mean = 2.10), help reduce nervousness. Additionally, learning to organize ideas logically (mean = 1.93) is crucial for creating a coherent speech structure. Preparing scripts in advance, including writing and memorizing them (mean = 2.33), provides learners with a foundation for managing nerves and delivering well-structured presentations. Finally, attending public speaking workshops (mean = 2.34) supports improvements in structural, visual, and physical message skills.

For EFL learners, it is very important to be well-prepared for a successful public speech. Some practical ways to prepare include standing in front of a mirror or a camera to practice beforehand (Interviewees 1, 2, 6, and 8), or delivering the speech to a small group of friends to receive feedback on pronunciation and body language (Interviewee 8). The important thing when they self-practice is to ensure standard physical norms for presentation. Such consistent practice can turn those physical movements into a habit, which can help them have natural body language in public speaking (Interviewee 4). Rehearsing many times before the official presentation is useful (Interviewee 2) because after watching back their recorded speech, they can correct pronunciation mistakes (Interviewee 8). Interviewee 4 also highlighted the importance of using a timer to monitor the speaking speed during preparation time. To have interesting ideas for the story message, it is essential to use artificial intelligence chatbots such as Gemini, ChatGPT, or Poe for help. Some search engines, such as Google or Pixabay, were also recommended for finding high-quality visuals for the presentation, as mentioned by Interviewees 3 and 4. Putting on some make-up, choose nice clothes to wear on the presentation day to make them better looking (Interviewee 6). Interestingly, Interviewees 5 and 9 suggested that students can prepare for better physical delivery and responses by watching the beauty contests such as the Miss Universe, TED Talks, or some shorts or reels on social media about public speaking samples. After watching, they can pretend to be the Master of the Ceremony (MC) or the candidate or the singer to speak in public. This can enhance their confidence and organize their speeches better.

In order to become a confident public speaker, it is crucial to avoid the fear of making mistakes, as everyone can make mistakes (Interviewee 3). Moreover, joining online group chats with foreigners or English clubs in and out of schools can also help students increase confidence to speak in public (Interviewees 3, 6, 7, and 10).

In terms of visual message, Interviewees 4 and 5 suggested that it is important to have consistent layouts, color combinations, and fonts for the PowerPoint slides from the first to the last slides. It is recommended that students go to some websites, such as https://slidesgo.com/ or https://www.canva.com/, to search for a favorite template and make minor modifications to the slide design.

One more solution was proposed to help EFL students improve the speech flow or fluency when speaking in public: to make the slides simple with key words and phrases instead of long sentences or paragraphs (Interviewee 8). This participant added that if the presenter happens to forget the prepared script, it is time to move on to another part without trying to memorize that forgotten one.

Other suggested solutions to tackle the external challenges were also given by the interviewees. First, it is crucial for lecturers to avoid biases and show favoritism to certain good speakers. Instead, instructors need to give equal attention to all students. Moreover, teachers should give a lot of chances for every student to

stand in front of the class every day. Especially, it is important for teachers to motivate shy students to speak, as everyone should have a chance to speak and receive detailed comments (Interviewees 2 and 8). The interviewees also suggested that teachers may ask students to introduce themselves or tell a story to have the opportunity to practice in front of the class. In addition, there should definitely be videos of TED Talks speakers or speeches from famous people and celebrities around the world. However, selecting the right video to watch is also quite important because 15- or 30-minute videos could be too long and tiring to watch. Instead, the 1- or 2-minute videos would be better, as suggested by Interviewee 9.

In conclusion, the findings highlight that EFL learners face multifaceted challenges in public speaking due to fear, non-verbal communication deficiencies, and content organization issues. Proposed solutions, such as structured practice, targeted workshops, and supportive tools, can potentially enhance learners' public speaking proficiency. These insights offer valuable guidance for educators and policymakers in developing effective interventions.

5. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusions

The students' problems with public speaking in the current study come from subjective and objective causes. Students' confidence and performance are hindered due to inadequate preparation and limited experience in public speaking. This finding supports the results of Tran and Dang (2019) and Raja (2017), which emphasized the importance of practice in overcoming stage anxiety and building speaking competence. It is essential to promote frequent practice in educational settings since many participants reported feeling lost without adequate preparation. To address this issue, regular rehearsal opportunities need to be integrated into the teaching curriculum to assist students in building their own foundational skills and confidence. In addition, poor physical delivery, including posture, gestures, eye contact, and voice inflection, appeared as a major obstacle. Ineffective use of gestures and monotonous speech patterns further detracted from the overall quality of their presentations. These challenges underline the importance of training in nonverbal communication and expressive delivery as critical components of public speaking courses. Besides, choosing inappropriate visuals also contributes to poor PowerPoint presentations. The peer pressure, environmental distractions, and scarcity of resources, in addition, influenced students' performance. Peer judgment anxiety is very widespread; indeed, the study has proven the existing studies concerning performance anxiety in public speaking (Grieve et al., 2021). Aligning with the previous studies (Hibatullah, 2019; Phan & Bui, 2022; Seli & Santosa, 2023), other environmental barriers, such as noise and overcrowded classes, required the school to provide more effective policies and supports to reduce class size and ensure more spacious rooms. Based on the findings, the proposed solutions, such as structured practice, targeted workshops, and supportive tools, are believed to significantly enhance learners' public speaking proficiency.

Limitations and recommendations

Although the studies have significant findings, there are certain limitations. Firstly, the sample size was quite limited to 141 participants for the questionnaire and 10 interviewees, which may restrict the generalizability of the research findings. Further studies should employ a larger scale of participants to enhance more accurate statistical reliability. Secondly, although a clear theoretical framework and structured procedure were applied for qualitative data analysis, it could not avoid the potential subjectivity in interpreting qualitative data in thematic analysis, which may somewhat affect the reliability of findings. It is recommended that other researchers should propose longitudinal studies with observations and self-reported instruments to assess how sustained use of technology-based platforms influences public speaking performance over an extended period.

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NGHIÊN CỨU VỀ NHỮNG THÁCH THỨC MÀ SINH VIÊN CHUYÊN NGÀNH NGÔN NGỮ ANH GẶP PHẢI KHI NÓI TRƯỚC CÔNG CHÚNG VÀ CÁC GIẢI PHÁP ĐỀ XUẤT

HỒ THỊ HIỀN, NGUYỄN THỊ DIỄM THI, NGUYỄN THỊ THUÝ LOAN, TRẦN KIỀU MỸ AN
Khoa Ngoại ngữ, Trường Đại học Công nghiệp Thành phố Hồ Chí Minh
Tác giả liên hệ: : hothihien@iuh.edu.vn

TÓM TẮT. Nghiên cứu này nhằm mục đích tìm hiểu các yếu tố hạn chế khả năng nói trước công chúng của sinh viên chuyên ngành tiếng Anh và đề xuất các giải pháp thiết thực để cải thiện ở một trường đại học Việt Nam. Theo nhận định của Van Emden & Becker (2004), kỹ năng thuyết trình tốt mang đến cho người học những khả năng và phẩm chất được đánh giá cao trên thị trường lao động như tư duy phê phán, kỹ năng quản lý, kỹ năng lãnh đạo và kỹ năng giao tiếp chuyên nghiệp. Để cung cấp sự hiểu biết toàn diện hơn về vấn đề nghiên cứu với quan điểm cá nhân sâu sắc, nghiên cứu sử dụng hai công cụ chính: bảng câu hỏi có cấu trúc với 141 người tham gia và phỏng vấn bán cấu trúc với 10 người tham gia. Kết quả đã tiết lộ những thách thức nhiều mặt mà sinh viên EFL phải đối mặt khi nói trước công chúng, liên quan đến sự chuẩn bị và kinh nghiệm, cách trình bày thông điệp vật lý, hình ảnh và câu chuyện cũng như các yếu tố bên ngoài khác như môi trường lớp học, phương pháp giảng dạy và áp lực từ bạn bè. Dựa trên những phát hiện này, các giải pháp được đề xuất, chẳng hạn như thực hành có cấu trúc, hội thảo có mục tiêu và các công cụ hỗ trợ, được cho là sẽ nâng cao đáng kể trình độ nói trước công chúng của người học. Mặc dù nghiên cứu này còn hạn chế do quy mô mẫu và hạn chế về thời gian, nhưng nó gợi ý những hướng nghiên cứu trong tương lai, bao gồm các nghiên cứu theo chiều dọc với các quan sát và công cụ tự báo cáo để đánh giá mức độ ảnh hưởng của việc sử dụng bền vững các nền tảng dựa trên công nghệ đến hiệu suất nói trước công chúng trong nhiều tháng hoặc nhiều năm.