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**FROM SHAKY HANDS TO STEADY VOICES: A QUALITATIVE
EXPLORATION OF STUDENTS' EMOTIONAL JOURNEYS IN
PUBLIC SPEAKING TRAINING*****DARIPADA TANGAN YANG MENGGIGIL KEPADA SUARA YANG
MANTAP: SATU PENEROKAAN KUALITATIF TERHADAP
PERJALANAN EMOSI PELAJAR DALAM LATIHAN PENGUCAPAN
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ABSTRACT

This study examines how structured public speaking training influenced the emotional and cognitive development of 16 first-semester engineering students at a Malaysian polytechnic. Over an 11-week intervention, participants produced reflective journals documenting their experiences within a staged, emotionally supportive training programme. Thematic analysis of 176 journal entries identified five interconnected emotional trajectories: initial pervasive nervousness and physiological anxiety; heightened self-doubt driven by peer comparison; progressive confidence gains through repeated, scaffolded practice; increased comfort derived from audience familiarity; and gradual regulation of physical anxiety symptoms. The findings indicate that public speaking anxiety was not merely a performance-related obstacle but a deeply embodied and identity-linked challenge. Confidence growth did not emerge from technical instruction alone; rather, it developed through emotionally responsive pedagogical strategies that fostered mastery experiences, peer support, and reflective learning. Through structured practice and guided reflection, students learned to reinterpret physiological arousal, reframe negative self-perceptions, and approach speaking tasks with greater resilience and agency. By foregrounding student voice and tracing emotional transformation over time, this qualitative action research contributes a longitudinal, learner-centred perspective to communication pedagogy. The study argues for a reconceptualisation of public speaking instruction, positioning emotional safety, reflective practice, and scaffolded exposure as foundational conditions for sustainable communicative competence.

Keywords: *Communication apprehension; Public speaking anxiety; Student reflection; Emotional resilience; Action research*



ABSTRAK

Kajian ini meneliti bagaimana latihan pengucapan awam berstruktur mempengaruhi perkembangan emosi dan kognitif 16 orang pelajar kejuruteraan semester pertama di sebuah politeknik di Malaysia. Sepanjang intervensi selama 11 minggu, peserta menghasilkan jurnal reflektif yang mendokumentasikan pengalaman mereka dalam program latihan berperingkat yang bersifat menyokong emosi. Analisis tematik terhadap 176 entri jurnal mengenal pasti lima trajektori emosi yang saling berkait, iaitu kegelisahan awal yang meluas dan kebimbangan fisiologi; peningkatan keraguan diri yang didorong oleh perbandingan rakan sebaya; peningkatan keyakinan secara beransur-ansur melalui latihan berulang yang berstruktur; peningkatan keselesaan hasil daripada keakraban dengan audiens; serta pengawalan beransur-ansur terhadap simptom kebimbangan fizikal. Dapatan kajian menunjukkan bahawa kebimbangan pengucapan awam bukan sekadar halangan berkaitan prestasi, tetapi merupakan cabaran yang mendalam, bersifat berjasmani dan berkait dengan identiti diri. Pertumbuhan keyakinan tidak terhasil semata-mata melalui pengajaran teknikal; sebaliknya, ia berkembang melalui strategi pedagogi yang responsif terhadap emosi, yang memupuk pengalaman penguasaan, sokongan rakan sebaya, dan pembelajaran reflektif. Melalui latihan berstruktur dan refleksi berpandu, pelajar belajar mentafsir semula rangsangan fisiologi, membingkai semula persepsi sendiri negatif, serta mendekati tugas pengucapan dengan daya tahan dan keupayaan sendiri yang lebih tinggi. Dengan menonjolkan suara pelajar dan menelusuri transformasi emosi secara longitudinal, kajian tindakan kualitatif ini menyumbang perspektif berpusatkan pelajar dalam pedagogi komunikasi. Kajian ini mencadangkan satu rekonseptualisasi pengajaran pengucapan awam dengan meletakkan keselamatan emosi, amalan reflektif, dan pendedahan berperingkat sebagai asas penting bagi pembangunan kecekapan komunikatif yang mampan.

Kata Kunci: Kebimbangan komunikasi; Kebimbangan pengucapan awam; Refleksi pelajar; Ketahanan emosi; Kajian tindakan

1. Introduction

Oral communication skills constitute a fundamental competency in collaborative learning and civic engagement (Aomr & Abdalla, 2025). Research has consistently shown that structured and practical oral communication training enhances students' confidence, improves academic performance, and strengthens future career readiness (Abdurakhmonova, 2025; Tokçalar & Gürlen, 2025). Although public speaking is widely acknowledged as anxiety-inducing, it is an essential skill in academic and professional contexts. Many students encounter psychological barriers, ranging from communication apprehension to fear of negative evaluation, which hinder their ability to speak confidently and effectively before an audience (Horwitz, Horwitz, & Cope, 1986; Muengnakin & Narathakoon, 2025).

Anxiety related to public speaking is not confined to foreign language settings. Rather, similar emotional challenges are observed in broader educational settings where public speaking is required, even when individuals speak in their native language (Ambawani et al., 2025; Suratin & Sribayak, 2025). Thus, public speaking anxiety emerges as a cross-contextual issue that transcends linguistic boundaries.

While research on public speaking anxiety has been extensive, much of the earlier scholarship has relied predominantly on quantitative methodologies. These studies have primarily focused on measuring anxiety levels, self-efficacy, and performance outcomes through statistical analysis (Muengnakin & Narathakoon, 2025; Tokçalar & Gürlen, 2025). Although such approaches have generated valuable insights into measurable outcomes, they often offer a limited understanding of the underlying emotional and developmental processes. Recent studies show that public speaking anxiety caused by factors such as fear of negative evaluation and persistent self-doubt can decrease with repeated practice and supportive interventions (Dewi & Kadnawi, 2024; Putri et al., 2023). Structured peer collaboration, game-based speaking activities, and reflective strategies have been shown to build self-assurance and reduce apprehension gradually (Ayiz & Tauchid, 2024; Kaur et al., 2023; Tresnawati & Musthafa, 2016). Within safe and encouraging classroom settings, students' initial nervousness can evolve into greater self-assurance through repeated exposure, guided reflection, and constructive feedback (Mohamad et al., 2023; Supriyani & Kartikasari, 2022).

However, little is understood about how emotional, psychological, and pedagogical barriers to public speaking change over time in response to intervention.

The study explores the emotional and cognitive journeys of Malaysian polytechnic students participating in structured public speaking training designed to reduce communication apprehension. Situated within the action research tradition, the study positions the researcher simultaneously as instructor and investigator. Through iterative cycles of observation, reflection, and pedagogical refinement, the research both documents and enhances students' emotional development and confidence-building trajectories within a structured public speaking programme. In doing so, the study seeks to contribute a dynamic, process-oriented understanding of how confidence in public speaking can be systematically cultivated over time.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Theories of Communication Anxiety

Two foundational theoretical frameworks underpin the study's understanding of public speaking anxiety: McCroskey's (1984) Communication Apprehension (CA) Theory and Bandura's (1977) Self-Efficacy Theory. Together, these theories provide a comprehensive lens for examining both the emotional origins of speaking anxiety and the mechanisms through which confidence can be developed.

2.1.1. Communication Apprehension Theory

McCroskey (1984) defines communication apprehension as "an individual's level of fear or anxiety associated with either real or anticipated communication with another person or persons" (p. 13). He conceptualises CA as a relatively stable, trait-like predisposition that manifests across various communication contexts, including interpersonal conversations, group discussions, meetings, and public speaking. Among these contexts, public speaking is consistently identified as the most anxiety-inducing.

Individuals with high communication apprehension tend to avoid speaking situations whenever possible. When required to speak, they often experience pronounced physiological arousal, including trembling, sweating, increased heart rate, and disfluency. In addition to these observable symptoms, highly apprehensive individuals frequently perceive themselves as inadequate communicators, reinforcing cycles of self-doubt and avoidance (McCroskey, 1984; McCroskey & Richmond, 1982).

Public speaking anxiety involves interrelated physiological, cognitive, and behavioural components. Physiological arousal, such as rapid heartbeat and muscle tension, often predicts avoidance behaviour and heightened self-doubt (Mörtberg et al., 2018; Norazizan et al., 2025). Observable manifestations, including trembling, sweating, and disruptions in fluency, are commonly reported during oral presentations (Dewi, 2024; Kadir@Shahar & Abdul Raof, 2021). At the cognitive level, persistent self-criticism and fear of negative evaluation contribute to students' tendency to withdraw from participation and perceive themselves as poor communicators (Alhasan & Amar, 2024; Ebenezer et al., 2022).

Thus, Communication Apprehension Theory explains the emotional and behavioural barriers that students bring into public speaking contexts. It clarifies why anxiety often precedes performance and why avoidance becomes a self-reinforcing pattern.

2.1.2. Self-Efficacy Theory

While Communication Apprehension Theory explains the origins and manifestations of speaking anxiety, Bandura's (1977) Self-Efficacy Theory provides insight into how such anxiety can be reduced and confidence strengthened.

Bandura (1977) defines self-efficacy as "the belief in one's capabilities to organise and execute the courses of action required to manage prospective situations" (p. 193). In essence, self-efficacy reflects an individual's belief in their ability to succeed when confronted with

specific tasks or challenges. This belief system influences how individuals approach difficult situations, the effort they exert, their persistence in the face of obstacles, and their ability to regulate emotional responses under stress.

In the context of public speaking, self-efficacy shapes how students engage with speaking tasks, interpret mistakes, and respond to feedback. Students with higher public speaking self-efficacy are more likely to participate actively, demonstrate resilience after errors, and adopt adaptive emotional coping strategies (Agustin et al., 2022; Darmawan et al., 2021).

Consistent with Bandura's theoretical framework, mastery experiences, repeated successful performances, are identified as the most powerful source of self-efficacy development. This highlights the pedagogical importance of structured practice, scaffolded speaking tasks, constructive feedback, and peer support in instructional design (Frey & Vallade, 2018; Marshall-Wheeler et al., 2022). Through gradual exposure and guided success experiences, students can reconstruct their beliefs about their speaking capabilities.

2.1.3. Theoretical Integration

The integration of Communication Apprehension Theory and Self-Efficacy Theory offers a multidimensional framework for the present study. Communication Apprehension Theory elucidates the emotional barriers that hinder students' willingness to speak, while Self-Efficacy Theory explains the cognitive and behavioural processes through which these barriers may be reduced.

Together, these frameworks support a pedagogical approach that is both emotionally responsive and skill-enhancing. They justify the design of a structured training intervention that simultaneously aims to reduce anxiety symptoms and foster confidence through mastery experiences. In this way, the theoretical alignment underpins an instructional model that addresses not only the emotional dimensions of public speaking anxiety but also the developmental pathways toward sustained communicative confidence.

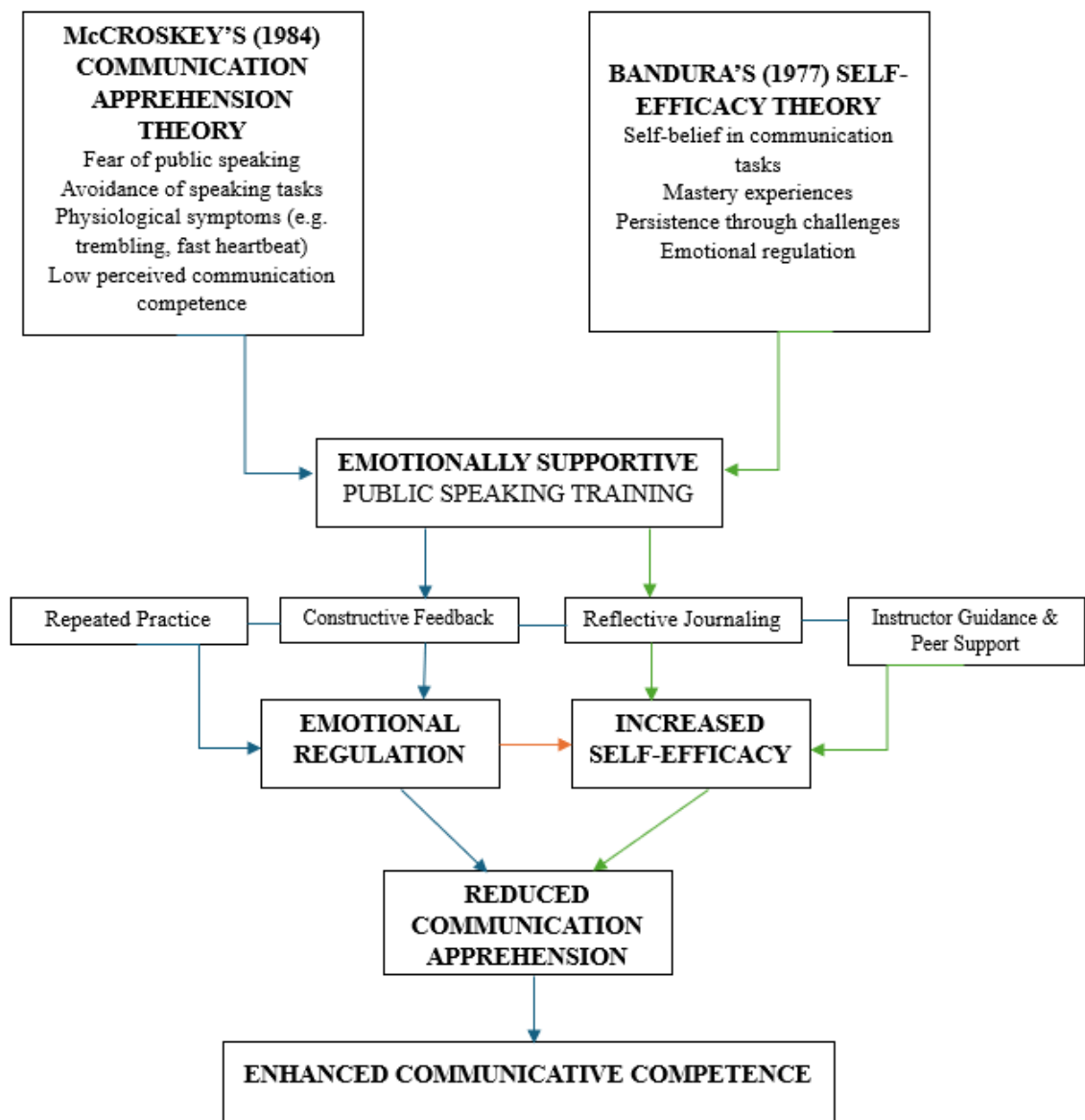


Figure 1: Theoretical framework guiding the design of an emotionally supportive public speaking training intervention

2.2. Student Reflections in Communication Skill Development

Studies investigating anxiety, communication strategies, and self-perceived competence provide valuable insights into how learners navigate the demands of oral communication in academic settings.

Zulkflee et al. (2023) employed a survey research design with 130 Malaysian ESL learners in Perak, comprising both Diploma and Form 6 students, to examine speaking anxiety in the context of the MUET–CEFR-aligned oral assessment. Using McCroskey’s Personal Report of Public Speaking Anxiety (PRPSA) alongside Nakatani’s (2006) Oral Communication Strategy Inventory (OCSI), the study revealed that a substantial proportion of learners experienced moderately high to high levels of speaking anxiety during oral presentations.

Furthermore, the findings indicated that students frequently relied on message reduction and alteration strategies as coping mechanisms. This reliance suggests an underlying fear of negative evaluation and limited confidence in their speaking abilities. Importantly, significant differences were observed between Diploma and Form 6 students in their use of communication strategies, indicating that proficiency level and academic context may influence coping behaviours. Collectively, these findings demonstrate how high-stakes, exam-oriented speaking assessments can intensify anxiety among Malaysian ESL learners and underscore the need for instructional scaffolding and emotional support in speaking pedagogy.

Extending the discussion beyond assessment contexts, Wang and Cionea (2024) conducted a cross-sectional survey involving 281 college students in the United States to explore how self-perceived intercultural communication competence and intercultural communication apprehension jointly predict intercultural willingness to communicate. Situated within an English-as-a-second-language (L2) context, the study found that both perceived competence and apprehension significantly influenced students' willingness to initiate communication across cultural boundaries. Intercultural communication apprehension mediated the relationship between competence and willingness. This finding suggests that even learners who perceive themselves as technically capable may refrain from speaking due to anxiety or fear of negative evaluation. Therefore, communicative behaviour cannot be explained solely by skill level. The study thus reinforces the importance of addressing emotional and psychological barriers in second-language speaking instruction.

Complementing these quantitative findings, qualitative research provides deeper insight into students' lived experiences and reflective processes. Wijaya and Mbato (2020), through classroom surveys, student reflections, and interviews with undergraduate EFL students in Indonesia, and Agustin et al. (2022), through a qualitative case study employing semi-structured interviews and thematic analysis with Indonesian university EFL learners, offer evidence that structured peer support, repeated speaking practice, and formative feedback contribute significantly to anxiety reduction. The studies suggest that emotional reassurance and mastery experiences are frequently associated with increased self-confidence and a stronger willingness to participate in speaking tasks. However, learners' voices are often used to support findings on strategy use or anxiety levels, rather than systematically analysed to understand how students interpret their own emotional development and identity transformation over time. Specifically, further inquiry is required to examine how learners reflect on their evolving identities, fears, confidence trajectories, and communicative competencies within structured speaking programmes.

2.3. Emotional and Cognitive Dimensions of Public Speaking

Public speaking anxiety is a multifaceted phenomenon that operates simultaneously on emotional and cognitive levels. Understanding these interconnected dimensions is essential for designing effective pedagogical interventions, as anxiety does not merely manifest as nervousness but influences how learners feel, think, and ultimately perform.

2.3.1. Emotional Dimensions

Emotionally, learners frequently report feelings of fear, shame, embarrassment, and vulnerability when required to speak before an audience, particularly in evaluative settings.



Qualitative classroom-based studies conducted with undergraduate EFL students in Indonesia, employing interviews and observations, reveal that such emotions are often triggered by the anticipation of negative judgment, fear of failure, and memories of prior negative speaking experiences (Dewi, 2024; Putri et al., 2023). These emotional responses are especially pronounced within formal assessment contexts, where performance is publicly scrutinised and graded.

For many learners, particularly in ESL and EFL environments, repeated exposure to anxiety-inducing speaking situations can lead to the internalisation of speaking anxiety. Mixed-method and qualitative research involving university EFL learners in Southeast Asia indicates that this internalisation frequently results in avoidance behaviours, reduced classroom participation, and diminished engagement in oral tasks (Pattah et al., 2022). Over time, students may begin to construct identities as “poor speakers,” reinforcing a self-perpetuating cycle of fear and withdrawal.

2.3.2. Cognitive Dimensions

From a cognitive perspective, emotional stressors significantly disrupt higher-order cognitive processes essential for effective speech production. These include idea formulation, memory retrieval, linguistic encoding, and real-time organisation of content. Bandura (1977) explains that anxiety interferes with attentional control and working memory capacity, impairing individuals’ ability to focus, retrieve relevant information, and articulate ideas coherently. As a result, students may experience disjointed speech, forgotten points, reduced fluency, or difficulty expressing thoughts clearly.

Studies show that increased physiological arousal during public speaking can lead to breakdowns in fluency and coherence, as cognitive resources are diverted toward managing stress rather than organising speech content (Dewi, 2024; Mörtberg et al., 2018). This creates a negative feedback loop: anxiety impairs performance, perceived performance failure reinforces feelings of incompetence, and subsequent speaking situations become increasingly threatening. Consequently, meaningful skill development requires simultaneous attention to both emotional regulation and cognitive functioning.

2.3.3. Proficiency Versus Apprehension: The Paradox

Importantly, research suggests that speaking anxiety cannot be explained solely by linguistic proficiency or communicative skill. McCroskey and Beatty (1988), through quantitative survey research using Communication Apprehension scales with American university students, identified a paradox: individuals with adequate or even high communicative competence may continue to experience substantial apprehension, particularly in public or evaluative speaking contexts. Their findings indicate that communication apprehension functions, in part, as a trait-like affective disposition that is not automatically eliminated by skill mastery alone.

This paradox is further reinforced by Khaidzir et al. (2024), who conducted a quantitative correlational study involving 121 Malaysian university ESL students. Despite participants’ generally satisfactory English-language proficiency, no significant relationship was found between language proficiency and public-speaking anxiety. These findings collectively suggest that technical competence or perceived communicative ability is

insufficient to eradicate anxiety, particularly in unfamiliar or high-stakes environments. Therefore, interventions must extend beyond mechanical training in presentation skills.

2.3.4. Implications for Training Design

The necessity of comprehensive intervention is further supported by Okoro and Cardon (2024), who conducted a quasi-experimental study involving nearly 200 undergraduate business students in the United States. Using pre- and post-course assessments in a semester-long business communication course, they found that participation significantly reduced apprehension in formal speaking, classroom, and group discussion contexts. However, a substantial proportion of students, particularly women, continued to report high levels of anxiety even after completing the course.

These findings underscore the limitations of performance-based instruction alone and highlight the need for long-term, programmatic interventions that address persistent emotional barriers. Although Okoro and Cardon did not directly assess emotional intelligence or reflective practices, they emphasise the potential value of integrating emotionally aware pedagogy into communication training. Such approaches align with holistic, learner-centred frameworks that attend not only to speaking proficiency but also to students' affective experiences as they navigate public speaking challenges.

Taken together, the literature demonstrates that public speaking anxiety is sustained by the dynamic interaction of emotional vulnerability, cognitive disruption, and affective predispositions that are not automatically resolved through skill acquisition. Effective speaking programmes must therefore address emotional regulation strategies, cognitive reframing processes, confidence-building exercises, and structured mastery experiences in tandem. Only by engaging both the emotional and cognitive dimensions of anxiety can training interventions foster durable improvements in communicative confidence and performance.

3. Methodology

This article presents the qualitative strand of a larger quasi-experimental mixed-methods study that investigated the impact of structured public speaking training on students' Communication Apprehension. While the broader research design incorporated both quantitative and qualitative components, the present paper focuses exclusively on the reflective journals produced by students in the experimental group.

The reflective journals were collected throughout the intervention period to document students' evolving emotional experiences, self-perceptions, and perceived shifts in speaking confidence. By foregrounding learners' subjective narratives, this qualitative strand offers deeper insight into the affective and psychological dimensions of public speaking development.

3.1. Participants

This article focuses on the reflective journals written by students in the experimental group of the larger quasi-experimental study. The participants comprised 16 first-semester diploma students (aged 18–20) from the Department of Petrochemical Engineering at a Malaysian polytechnic. All were enrolled in the Technical English 1 (DUE10062) course and participated



in a structured public-speaking training programme integrated into the curriculum. The group consisted of 61.4% male and 38.6% female students.

3.1.1. English Language Proficiency

Participants demonstrated varying levels of English proficiency, as indicated by their Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia (SPM) English results. The majority earned a passing grade (C or above), whereas a minority earned lower grades (D or E), indicating a mixed proficiency profile within the group. This variation provided a realistic representation of typical polytechnic ESL classrooms, in which learners enter tertiary education with diverse linguistic backgrounds.

3.1.2. Prior Speaking Experience

Regarding speaking background, only 25% of the experimental group reported having prior public speaking experience during secondary school. Although 81.3% had delivered at least one group project or oral presentation, their exposure to structured, formal public speaking activities remained limited. At the tertiary level, participation in formal presentation tasks was minimal: only 6.3% had delivered a PowerPoint presentation, and 12.5% had participated in a group project presentation.

Furthermore, only 11.4% of participants in both the experimental and control groups reported receiving formal training in public speaking or communication before the study. This lack of systematic training highlights the need for structured intervention in speaking pedagogy.

3.1.3. Baseline Communication Apprehension

When asked to self-report their comfort level with public speaking, 43.8% of students in the experimental group reported being “somewhat uncomfortable,” while 50.0% reported being neutral. Notably, none identified themselves as either “very comfortable” or “very uncomfortable.” This distribution suggests a moderate baseline level of communication apprehension, making the group particularly appropriate for examining emotional development and confidence-building in response to a structured public-speaking intervention.

3.2. Public Speaking Training Intervention

The experimental group participated in an 11-session structured public-speaking training programme designed to reduce communication apprehension and systematically enhance presentation competence. The intervention was embedded in a semester-long Technical English course, in which all students were required to deliver a graded oral presentation that accounted for 20% of their final course assessment. The training programme was therefore structured to support students’ preparation for this high-stakes task, with particular emphasis on emotional regulation, speech organisation, delivery techniques, and audience engagement.

The intervention was delivered across a 14-week semester in biweekly two-hour sessions. The design drew upon validated instructional frameworks and was informed by experiential learning principles, emphasising active participation, iterative practice, and reflective integration. Each session incorporated four core components: (1) instructor-led input, (2) guided practice activities, (3) peer and facilitator feedback, and (4) structured reflection. The programme was inspired by established public speaking development models,

including Toastmasters International, and integrated content adapted from a validated training manual.

To strengthen practical applicability, three thematic strands were strategically interwoven throughout the sessions: Audience Research, Using AI for Speech Development, and Managing Q&A Sessions. These themes were embedded progressively to enhance students' readiness for authentic speaking situations and to ensure that skill development extended beyond performance mechanics to include content development and audience responsiveness.

3.2.1. Programme Sequencing and Skill Development

The intervention followed a scaffolded structure to facilitate gradual skill acquisition and emotional adaptation across 11 sessions.

The initial phase focused on cognitive reframing and anxiety management. Activities were designed to help students normalise public-speaking fears and challenge negative self-perceptions, using cognitive-behavioural techniques. Session 1 centred on identifying common public-speaking fears and reframing maladaptive thoughts, while Session 2 introduced breathing exercises, visualisation strategies, and confident self-introduction practices to build early mastery experiences.

Sessions 3 to 5 shifted attention toward structural and rhetorical dimensions of speech construction. These sessions emphasised message clarity, logical organisation, and expressive delivery techniques. Students practised crafting coherent introductions, developing supporting points, and structuring conclusions to enhance clarity and persuasive impact.

In Sessions 6 and 7, the focus moved to physical and vocal delivery. Students engaged in activities targeting body language, eye contact, gesture control, vocal variation, pacing, and stage presence. These sessions aimed to strengthen embodied confidence and expressive authenticity.

The middle-to-later phase of the programme (Sessions 8 and 9) introduced strategies for researching credible sources and conducting audience analysis. By integrating audience research techniques, students were encouraged to tailor their messages strategically, thereby increasing both the relevance and the confidence in their content delivery.

Session 10 concentrated on the purposeful integration of visual aids. Students learned to design and use slides effectively to support key messages without overreliance on textual prompts, thereby reinforcing clarity and audience engagement.

Finally, Session 11 culminated in delivering a persuasive speech and developing strategies for managing question-and-answer (Q&A) sessions. This final session addressed challenges in spontaneous speaking and equipped students with techniques for responding confidently in evaluative contexts.

3.2.2. Reflective Component



Each session concluded with a structured reflective activity. Students were prompted to document their emotional responses, perceived progress, challenges encountered, and strategies used to manage anxiety. These reflective journals served as the primary qualitative data source for the present study.

Through these reflections, students articulated their evolving perceptions, emotional adjustments, and developing communicative identities across the intervention period. The integration of reflection within the instructional design not only consolidated learning but also enabled a systematic exploration of the emotional and cognitive dimensions of confidence-building throughout the structured training programme.

3.3. Reflective Journals

To ensure that students' reflective journal entries were pedagogically grounded and theoretically aligned, the reflection prompts were designed based on Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory (1984). Kolb's framework conceptualises learning as a cyclical process comprising four interrelated stages: Concrete Experience, Reflective Observation, Abstract Conceptualisation, and Active Experimentation. This model provided a structured foundation for guiding students' reflections in a systematic, developmentally meaningful manner.

Following each public speaking training session, students in the experimental group were provided with a reflection sheet containing guided questions aligned with these four stages. During the Concrete Experience stage, students were prompted to recall specific speaking tasks or activities they had completed during the session. This encouraged them to anchor their reflections in tangible experiences rather than general impressions.

During the Reflective Observation stage, students were asked to describe their emotional and physiological responses, such as nervousness, confidence, trembling, or increased comfort. They were encouraged to identify moments of success or challenge and to evaluate how these experiences affected their overall performance. This stage allowed learners to articulate their internal reactions and begin recognising patterns in their emotional responses.

The Abstract Conceptualisation stage required students to interpret their experiences more analytically. They were prompted to evaluate the effectiveness of techniques used during the session, such as breathing exercises, audience analysis strategies, and delivery techniques, and to articulate new insights gained about public speaking. Students were also asked to reflect on how their perceptions of themselves as speakers may have shifted.

Finally, under the Active Experimentation stage, participants were encouraged to consider how they would apply newly acquired skills or strategies in future speaking situations. They were invited to propose adjustments to training techniques to suit their individual learning needs better and to identify specific goals for subsequent presentations. This forward-looking component fostered intentional skill development and reinforced the transfer of learning beyond the immediate session.

This structured journaling approach facilitated purposeful self-reflection across both cognitive and emotional dimensions of learning. By maintaining consistent prompts across sessions, the study ensured systematic data collection, enabling longitudinal examination of students' evolving confidence, emotional regulation strategies, and identity development as

speakers. The reflective journals thus served not only as a pedagogical tool for consolidating learning but also as a rich qualitative dataset capturing the internalisation of anxiety-reduction techniques and the gradual transformation of communication apprehension over time.

3.4. Data Analysis

The primary dataset for this qualitative component comprised 176 reflective journal entries produced by 16 students across 11 structured public speaking training sessions. Each journal entry was completed immediately after a training session and subsequently transcribed verbatim by the researcher. To examine these reflections, the study employed inductive thematic analysis, allowing patterns and themes to emerge directly from students' accounts rather than being constrained by predetermined categories. The analysis focused on how students described emotional responses, perceived challenges, confidence development, and sense-making of the learning process throughout the intervention.

The analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework for thematic analysis, which provides a systematic yet flexible approach to identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns within qualitative data. Thematic analysis was selected because it enables themes to emerge inductively from participants' narratives while maintaining analytic rigour through a structured yet recursive process. Consistent with Braun and Clarke's model, the analysis involved (1) familiarisation with the data, (2) generation of initial codes, (3) searching for themes, (4) reviewing themes, (5) defining and naming themes, and (6) producing the report. Although these phases are presented sequentially for clarity, the analytic process was iterative rather than strictly linear, with back-and-forth movement between stages as understanding deepened.

During the familiarisation phase, the researcher conducted repeated readings of the complete set of journal entries to develop an in-depth understanding of participants' reflections. Analytic memos documented early impressions, recurring emotional patterns, and preliminary indications of developmental change across sessions. In the coding phase, all journal entries were imported into ATLAS.ti, where systematic line-by-line coding was undertaken at the sentence and phrase levels. Codes were generated inductively to represent distinct emotional states, coping behaviours, perceived turning points, and emerging insights. Examples of initial codes included "fear of being judged," "calmed down after practice," and "learned to manage nerves." Codes were reviewed and refined iteratively to enhance conceptual clarity, minimise redundancy, and ensure consistent application across the dataset.

Subsequently, patterns among codes were examined to identify broader themes that captured shared meanings across participants. This phase involved grouping conceptually related codes into preliminary thematic categories and tracing emotional shifts across the 11-session intervention. The emerging themes were then systematically reviewed against both coded extracts and the full dataset to ensure internal coherence, conceptual distinctiveness, and alignment with participants' lived experiences. Themes were further refined and clearly defined to articulate their analytical boundaries and relevance to the study's research objectives and theoretical framework, particularly regarding communication apprehension and self-efficacy development.

In the final stage, the themes were organised into a coherent narrative account supported by illustrative excerpts from participants' reflections. The findings were interpreted in dialogue

with relevant theoretical perspectives and empirical literature to generate meaningful insights into the emotional and cognitive dimensions of public speaking development. Throughout the analytic process, ATLAS.ti was used to manage the dataset, organise coded material, and enhance analytic transparency. This structured yet reflexive procedure ensured that the analysis remained grounded in participants' narratives while maintaining methodological rigour.

3.5. Ethical Considerations

Ethical clearance for this study was obtained from two institutions to ensure compliance with established research governance standards. Approval was first granted by the Research Ethics Committee of Universiti Malaysia Sarawak (UNIMAS) [Ref: UNIMAS/NC-21.02/03-02 Jld.4 (113)] on 22 August 2023. Institutional approval was subsequently obtained from Politeknik Kuching Sarawak under the authority of the Head of the Research, Innovation and Commercialisation Unit on 9 February 2023.

Before participation, students were fully informed about the study's objectives, procedures, and data collection methods. Written informed consent was obtained from all participants. They were explicitly assured that participation was entirely voluntary and that their decision to participate or withdraw would not affect their academic assessments or course outcomes.

To safeguard confidentiality, all participants were assigned anonymised identification codes during data analysis and reporting. No identifying information was included in published findings. All digital data, including reflective journals and transcripts, was securely stored in password-protected folders accessible only to the research team. These measures were implemented to ensure participant privacy, data protection, and adherence to ethical research standards throughout the study.

3.6. Practitioner Reflection and Professional Growth

As both instructor and researcher, my role in this study extended beyond delivering structured training content. What initially began as a carefully planned public speaking intervention gradually evolved into a transformative process of pedagogical reflection and professional growth. At the outset, my instructional emphasis centred primarily on technical aspects of presentation skills, including speech organisation, vocal projection, clarity, and eye contact. The intervention design was structured and systematic, with clear objectives tied to performance improvement.

However, during the initial sessions, I observed patterns that the lesson plan alone could not address. Several students entered the classroom exhibiting visible signs of anxiety, such as fidgeting, avoiding eye contact, speaking in barely audible voices, or hesitating before participation. Despite demonstrating adequate written language proficiency, some expressed reluctance to engage in oral activities. These early observations prompted deeper reflection on the affective dimensions of learning that were not fully accounted for in my original instructional design.

A pivotal moment occurred when a typically reserved student wrote in her reflective journal that she "felt her chest tighten" whenever she stood to speak. This expression of



embodied anxiety served as a turning point in my understanding of students' lived experiences. It highlighted the emotional burden of public speaking for some learners, an aspect that could not be resolved by technique-focused instruction alone. This insight prompted a shift in my pedagogical approach.

Subsequently, I began integrating intentional emotional check-ins and low-stakes small-group warm-up activities before formal speaking tasks. These adjustments aimed to create a psychologically safer environment and gradually desensitise students to performance pressure. I also revised my feedback strategy to adopt a more strengths-based orientation, emphasising effort, incremental progress, and specific improvements before addressing areas for refinement. This shift sought to reinforce mastery experiences and reduce fear of negative evaluation.

Engaging in iterative observation, reviewing students' reflections, and responding adaptively became central to the action research process. The reflective journals not only informed the qualitative analysis but also directly shaped instructional decisions. In parallel, I maintained a personal teaching journal to document classroom dynamics, moments of tension, breakthroughs, and emerging student insights. These entries frequently informed subsequent lesson planning, particularly when recurring themes of apprehension or hesitation were identified. Through this reflective cycle, I became increasingly attuned to students' non-verbal cues and emotional shifts, learning to pause instruction, reframe tasks, or provide reassurance when signs of overwhelm were evident.

Ultimately, this action research experience reinforced my conviction that communication instruction must integrate both cognitive structure and emotional responsiveness. Technical competence alone does not guarantee communicative confidence; rather, meaningful development occurs when learners feel psychologically safe, heard, and supported. The most significant student growth emerged not simply from repeated practice, but from environments characterised by empathy, affirmation, and constructive challenge.

Professionally, this experience has reshaped my pedagogical philosophy. I now conceptualise public speaking not merely as a performative skill to be mastered, but as a developmental and identity-shaping process that requires trust, reflection, and relational awareness within the classroom. This study, therefore, contributed not only to students' communicative development but also to my ongoing evolution as a reflective practitioner.

3.7. Future Research Cycle and Pedagogical Refinement

Consistent with the cyclical and iterative principles of action research, this study is not conceptualised as a one-off intervention but as the initial phase of an ongoing process of pedagogical refinement. The findings derived from students' reflective journals provide critical insights that inform planned enhancements for subsequent cycles of the public speaking training programme. These refinements are intended to deepen emotional support mechanisms while simultaneously fostering greater learner autonomy.

First, the programme's early sessions will be revised to place greater emphasis on emotional regulation strategies. While anxiety-reduction techniques have previously been introduced, future iterations will incorporate more structured cognitive reframing exercises, guided emotional awareness activities, and systematic desensitisation. The aim is to normalise

anxiety as part of the public speaking experience and equip students with practical tools to manage physiological and cognitive stress responses more effectively from the outset.

Second, a peer mentorship component will be introduced. Students who have previously completed the training programme will be invited to share their experiences, coping strategies, and growth narratives with new participants. This near-peer support model is expected to enhance relatability, reduce perceived performance pressure, and cultivate a stronger sense of classroom community. By observing peers who have successfully navigated similar challenges, current participants may experience increased vicarious self-efficacy and reduced fear of negative evaluation.

Third, formative peer evaluation will be integrated more systematically throughout the programme. Rather than focusing feedback primarily on major performance milestones, structured peer assessment activities will occur at multiple points throughout the training cycle. These evaluations will be designed as low-stakes opportunities for constructive dialogue, enabling students to develop evaluative judgment, reflective listening skills, and collaborative learning habits. Importantly, this approach aims to transform feedback from a source of anxiety into a tool for shared growth.

Collectively, these enhancements constitute the proposed second cycle of the action research project. The next phase will evaluate how integrating strengthened emotional scaffolding, peer mentorship, and formative feedback influences learners' confidence, emotional regulation capacity, and communicative competence over time. By maintaining the cyclical process of planning, acting, observing, and reflecting, the study seeks to support continuous instructional improvement while deepening understanding of the affective and experiential dimensions of public speaking development.

Through this iterative refinement, the research advances a model of communication instruction that evolves responsively in dialogue with learners' lived experiences, ensuring that pedagogical practices remain both evidence-informed and contextually grounded.

4. Findings

This section presents and interprets the five core themes that emerged from the thematic analysis of students' reflective journals following their participation in the 11-session structured public speaking training intervention. The identified themes are: (1) Nervousness and Anxiety, (2) Intimidation and Self-Doubt, (3) Growth in Confidence Through Practice, (4) Comfort in Familiarity with Audience, and (5) Physical Symptoms of Anxiety.

Each theme is discussed in relation to relevant theoretical frameworks and empirical literature to illuminate how structured public speaking training influences learners' emotional and cognitive experiences over time.

4.1. Nervousness and Anxiety

Nervousness and anxiety emerged as a foundational theme across the dataset, reported by all 16 participants in their initial journal entries. The uniformity of this theme suggests that emotional apprehension constituted the baseline experience from which most students began

their public speaking journey. Participants described intense fear, unease, and anticipatory worry when required to speak in front of an audience.

For instance, Participant 2 wrote:

“At first, I feel nervous, my hands are shaking, and I am scared to speak in front of lots of people.”

Similarly, Participant 11 reflected:

“When I was called to present, I felt my heart beating fast and couldn’t think properly.”

These reflections illustrate heightened emotional and physiological arousal commonly associated with public speaking anxiety. The language used, “shaking,” “scared,” “heart beating fast,” and “couldn’t think properly”, captures both affective and cognitive disruptions occurring simultaneously.

From a theoretical standpoint, these findings align closely with McCroskey’s (1984) Communication Apprehension theory, which conceptualises anxiety as a fear associated with real or anticipated communication. Although communication apprehension is often described as a relatively stable, trait-like disposition, the reflections in this study more clearly illustrate state-based anxiety context-dependent emotional reactions triggered by unfamiliar audiences, perceived performance stakes, and fear of negative evaluation. The participants’ narratives reveal that anxiety was activated not merely by speaking itself, but by the social and evaluative context surrounding the task.

Empirical research supports these patterns. In a mixed-methods study involving 130 Malaysian ESL learners preparing for the MUET–CEFR oral assessment, Zulkflee et al. (2023) reported that more than 44% of participants experienced high levels of anxiety. Identified triggers included fear of unexpected questions, concerns about limited language proficiency, and inadequate preparation. These stressors resulted not only in cognitive overload but also in observable physical symptoms such as trembling and rapid heartbeat. Similarly, Shaalan (2025), in a qualitative study of Arab EFL learners in Egypt, found that speaking tasks were frequently perceived as emotionally charged events shaped by institutional pressure, limited opportunities for practice, and heightened sensitivity to peer judgment. Both studies emphasise how high-stakes evaluative environments amplify apprehension.

Beyond situational triggers, learners’ internal belief systems also played a crucial role. Bandura’s (1977) Self-Efficacy Theory provides an explanatory lens for understanding why anxiety may intensify when individuals doubt their competence. Students with low self-efficacy, those who question their ability to succeed, are particularly vulnerable to anxiety in meaningful or publicly evaluated tasks. This perceived inadequacy often initiates a self-reinforcing cycle: anxiety impairs performance, perceived failure further diminishes confidence, and subsequent speaking situations become increasingly threatening.

The present findings reinforce this cyclical dynamic. Participants’ early reflections frequently revealed anticipatory worry and fear of embarrassment, suggesting that anxiety was not solely a reaction to performance but also a reflection of their self-concept as speakers. Thus,

public speaking anxiety in this context emerges as a multidimensional phenomenon shaped by prior experiences, identity formation, and emotional readiness.

Importantly, the literature indicates that technical instruction alone is insufficient to mitigate such anxiety. McCroskey and Beatty (1986), based on survey data from American university students, argue that communication apprehension functions as a persistent affective barrier that cannot be eliminated solely through skill training. Complementing this, Agustin et al. (2022) found, in a qualitative case study of Indonesian university EFL learners, that anxiety reduction required repeated, low-stakes speaking opportunities embedded within emotionally supportive environments. Similarly, Kroczek and Mühlberger (2023) demonstrated, through experimental research with German university students, that performance improved significantly when learners were trained in psychologically safe settings that validated emotional responses and allowed for gradual exposure to public-speaking tasks.

Taken together, the theme of nervousness and anxiety in the present study reflects a broader pattern consistently observed in second-language speaking contexts. Performance anxiety is not merely a by-product of insufficient skill; rather, it is a complex emotional experience shaped by perceived evaluation, identity vulnerability, and environmental context. Addressing this phenomenon requires pedagogical interventions that prioritise emotional regulation, cultivate self-belief, and normalise fear as an integral part of the learning process.

4.2. Intimidation and Self-Doubt

Beyond general nervousness, many participants expressed deeper feelings of intimidation and self-doubt, particularly when comparing themselves to peers perceived as more fluent, articulate, or confident. These emotions functioned as a significant psychological barrier to self-expression and participation. Rather than motivating improvement, peer comparison often reinforced feelings of inadequacy.

Participant 1 candidly reflected:

“I feel intimidated, especially in front of Participant 10 and Participant 9, because I think they are better than me.”

This statement illustrates the internalisation of social comparison and the perception of hierarchical competence within the classroom. The emotional burden described here reflects not only anxiety about the speaking task itself, but also anxiety about perceived relative standing among peers. When learners interpret others’ strengths as evidence of their own shortcomings, their willingness to engage can diminish substantially.

Bandura’s (1977) Self-Efficacy Theory provides a useful explanatory lens for understanding this dynamic. According to Bandura, vicarious experiences observing others succeed or struggle play a critical role in shaping individuals’ beliefs about their own capabilities. While exposure to successful peers can enhance motivation when similarity is perceived, it may instead undermine self-efficacy when learners view those peers as fundamentally more capable or superior. In such cases, observational comparison becomes discouraging rather than empowering.

This pattern is echoed in empirical research. Hashmi (2025), in a qualitative case study involving focus groups with 33 students at a private university in Dubai, found that many learners experienced heightened communication apprehension when comparing themselves to more confident classmates. Participants frequently interpreted peer fluency not as a source of inspiration but as confirmation of their own perceived inadequacy. Such interpretations often led to withdrawal, reduced participation, and avoidance of speaking opportunities.

Similarly, Shaalan (2025), in a qualitative study of Arab EFL learners, observed that students commonly minimised their own achievements while overestimating their peers' competence. This distortion was particularly evident during high-stakes speaking tasks, where performance pressure intensified sensitivity to peer judgment. Participants described public speaking in English as emotionally taxing, not solely because of linguistic difficulty, but also because of the implicit expectation to perform at a near-native level in front of others. Together, these findings suggest that peer presence in speaking contexts can function as a double-edged sword. While collaborative learning environments are often promoted as supportive, they may inadvertently amplify social comparison if not carefully scaffolded. The emotional experience of intimidation is therefore not merely an individual psychological issue but also a socially constructed phenomenon shaped by classroom norms and implicit performance hierarchies.

From a pedagogical perspective, these insights underscore the need for intentional classroom structuring. Peer interaction remains a powerful instructional tool; however, it must be framed within a culture that emphasises collaboration over competition. Instructors can mitigate intimidation by positioning proficient peers as collaborators or mentors rather than benchmarks of comparison. Establishing norms that value personal growth, effort, and incremental improvement rather than relative performance can reduce the threat associated with peer evaluation.

Additionally, structured formative feedback that highlights individual progress and contextualises strengths can help recalibrate distorted self-perceptions. Creating psychologically safe spaces where vulnerability is normalised and mistakes are reframed as developmental milestones is essential for fostering resilient communicators.

In sum, the theme of intimidation and self-doubt reveals how social comparison intersects with self-efficacy beliefs to shape communicative behaviour. Addressing this dimension requires not only individual confidence-building but also deliberate cultivation of classroom cultures that transform comparison into collaboration. Such shifts are crucial for enabling learners to reinterpret intimidation as temporary and surmountable, thereby supporting the gradual development of self-assured and reflective communicators.

4.3. Growth in Confidence Through Practice

One of the most affirming outcomes of the intervention was the participants' reported increase in confidence as they progressed through the structured training programme. While early reflections were characterised by apprehension and uncertainty, later entries revealed growing ease, self-assurance, and emotional stability during speaking tasks. This trajectory illustrates a clear developmental shift from fear-based avoidance to active engagement.

Participant 7 captured this transformation succinctly:



“At first, I felt a bit nervous, but after a few practice sessions, I got used to it and am quite comfortable now.”

This statement reflects a movement from anticipatory anxiety toward habituation and competence. The phrase “got used to it” suggests not only increased familiarity but also cognitive reframing of the speaking experience from threatening to manageable. Such progression aligns closely with Bandura’s (1977) concept of mastery experiences, identified as the most influential source of self-efficacy development. According to Bandura, successful task completion, particularly when achieved through effort and repetition, strengthens individuals’ beliefs in their capabilities. In this study, repeated structured practice functioned as incremental mastery experiences that gradually reshaped learners’ self-perceptions.

Empirical research supports this pattern. Suratin and Sribayak (2025), in a mixed-methods study involving Thai adult EFL learners in a corporate training programme, found that consistent speaking opportunities, preparation time, peer discussion, and positive thinking strategies significantly reduced anxiety and enhanced confidence. Learners reported feeling increasingly self-assured when speaking tasks were scaffolded and when emotional support was embedded within the learning environment. Importantly, reflective practices such as diaries and interviews contributed to learners’ awareness of their progress, thereby reinforcing self-belief over time.

Similarly, Muhammad et al. (2025) demonstrated, in a quasi-experimental study involving 18 Indonesian university students, that structured public speaking training in psychologically safe environments produced statistically significant reductions in communication apprehension. The intervention group, which engaged in repeated, supported practice sessions, showed marked decreases in anxiety scores compared to the control group. The researchers concluded that frequent exposure to manageable speaking tasks enabled students to reframe public speaking as achievable and even rewarding, a shift mirrored in the present study’s qualitative findings.

The design of the current intervention further explains this developmental progression. Grounded in Kolb’s (1984) experiential learning cycle, the programme incorporated repeated cycles of concrete experience, reflection, conceptualisation, and reapplication. This cyclical process allowed learners to test strategies, evaluate outcomes, and refine their approaches in subsequent sessions. Rather than perceiving mistakes as failures, students increasingly interpreted them as part of the learning process.

Moreover, the structured opportunities for feedback and reflection enabled learners to internalise their improvements. Confidence gains were not merely situational but appeared to emerge from cumulative evidence of personal progress. As students documented their experiences in reflective journals, they constructed coherent narratives of growth, transforming their identities from “anxious speakers” to developing communicators who could navigate future speaking challenges with greater autonomy and composure.

In sum, the theme of growth in confidence through practice demonstrates that repeated, scaffolded exposure within emotionally supportive environments can disrupt the anxiety-performance cycle identified earlier. Confidence development was neither immediate nor linear; rather, it emerged through iterative mastery experiences reinforced by reflection and

social support. These findings underscore the importance of sustained, structured practice as a central mechanism in reducing communication apprehension and fostering durable communicative self-efficacy.

4.4. Comfort in Familiarity with the Audience

A notable theme emerging from participants' reflections was a greater sense of comfort speaking before familiar peers. Several students reported that presenting in a classroom setting with classmates they knew well significantly reduced their nervousness.

Participant 1 articulated this sentiment succinctly:

“I am comfortable speaking in front of the boys.”

Although brief, this statement reveals how social familiarity can function as a psychological buffer against communicative threat. The comfort described here does not stem solely from improved technical ability but also from the audience's perceived safety. Familiar peers were viewed as less judgmental and more supportive, thereby lowering the emotional stakes of performance.

This finding aligns closely with McCroskey's (1984) concept of audience-based communication apprehension. According to McCroskey, speakers' anxiety levels are influenced not only by the act of speaking itself but also by their perceptions of the audience. When audiences are perceived as critical, evaluative, or unfamiliar, apprehension intensifies. Conversely, when audiences are perceived as supportive and non-threatening, anxiety diminishes. In the present study, familiarity appeared to moderate emotional arousal, allowing students to focus more on message delivery than on self-monitoring or fear of negative evaluation.

Empirical research in EFL contexts reinforces this pattern. Dewi and Kadnawi (2024), in a qualitative classroom study involving Indonesian undergraduate EFL students, found that participants consistently reported feeling less anxious and more fluent when presenting to familiar classmates than to unfamiliar or formally evaluative audiences. Students described peer audiences as “less threatening” and more forgiving, enabling them to focus on communicating meaning rather than obsessing over potential errors. This shift in attentional focus is critical, as reduced self-monitoring can enhance fluency and coherence.

Similarly, Putri et al. (2023), in a qualitative case study of fifth-semester English literature students in Indonesia, observed that familiarity with classmates reduced fear of negative evaluation and encouraged experimentation with language and delivery strategies. Interview data revealed that students perceived peer audiences as emotionally safer spaces, creating opportunities for communicative risk-taking that were absent in high-stakes presentation settings.

Further support is provided by Pattah et al. (2022), who conducted a mixed-method study combining questionnaires and interviews in an Indonesian EFL classroom. Their findings indicated significantly lower anxiety levels during peer-based speaking activities compared to graded presentations. Participants explicitly attributed this reduction to familiarity

with their audience and the absence of harsh judgment, factors that increased both willingness to participate and sustained engagement in speaking tasks.

Collectively, these studies converge on the conclusion that interpersonal familiarity serves as an affective buffer, mitigating evaluative pressure and fostering early-stage confidence. Importantly, this does not imply that learners should remain confined to familiar audiences. Rather, familiarity can serve as a developmental starting point from which communicative competence and emotional resilience are gradually built.

From a pedagogical standpoint, these findings underscore the importance of progressive scaffolding in public speaking curricula. Educators may consider sequencing speaking tasks from low-stakes presentations within familiar peer groups toward increasingly formal and evaluative contexts. By doing so, familiarity becomes a foundation for skill acquisition rather than a constraint. Structured progression enables learners to consolidate confidence in psychologically safe environments before transitioning to higher-stakes communicative situations.

In sum, the theme of comfort in familiarity with the audience highlights the relational dimension of public speaking anxiety. Confidence development is not solely a matter of individual skill mastery but is deeply influenced by social context and perceived audience disposition. Designing learning environments that leverage familiarity as an early-stage support mechanism can significantly enhance emotional readiness and communicative growth.

4.5. Physical Symptoms of Anxiety

Participants in this study frequently reported experiencing physical manifestations of communication apprehension, particularly during the early stages of the public speaking training programme. These symptoms included trembling hands, rapid heartbeat, sweating, voice instability, and difficulty regulating breath, physiological responses commonly associated with performance-related anxiety.

Participant 12 described this experience vividly:

“I feel shaky and cannot control myself; my hands are cold and shaking.”

This reflection illustrates how anxiety was not merely cognitive or emotional but somatically embodied. The bodily responses described often disrupted students’ concentration, interfered with idea formulation, and negatively affected speech fluency during initial presentations. In several cases, students interpreted these physiological sensations as evidence of personal inadequacy, thereby intensifying self-doubt and reinforcing avoidance tendencies.

These findings align with McCroskey’s (1984) conceptualisation of communication apprehension as involving physiological arousal triggered by perceived communicative threat. Within this framework, bodily symptoms such as increased heart rate and muscular tension are natural stress responses to evaluation contexts. However, when learners interpret these sensations as signs of incompetence rather than temporary arousal, anxiety becomes self-reinforcing. Thus, physiological symptoms function not only as outcomes of apprehension but also as mechanisms that perpetuate it.

Empirical research supports this cyclical pattern. Muhammad et al. (2025) conducted a quasi-experimental study among Indonesian university students to examine the impact of structured public speaking training on communication apprehension. Pre- and post-test measures revealed statistically significant reductions in physical manifestations, such as trembling, rapid heartbeat, and muscle tension, among participants who underwent repeated, guided speaking practice. The researchers concluded that systematic exposure, combined with emotional regulation techniques, enabled students to gain greater control over their physiological responses during public speaking tasks.

Similarly, Shaalan (2025), in a mixed-methods study involving 111 female EFL majors in Saudi Arabia, utilised the PRCA scale alongside focus group interviews to examine communication apprehension. Quantitative results indicated high overall anxiety levels, while qualitative findings revealed that physical symptoms, such as racing heart, shaking voice, and shortness of breath, were among the most frequently reported experiences during oral tasks. Importantly, these symptoms were strongly associated with fear of negative evaluation and prior negative speaking experiences, highlighting the interconnection between emotional appraisal and bodily response in high-stakes academic contexts.

Evidence from non-EFL settings further corroborates this pattern. Okoro and Cardon (2024), studying nearly 200 undergraduate students in a U.S. business communication course, reported significant reductions in oral communication apprehension following a semester-long intervention. Nevertheless, a substantial number of students continued to experience residual physiological discomfort during speaking tasks. The authors argued that while structured instruction can alleviate apprehension in the short term, sustained and programmatic interventions are necessary to address deeply ingrained physiological responses.

Collectively, these findings reinforce the present study's conclusion that physical symptoms of anxiety constitute a prominent and persistent dimension of communication apprehension, particularly during early exposure to public speaking tasks. Crucially, the evidence suggests that these symptoms should not be treated as peripheral side effects but as central components of the anxiety experience.

Addressing physiological manifestations requires more than technical training in speech mechanics. Effective interventions must incorporate repeated exposure, breathing and relaxation techniques, cognitive reframing strategies, and psychologically safe environments that allow learners to reinterpret bodily arousal as manageable rather than debilitating. When students begin to perceive physiological activation as a normal and controllable aspect of performance rather than as evidence of incompetence, emotional resilience can gradually develop.

Thus, public speaking training programmes that integrate emotional regulation with structured practice have the potential not only to improve performance outcomes but also to foster long-term psychological adaptation and confidence in communicative settings.

5. Conclusion

The study examines the influence of structured public speaking training on the emotional and cognitive development of 16 first-semester engineering students at a Malaysian polytechnic and uncovered five themes, showing the complex emotional and cognitive journey learners



undergo as they transition from apprehensive speakers to increasingly confident communicators. This transformation was neither immediate nor uniform; rather, it unfolded through a dynamic interplay of anxiety, social comparison, embodied stress responses, repeated practice, and growing familiarity with audience contexts. Using Bandura's Self-Efficacy Theory (1977) and McCroskey's (1984) Communication Apprehension framework together can explain why some learners experience persistent anxiety despite adequate language proficiency and how structured, supportive interventions can gradually facilitate emotional recalibration and the growth of confidence.

Several important pedagogical implications emerge from these findings. First, the necessity of safe scaffolding is evident. Early-stage speaking activities should be deliberately structured to minimise evaluative pressure while maximising familiarity and psychological safety. Beginning with low-stakes, peer-based presentations allows students to develop initial mastery experiences without overwhelming emotional threat. Gradual progression toward more formal and evaluative speaking contexts can then build resilience in a developmentally appropriate manner.

Second, the study reinforces the central role of experiential learning in building confidence. When repeated practice is paired with structured reflection and constructive feedback, learners not only refine technical fluency but also strengthen emotional resilience. The cyclical process of action, reflection, and adjustment enables students to internalise progress and reframe setbacks as part of growth rather than evidence of inadequacy.

Third, affective support must be intentionally embedded within public speaking instruction. Techniques such as cognitive reframing, guided relaxation exercises, emotional check-ins, and open discussions that normalise anxiety help students reinterpret physiological arousal as manageable rather than debilitating. Addressing emotional readiness alongside technical skill development enhances the sustainability of confidence gains.

Fourth, peer modelling emerges as a powerful yet underutilised instructional strategy. Exposure to relatable peers who openly share their struggles and improvements can reduce intimidation and foster vicarious self-efficacy. Unlike idealised exemplars, near-peer models demystify the speaking process and position competence as attainable rather than exceptional.

By centring students' voices and emotional narratives, this study advances a more humanised and context-sensitive understanding of the development of public speaking. The findings suggest that the true value of structured training lies not only in measurable performance improvements but also in reshaping learners' self-perceptions and communicative identities. Such transformation extends beyond the classroom, contributing not only to academic success but also to the cultivation of lifelong communication competence and emotional adaptability in professional and social contexts.

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