Techniques for Reducing Public Speaking Anxiety in Adult English Learners

A Field Project Presented to
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Master of Arts in Teaching English To Speakers of Other Languages

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in

TEACHING ENGLISH TO SPEAKERS OF OTHER LANGUAGES

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Under the guidance and approval of the committee, and approval by all the members, this field project has been accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree.

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This work is dedicated to English learners who hope to use public speaking skills as a means toward a better life.

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ABSTRACT

Making presentations to a group is a complex skill that takes time to develop, and it can be intimidating and anxiety inducing. Using mindset theory and feedback from interviews with community college teachers, this teacher's guide, *Techniques for Reducing Public Speaking Anxiety in Adult English Learners*, discusses approaches for reducing anxiety in an adult ESOL/EFL speaking classroom. It discusses the importance of providing a safe and comfortable environment to practice and manage anxiety, building good support structures, providing clear rubrics and student roles, and offering plenty of opportunities for interaction through purposeful communication. This guide holds significance for students, teachers, professors, administrators, and others teaching public speaking skills to adult English learners.
CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

We are all, at certain points in our lives, confronted with the need - sometimes sudden, sometimes pressing - to give an “elevator pitch”. This comes up in moments where we must prove or persuade, convince, or perhaps even confront. For some situations when we have an audience, how well we say something will be a major factor in determining whether we get what we want out of the situation (like a critical moment with a landlord or potential employer). Imagine then what is involved when you must orally communicate, to convey important information to an audience of one or more, in a language and within a culture of which you are not entirely fluent.

This capstone project is intended to provide instructors with the proper tools to help adult multilingual learners (MLL) speak their voice in front of their peers, while managing the fear.

Statement of the Problem

Of the language skills, speaking is the most difficult one to master (Hinkel, 2005). It is not commonly supported with real situations in the classroom (Gan, 2012). Oral presentations are not a simple task. Giving oral presentations in English is a “skill requiring complex sociolinguistic as well as cognitive understandings, especially for learners of English as an Additional or Foreign Language (EAL/EFL)” (Morita, 2000; Adams, 2004, as cited in Yu & Cadman, 2009).

Once MLLs reach the intermediate level and beyond, reading and writing activities fill more of their time in school (Williams & Roberts, 2011). Relatively few for-credit speaking courses are taught by English to Speakers of Other Language (ESOL) departments (previously
referred to as English as a Second Language, or ESL) in the U.S. community college system (Rodriguez et al., 2019).

For those adults who are learning English as a foreign language (EFL) in non-English speaking countries, the opportunities to speak English are even slimmer. In recent years, higher education institutions have recognized the importance of international applicant’s oral skills, and included speaking assessment in their language entrance requirements, including on the TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language) (Zappa-Hollman, 2007). Fluency in a language means having the skills and confidence to share your opinions and voice your ideas in an organized fashion, and in turn, to be heard. For someone learning the language and also adapting to the culture, gaining an ample amount of speaking skill can set you up for academic success and open up many career opportunities.

Instruction in ESOL and EFL classrooms rarely focus on the important skill of performing oral presentations, and little research has been done in the area of oral presentations in the classroom, at least in an EFL context (Yu & Cadman, 2009). Most MLLs coming out of ESOL community college and overseas EFL schools do not have sufficient speaking abilities in English to smoothly transition to English at the postsecondary level or to business contexts that require speaking (e.g. in meetings and customer facing situations). More resources aimed at the sociolinguistic and sociocultural levels need to be provided for MLLs to obtain advanced speaking abilities for many real-life contexts.

There are plenty of ways to make speaking in the classroom meaningful for the students. Some studies show that the integration of students’ personal narratives into the curriculum strengthens their self-identity, self-efficacy, and connection to the classroom and the community (Nicholas, Rossiter & Abbott, 2011; Poupore, 2014; Fouratt, 2020). Teachers and administrators
should look thoroughly at how they can include their students’ stories into English language instruction, to help them tell their story in their L2. And it is important that teachers hear students’ stories, to understand their students, and to respond to their needs.

Attention must be spent on the many students who are challenged by the experience of speaking in public. Clear strategies must be provided to these learners so they can cope with the anxiety that typically comes with such an endeavor.

**Purpose of the Project**

This study aims to explore ways teachers can encourage speaking in the language classroom, with a particular focus on public speaking. Much about learning a language involves identity, culture, and experiences, unique and shared. There are many benefits to be gained by the learner, their classmates, the teacher, as well as the broader community, extending out to the world.

This project provides approaches for helping MLLs adjust to the challenges and demands of oral presentations; strategies which have proven to help ease the students into performing this language/life skill; ways to keep the audience members (the student’s peers) engaged and positive, thus helping the student feel welcomed, unintimidated and appreciated.

**Theoretical Framework**

Dweck’s (2006) mindset theory, stemming from research in educational psychology, is used as a framework for this field project. Engendering a growth mindset in learners means encouraging them to believe that they can develop and grow their intelligence and their skills; they are not helpless. Students with a growth mindset are willing to expose a deficiency for the sake of correcting it. A growth mindset can form the base of a larger meaning system that can,
under good conditions, help people engage in challenge seeking behaviors, as well as thoughts and actions that lead them closer to their goals. Although mindset theory is used primarily in the context of helping children who underperform in K-12 education, this theory can be applied in all educational scenarios, including to those explored in this field project.

**Significance of the Project**

This field project may be of benefit to students, teachers, professors, administrators, and other researchers in the field of SLA. It may hold significance for teacher preparation programs, specifically for those planning on teaching oral presentation skills or public speaking skills to intermediate and advanced English learners. It may also help instructors and meeting hosts be more aware of the fears of public speaking and provide answers to how those fears can be confronted.
CHAPTER II
REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Overview

Students at the post-secondary level learning English to Speakers of Other Language (ESOL) or English as a Foreign Language (EFL) would benefit from assistance with speaking skills to prepare them for college and career, and to overcome fears of public speaking. The body of scholarship that justifies this claim includes three sets of evidence/reasons that demonstrate that: a) telling and listening to personal narratives provides opportunities for enhanced language learning, greater authenticity, affect, and motivation in the ESOL/EFL classroom; b) oral presentations are student-centered, communicative, and also increase motivation, leading to improved language skills; c) a variety of practices have proven to help reduce public speaking anxiety (PSA) in the speaking classroom and beyond.

Dweck’s (2006) mindset theory can be used to frame this body of scholarship. Side-by-side reasoning is used to connect these pieces of evidence/reasons because the literature includes different authors, theorists, experts, studies, and/or statistics. A visual representation of the logic equation is as follows: R1, R2, R3 \implies C (Machi & McEvoy, 2012, p. 97).

Theoretical Framework

Mindset theory (Dweck, 2006) stems from research in educational psychology. It challenges us to consider that attributes like intelligence, morality or personality can be shaped and developed. It posits that a learner thinks about effort and difficulty in one of two ways: with a fixed or growth mindset. How one perceives their abilities plays a direct role in their motivation and achievement. Nordin and Broeckelman-Post write that “mindset theory can be
useful in giving researchers a framework for understanding the internal psychological processes that influence external behavioral efforts to succeed” (Nordin & Broeckelman-Post, 2019, p. 45).

According to mindset theory, someone with a fixed mindset thinks of their intelligence as being up for judgment. They run from difficulty/error instead of engaging with it. When faced with a setback, they may blame themselves, exhibit a helpless response, or show a decrease in performance (Dweck & Yeager, 2019). Someone with a growth mindset understands that their abilities can be developed. They are willing to expose a deficiency for the sake of correcting it (Dweck, 2014).

Teaching a growth mindset uses a memorable metaphor in order to convey information about the neuroplasticity of the brain to students: “the brain is like a muscle—it gets stronger (and smarter) when you exercise it” (Yeager et al., 2019). But merely defining the mindset does not motivate sustained behavioral change. Concrete actions must be outlined in order to implement the growth mindset, such as “You exercise your brain by working on material that makes you think hard in school” (Dweck & Yeager, 2019).

The findings of Dweck and Yeager (2019) suggest that a growth mindset can form the base of a larger meaning system that can, under good conditions, help people engage in challenge seeking behaviors, as well as thoughts and actions that lead them closer to their goals. “When people view ability as something that can be improved, then developing that ability (by taking on challenging learning goals) can become more important, effort may be seen as a tool in this process, and setbacks can more readily be seen as information about the learning process. When this happens, persistence can be sustained.” (Dweck & Yeager, 2019) Studies have shown that “by focusing curricula on the psychological factors students bring into the classroom (such as mindset) has been shown to improve motivation, increase grades, and decrease achievement
gaps based on race, gender, and social class” (Nordin & Broeckelman-Post, 2019, p. 46).

In studies focused on introversion, individuals with a growth mindset towards introversion “believed they could get over shyness and viewed social situations positively” (Beer, 2002, as cited in Nordin and Broeckelman-Post, 2019). They also avoided social situations less than those with a fixed mindset towards introversion (Beer, 2002). Students with a growth mindset toward public speaking were less anxious and more confident (Stewart et al., 2017, as cited in Nordin and Broeckelman-Post, 2019). Nordin and Broeckelman-Post propose that perhaps “interventions geared toward a growth communication mindset can also function as a treatment for PSA” (Nordin & Broeckelman-Post, 2019, p. 53).

Although this theory is in its early stages, it shows promise for all areas of learning including in the area of second language acquisition, and for the purposes of this project: improvement of oral presentation skills and management of public speaking anxiety.

The Learner’s Personal Story

Research demonstrates that the introduction of students’ narratives into the curriculum brings many benefits to the classroom. This includes (a) a study that claims that stories increase the authenticity, richness and effectiveness of the language learning experience, and introduces the values of collaborative learning (Nicholas, Rossiter & Abbott, 2011) (b) a study that articulates how story content affects learner motivation (Poupore, 2014) (c) a study that looks at how highlighting the experiences of students with the topic of migration through story can build academic confidence and classroom community, and work against dominant assimilationist paradigms (Fouratt, 2020). This is important because taken together, these studies show that telling and listening to personal narratives provides opportunities for enhanced language
learning, greater authenticity, affect, and motivation in the ESOL/EFL classroom.

**Benefits of Personal Narrative in the Classroom**

Nicholas et al. (2011) gathered feedback from five ESOL instructors and nine adult ESOL learners (seven women and two men), enrolled in ESOL classes at a settlement agency - a service for immigrants and refugees - in Edmonton, Alberta, Canada. The learners were from China, India, Japan, Lebanon, Pakistan, and Singapore, and they spoke Mandarin, Bengali, Hindi, Punjabi, Japanese, Arabic, Urdu, and Cantonese. The majority of the participants had only lived in Canada between 1 and 18 months.

Feedback from these participants revealed many benefits from introducing personal narratives into the classroom. Firstly, stories provide an element of authenticity. Instructors described learners’ personal stories as “immediate, relevant, intimate, and alive” (Nicholas et al. 2011, p. 260). These qualities correspond to the aspects of authenticity proposed by Guariento and Morley. Authentic material provides a genuine purpose for the students. It emphasizes real-world goals, fosters classroom interaction, and promotes engagement (Guariento & Morley, 2001, as cited in Nicholas et al., 2011).

Secondly, stories contributed to a positive affect with the students, thus leading to confidence and increased motivation. Wajnryb (2003, as cited in Nicholas et al., 2011) suggests that the sharing of stories can help to develop personal relationships between the learners, which can be a powerful motivator. This has also been acknowledged by other researchers (e.g., Johansson, et al., 2000; Sauvé, 2005; Shanahan, 1997, as cited in Nicholas et al., 2011). The students state in this study that they felt the story sharing engaged them in the classroom. Sauvé (2005, as cited in Nicholas et al., 2011) writes that we desire to tell stories and, in turn, to
receive recognition for them.

In addition, stories increase the richness of the language learning experience, as a way to bring in new language. Users’ own stories increase the effectiveness of learning new vocabulary. Students learn about the sequencing of narrative and the grammar of a story: beginnings and endings, main and supporting ideas.

Feedback from these participants also proved that stories introduced the values of collaborative learning, the creation of connections with other learners in the class, and increased social interaction, values which have been identified by other researchers (Auerbach, 1992, 1996; Weinstein, 1999, 2004, as cited in Nicholas et al., 2011).

In these ESOL classes, students themselves were able to determine what topics could be discussed, whether they be controversial, religious, ethical, or moral issues. This freedom promotes individual agency among learners while they reconstruct their sense of self.

**Life Themes Are More Motivating**

Glen Poupore’s (2014) study aimed to identify what sorts of story themes would help generate motivational engagement in a language learning task. Learners’ intrinsic motivation is known to be critical to successful learning (Ushioda, 2008, as cited in Poupore, 2014).

The participants in Poupore’s (2014) study included 38 adult Korean English learners of intermediate proficiency, who were enrolled in a conversation course as part of a TESOL certificate program operated by a Korean university. 15 tasks were part of the conversation course, including jigsaw/information gap, problem solving, decision making, opinion exchange, and prediction. These tasks included texts retrieved from television sitcoms, film, short stories, Internet websites, and other reading-based texts. In terms of content: “different topics included
world peace, world cultures, charities and volunteerism, the death penalty, famous people, issues surrounding the historical event of 9-11, humorous or dramatic situations in TV sitcoms and movies, love and romance, adultery, and stories of personal development” (p. 74). Tasks were performed in either groups of three or four and lasted, on average, 23 minutes long.

Once students participated in the group tasks, their thoughts and feelings about the content in those tasks were analyzed via a task motivation questionnaire, a topic preference questionnaire, and interviews with learners.

Poupore (2014) concluded that more life themes should be incorporated into adult-based courses, especially through story-based texts. Themes of the more mature, controversial and scandalous life-related issues are particularly motivating, and deserve greater consideration as language learning material. On the other hand, topics which are centered around global and political issues - those associated with abstractness, complexity, heaviness, or negative mental-emotional connotations - should be approached with caution. “Learners tend to lack the background knowledge needed, both in terms of content and language, to be able to successfully understand and discuss such issues” (p. 87).

**Building Confidence and Community Through Personal Migration Stories**

In line with these findings are those provided by Caitlin Fouratt (2020), whose students interviewed and wrote about each other’s migration stories for a Migration & Modernity upper-division class at California State University, Long Beach during the fall 2019 semester. Fouratt made observations and collected twenty-eight students’ evaluations regarding the assignment. The majority of students were first generation immigrants. 43 percent of students on campus identified as Hispanic/Latino, and most of them had been touched by immigration in
some way.

Fouratt’s (2020) article brings up the many difficult issues that immigrant students face regarding culture and identity, xenophobia, transnational family-life, and immigration enforcement. The study describes the benefits of students sharing their personal stories about their experience with migration. Responses from students showed that storytelling not only set the tone for the course and built connections among students, it also built academic confidence and classroom community among these mostly first-generation students. “Listening to each other’s stories created a foundation of respect and community for the course as a whole” (p. 49).

As the students in Fouratt’s (2020) class worked together to understand global migration, their stories also helped to disrupt an “Anglo-conformity” (Spickard, 2009, as cited in Fouratt, 2020) that does not recognize the diversity of the origins of where Americans come from. Fouratt states that as a whole, narratives of migration are narrow and assimilationist.

In summary, research demonstrates that sharing stories in the classroom, especially personal life stories, cause learners to become motivationally, emotionally, and cognitively active. Storytelling activities in turn promote classroom discussion, and provide a strong motivational foundation for task design and the promotion of target language development. These findings are shared by (a) Nicholas et al. (2011), who reveals many benefits from introducing personal narratives into the classroom, including richness of the language learning experience and individual agency among learners (b) Poupore (2014), who investigates what kinds of story themes would help generate motivational engagement, and (c) Fouratt (2020), who claims that students affected by immigration hold dear the stories of their classmates, and not only provides the benefits described above, but also can be used to disrupt linear assimilationist paradigms around concepts of immigration. Taken together, this body of research
justifies that telling and listening to personal narratives provides opportunities for enhanced language learning, greater authenticity, affect, and motivation in the ESOL/EFL classroom. Related to this is a body of scholarship that demonstrates that oral presentations are student-centered, communicative, and increase motivation, leading to improved language skills.

**Oral Presentations in the ESOL/EFL Classroom**

Research demonstrates that shared personal narratives are authentic, engaging, motivating, and enhance community-building. Research has also revealed many benefits gained by students who perform oral presentations in class, including language skills, critical thinking skills, and collaborative learning skills. Zappa-Hollman (2007) confirms that oral presentations improve critical thinking in non-native English speaking (NNES) students in upper academia. They also highlight the crucial role that oral speech plays in socializing students into their classrooms and into post-secondary contexts. Gürbüz and Cabaroğlu (2021) also cites the many benefits of improved oral presentation skills, and aided with guidance from the teacher. Taken together, these studies support the claim that oral presentations are student-centered and also increase motivation, leading to improved language skills.

**The Challenges of Oral Presentations for Non-Native Speakers**

Zappa-Hollman’s (2007) study looks closely at the demands associated with advanced oral activities in a university setting. Universities which use English as the primary medium of instruction require that students possess advanced speaking ability. However, there has been relatively little research on the development of oral academic discourse. The purpose of Zappa-Hollman’s study is to contribute to the knowledge about the kinds of challenges
associated with oral activities (including academic presentations). Zappa-Hollman also wants to see how well the non-native English speakers (NNES) participants coped with those challenges.

Zappa-Hollman studied seven graduate courses for one semester across a wide range of disciplines at a large research-based university in Western Canada where academic presentations were one of the required course assignments. Classes included anthropology research methods, comparative history, a biochemistry course on cellular analysis, and a neuroscience course on different approaches to the study of the nervous system. The participants were 18 NNES and 37 native English speaking students. Six of the 18 NNES students participated more fully in all phases of the study. Students did oral presentations of academic material in front of the class and then participated in a follow-up period of lengthy questions and discussion with their instructor and fellow classmates. The author notes that “the success of the academic presentation was largely measured by the degree of audience engagement during this discussion” (p. 466).

Zappa-Hollman outlines the dimensions of the interrelated problems connected to the students’ challenges:

- Linguistic (e.g., unclear pronunciation, lack of vocabulary, or limited fluency);
- Sociocultural (e.g., lack of familiarity with academic presentations or rejection of the presenter qualities valued in their Canadian courses); and
- Psychological (e.g., shyness, fear of presenting in front of a large audience) (p. 479)

NNES students clearly had difficulty trying to convey the same amount of complexity and sophistication as in their L1, which led to high levels of anxiety and nervousness leading up to and during their academic presentations. Regarding the amount of time preparing the academic presentation, “NNESs spent 30% more time than their native English speaker (NES)
counterparts while engaging in similar kinds and amounts of literacy activities (i.e., reading materials, producing slides, etc.)” (p. 470). Some of the NNESs were very successful at expressing elaborate ideas, even though they reported an inability to portray themselves as ‘smart’ in front of their peers and instructors. In spite of their fears of being perceived as intellectually inferior, this study showed that the NES peers were not in fact judging them. The NES peers expressed great admiration for their courage by being enrolled in a graduate studies course in a foreign language and in a foreign country. Unfortunately, this feedback from the NES was not communicated to the NNESs, who would most likely have received encouragement from such statements (p. 474). This study gives insight into the high expectations placed on some NNES students at the university level, and how they cope.

The benefits of oral presentations are apparent to the instructors leading these classes. The syllabus asks the students to provide “an appropriate environment to generate discussion and active participation” with their academic presentations (p. 469). Academic presentations are seen by instructors as a chance for the students to become better critical thinkers; “an instance of academic apprenticeship through which the students become familiar with the skills and subject matter associated with their respective fields; to learn about ‘how to sound and how to act’ according to the values promoted in each field, as well as in each specific course” (p. 468).

Likewise, many of the participants in this study “expressed a vested interest in becoming socialized into the Canadian graduate school culture” (p. 478). The students acknowledged it would take much effort and time to achieve their goal.

**Oral Presentations Improve Language Skills and Critical Thinking**

Gürbüz and Cabaroğlu (2021) share similar insights about the benefits of oral
presentations in the classroom. Oral presentations improve language skills and critical thinking, and they are skills which prepare students for a professional field. Like Zappa-Hollman, Gürbüz and Cabaroğlu’s study looks at students’ perceptions of oral presentations in the language class, but in the context of an EFL classroom situated in Turkey.

In Gürbüz and Cabaroğlu’s (2021) study, the participants were 29 EFL students in a Listening & Speaking course over a period of twelve weeks: 24 males and 5 females between 18 and 23 years old, who attended a one-year intensive English preparatory program at a state university in Turkey. The first three weeks of this course was composed of preliminary, guided instruction on theoretical and practical information about oral presentations (e.g., speech fundamentals, different types of speeches, techniques and strategies; and examples of successful and unsuccessful presentations). The study procedure involved a pre-survey, voluntary and mandatory oral presentations (up to three), self-reflections and peer evaluations, a post-survey, and semi-structured interviews.

Gürbüz and Cabaroğlu argue that while the integration and equal distribution of all four language skill areas are often problematic in EFL settings, the inclusion of oral presentations into the curriculum might solve this problem, since oral presentations require all of these skills.

The participants in Gürbüz and Cabaroğlu’s (2021) study were more supported in their pursuit of improving oral presentation skills than the participants in Zappa-Hollman’s study. Guided instruction and peer feedback were valued by students.

In addition, students found oral presentations highly motivating “due to the appreciation and positive and constructive feedback provided by peers” (Gürbüz & Cabaroğlu, 2021, p. 610). Kim (2002, as cited in Gürbüz & Cabaroğlu, 2021) believes this is because “oral presentations break the monotony of language learning and thus motivate both students and teachers” (p. 610).
In summary, research demonstrates that language learners benefit from the creation and performance of oral presentations. Zappa-Hollman’s (2007) study focused on the experiences and challenges faced by a particular group of NNES students in Canada. While it is evident that oral presentations help to socialize students into post-secondary contexts and in preparation for the professional sphere, Zappa-Hollman believes these students could be helped further through modeling of the activity by the teacher and explicit communication of expectations. Gürbüz and Cabaroğlu (2021) also cites the many benefits of improved oral presentation skills aided with guidance from the teacher. Taken together, these studies support the claim that oral presentations are student-centered and motivational, leading to improved language skills.

**Confronting and Managing the Fear of Public Speaking**

Research has also demonstrated that the primary obstacle to advancing one’s oral presentation skills is the fear or anxiety that comes with physically speaking in front of an audience. A variety of methods have been proven to reduce this anxiety. Bodie (2010) reviews three primary categories of techniques available to instructors to reduce PSA. Based on results from his qualitative study, Tsang (2020) recommends that speech practice must be done in front of audience members - not alone - in order to reduce PSA, and teachers should provide post-presentation feedback and focus on developing student’s self-efficacy. Recent experiments have shown promise of the use of virtual reality technology as a preliminary substitute for a live audience in order to help alleviate PSA (Lindner et al., 2018). Taken together, these studies support the claim that the tools are available to support ESOL/EFL students with the anxiety that comes with public speaking at the post-secondary level.

Bodie’s (2010) comprehensive review of the literature on PSA begins by defining the
condition of PSA: a “situation-specific social anxiety that arises from the real or anticipated enactment of an oral presentation” (p. 72). PSA, and more broadly, communication-based anxiety, can be classified in six ways (see Table 1).

**Table 1**

*Six-Way Classification for the Conceptualization and Measurement of PSA*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Three-Systems Distinction</th>
<th>State</th>
<th>Trait</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Physiological</td>
<td>Physiological arousal (e.g., heart rate) during one or more speaking milestones</td>
<td>Physiological arousability and/or psychological reactivity to a public speaking stressor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cognitive</td>
<td>Psychological anxiety during one or more speaking milestones</td>
<td>Feelings about public speaking in general and/or general feelings about specific time points of speeches</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Behavioral</td>
<td>Behavioral manifestations of anxiety during one or more speaking milestones</td>
<td>Typical behavioral responses to most public speaking situations</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Anxiety has a trait-state distinction, as well as physiological, cognitive, and behavioral manifestations. Trait anxiety is a disposition where people generally feel anxious about public speaking, in a wide variety of contexts. Anxiety can also be measured to be more state-specific, meaning that it is limited to a given context. Anxiety can be manifested physiologically (e.g. racing heart), behaviorally (e.g. trembling, stammering), or cognitively (e.g. worrying, self-depreciating thoughts) (Bodie, 2010).

Due to these factors, PSA can limit a speaker’s ability to succeed with their presentation
and thus fail to properly connect to the audience as intended. Students suffering from this anxiety may decide to avoid the experience altogether, or perhaps they reach the podium but then panic (Tillson, 2015). Learners’ anxiety reduces communicative effectiveness (Richmond, Wrench, and McCroskey, 2013, as cited in Tsang, 2020). Tee, Tjin Ai Tan, and Kamarulzaman write that communication-based anxiety can have add-on negative effects, in education, “leading to drop-outs; the workforce, leading to low income; and social relationships, leading to a loss of self-confidence and motivation” (Tee et al., 2020, p. 58).

**Techniques for Managing PSA**

Bodie describes the three primary methods researchers have taken to manage PSA: systematic desensitization (SD), cognitive modification (CM), and skills training (ST). SD attempts to mentally and subconsciously disassociate anxiety from the triggering event. SD involves first encouraging the subject to relax by directing them through progressive muscle relaxation or guided imagery. Then the subject is asked to imagine a stressful public speaking experience which introduces them to increasingly more anxiety producing situations. The subject would be asked, for example, to: “imagine reading about a speech”, later, “imagine watching a speech”, eventually, “imagine making a speech”. It is an iterative process whose purpose is to condition the mind to gradually become more comfortable with what are initially seen as threatening situations.

Cognitive modification (CM) attempts to replace the negative cognitions towards public speaking with more positive views. This technique typically follows three steps:

1) discussing specific fears about public speaking including

2) negative self statements; then,
3) a trained therapist shows how each belief is irrational and introduces a coping statement (e.g., ‘I can handle this’) that can be used while speaking (Bodie, 2010, p. 87-88).

Finally, Skills Training (ST) involves teaching the necessary skills of public speaking. Advocates of this approach believe that providing learners with the knowledge and techniques of public speaking will reduce anxiety, but studies show that this approach does not directly address PSA (Bodie, 2010, p. 89).

The effectiveness of each of these techniques is dependent on the levels of trait PSA. Bodie cautions researchers, therapists and instructors to take care in how they treat their students for PSA. Research suggests starting PSA treatment with SD is the best option for those with high trait PSA. However, “the process of identifying high trait PSAs presents the possibility of stigmatizing or ostracizing students, offering SD as a self-administered option to reduce PSA may be preferred” (p. 87). Bodie writes that the most effective treatment for PSA “begins with SD or CM and ends with ST”, although “the order of remediation should align with an individual’s personality and not necessarily a standard order” (p. 91). So teachers should use their own judgment in how to implement their strategy for the reduction of PSA within a given classroom. It’s important to note that - once the students begin to practice in front of one or more peers - this continual exposure to the arousing situation is one primary factor in reducing PSA (Bodie, 2010, p 87, 91).

Although there is no empirical evidence that specific feedback has a direct effect on PSA, Bodie stresses the importance of useful feedback. Interestingly, research shows that “negative comments are perceived as more helpful than positive ones, especially when these comments focus on the most needed areas of improvement for a particular speaker”. Bodie also recommends that students evaluate their speech by videotaping it and viewing it afterwards,
citing a study which shows that “student evaluation of their videotaped speech can help decrease the discrepancy between student and observers anxiety ratings” (p. 90).

**The Importance of Practicing in Front of an Audience**

In the area of skills training, Tsang (2020) argues for more training in delivery skills (e.g. body language; interaction with audience; voice). They write, “competence in this form of communication is regarded as the one of the most important qualifications of university graduates nowadays” (p. 1061). Tsang’s mixed study looks at students’ self-perceived presentation delivery and PSA, with the help of 211 student participants from a Hong Kong university. Tsang chose the 12-item version of Personal Report of Confidence as a Speaker (PRCS), designed by Hook, Smith, and Valentiner (2008) to assess PSA levels using a five-point Likert-type scale.

Participants in Tsang’s study were then asked to self-rate their performance on 23 delivery aspects of presentation, including how natural they look with body movements (e.g. arms and hands) when delivering a speech. They also rated themselves on other delivery aspects such as confidence, speed of speech, mistake management, and how often they rehearse before making a speech. Six participants also were involved in follow-up interviews to discuss primary quantitative findings with the researcher/interviewer.

Tsang’s study found that “the higher the ratings the learners gave to their performances in these areas, the less anxious they were about public speaking” (p. 1068), except for rehearsals for presentations. Interviews revealed that feedback from the audience plays a very important role. Participants thought that rehearsing more may make you feel more confident “as far as familiarization with the content of a presentation is concerned … but fear about facing the
audience and audience’s responses are still present” (p. 1067).

Tsang recommends that speech practice must be done in front of audience members - not alone in their bedroom for instance - in order to reduce PSA. Teachers should also 1) provide post-presentation feedback and 2) focus on developing student’s self-efficacy.

**Virtual Reality as a Form of Exposure Therapy**

Coming back to Bodie’s recommendation to start PSA treatment with systematic desensitization, one area of research in this area that is gaining steam is the use of virtual reality exposure therapy (VRET). Exposure therapy involves a treatment program based in cognitive behavioral therapy. Lindner et al.’s (2018) quantitative study validates the use of affordable VERT using consumer hardware and software. The study involved Swedish adults recruited from the general public who were either assigned a therapy session in person, or were led themselves through a similar intervention online at home.

For the three hour in-person session, participants were led through “15 minutes of initial psychoeducation and functional analysis, followed by a sequence of approximately eight exposure exercises with different speech tasks of increasing severity.” Therapists - four worked on the study - “were encouraged to tailor the later exercises to the idiosyncratic catastrophic beliefs of the participant” (p. 47). The participant then carried out exercises wearing a Samsung Gear VR headset or, if at home, a Google Cardboard headset (costing approximately 5 USD a piece) connected to a VR-compatible smartphone (e.g. featuring a gyroscope).

Speech exercises included holding an unprepared speech for two minutes on a random topic, “with no or little preparation time, with the rationale that unprepared speeches are typically associated with greater anticipatory anxiety and that excessive speech preparation and
reading line-by-line are common safety behaviors” (p. 47). The study used software called VirtualSpeech - explicitly designed for public speaking practice - to imitate/reproduce a watching audience. Three scenarios were used: an auditorium (large audience seated at some distance), a meeting room (small audience seated at close distance), and a wedding reception (medium audience seated at a medium distance). All scenarios featured realistic looking video-recorded audience members.

Upon completion of the speech exercise, and after removing the VR headset, participants evaluated their performance together with the therapist (or through guided instructions if online). “The participant then listened to the audio recording with eyes shut, and used mental imagery to imagine seeing themselves in the third person in the same virtual environment of the speech they performed.” Previous research has shown that “using audio feedback to reduce self-attention promotes reduced performance anxiety” (p. 47). The hope with these exercises was that any catastrophic beliefs would gradually be disproved.

For the next three weeks of the study, participants were led through an online exercise planning and evaluation form, as well as a brief psychoeducation section repeating and extending key PSA and treatment concepts, all monitored by a therapist. "Participants were instructed to plan, perform and evaluate two in-vivo exposure exercises per week. Example exercises included arranging their own meetings and presenting, attending public meetings and asking questions, and pretending to talk on the phone in front of people on the bus or train ... In addition to sending reminders, therapists answered questions when asked, and reinforced and encouraged adherence" (p. 48).

The study found that participants who completed at least one exposure exercise in the week prior to measurement experienced a decrease in PSA. However, “this association was
found only in the arm that received therapist-led one-session treatment (OST). The most parsimonious interpretation of this finding is that the self-led OST intervention, while leading to a similar initial decrease in PSA symptoms, was not as successful in preparing participants for the real-life exposure that followed” (p. 52). Therefore, now that virtual reality technology has recently become more accessible to classrooms and to students outside the classroom, VRET shows real promise towards helping students reduce PSA.

In summary, a variety of methods are available to teachers to reduce anxiety in the speaking classroom. Bodie (2010) provides the three primary categories that have been established through careful research. One study (Tsang, 2020) argues that in the area of skills training, students who self-rated their delivery skills higher had less perceived anxiety in front of the classroom. Tsang concludes that teachers should focus on developing students’ self-efficacy to help motivate the students towards developing these skills. A new look at addressing PSA is being done in the technology sphere, including a study by Lindner et al. (2018) which shows a measured decrease in anxiety through the use of virtual reality.

**Summary**

This literature review argues that ESOL/EFL students at the post-secondary level need assistance with speaking skills to prepare them for college and career. One key hurdle faced by many students is anxiety and fear of public speaking. ESOL/EFL Teachers should understand the latest pedagogical techniques that can motivate students, reduce their PSA, and allow their stories to be heard. Evidence that supports this claim includes: a) telling and listening to personal narratives provides opportunities for enhanced language learning, greater authenticity, affect, and motivation in the ESOL/EFL classroom; b) oral presentations are student-centered
and motivational, leading to improved language skills; c) Strategies exist to help reduce public speaking anxiety in the speaking classroom. This evidence can be understood through the theoretical frameworks of growth mindset. This claim and body of evidence addresses the need for teachers to focus on preparatory steps ESOL/EFL students at the post-secondary level need to get beyond their anxieties. For this field project, I have created a guide for ESOL/EFL teachers containing best practices for managing and reducing PSA, so that students can become fully engaged in their oral presentation projects, and to gain more communicative competence and self-efficacy.
CHAPTER III

THE PROJECT AND ITS DEVELOPMENT

Brief Description of the Project

This project is a written guide, built from knowledge in the literature and through discussions with teachers in ESOL classrooms that include a public speaking component. It is intended to help ESOL/EFL teachers introduce oral presentation skills in a speaking classroom, with the keen awareness that public speaking anxiety (PSA) can be a big hindrance to the process. This project explains PSA and then discusses a variety of techniques in the classroom to help students improve their public speaking skill while managing any anxiety.

Figure 2
Table of Contents

The sections of this guide have been developed as follows:

The section titled “Introduction” introduces the usefulness of oral presentation skills; it
explains the difficulties adults have speaking in a new language, and the importance of the teacher’s attitudes toward and understanding of PSA.

The section titled “Managing Public Speaking Anxiety” has three subsections:

➔ The “What is Public Speaking Anxiety” subsection describes the effects of PSA and its widespread occurrence in the population. It explores a variety of reasons why Multilingual learners (MLLs) may feel anxiety.

➔ The “Proven Strategies from Therapy Research” subsection summarizes three approaches proven in the field of therapy: Systematic Desensitization, Cognitive Modification, and Skills Training. This information is based primarily on Graham Bodie’s comprehensive review of the literature on PSA: “A racing heart, rattling knees, and ruminative thoughts: Defining, explaining, and treating public speaking anxiety” (Bodie, 2010).

➔ The “Identifying Student Anxiety” subsection describes the questionnaires frequently used by therapists and teachers to assess whether their patients/students may be suffering from PSA.
The section titled “Classroom Methods” has four subsections:

➔ The “Making Connection” subsection focuses on how to approach the first one or two sessions of class. It talks about techniques and approaches to help students feel recognized and to connect with you and with one another. It also considers how students can begin giving very brief speeches on personal topics through giving introductions or performing a show-and-tell.

➔ The “Interaction” subsection discusses how to bring students together in purposeful, communicative activities in pairs and groups to perform dialogues
and cooperative learning activities. Other topics include: allowing opportunities for all students a chance to speak; treating misunderstandings as a learning experience; and allowing students ample time to familiarize themselves with the language being used.

Figure 4
Excerpt from the “Classroom Methods > Interaction” subsection

➔ The “Public Speaking Preparation and Practice” subsection discusses how to slowly introduce the concepts of public speaking to students, and how to help them prepare and practice, in groups, in the classroom, and individually. It outlines how approaches may differ between low level and more advanced
classrooms. This subsection also discusses the importance of a supportive audience, validating language, and roles for the presentation stage. Advice is provided for teachers on helping panicking students cope. Tips are also listed for helping students prepare and deal with the anxiety in the moments before they are scheduled to begin presenting.

→ The “Feedback” subsection discusses how to provide feedback so that students do not become discouraged. Feedback - coming in a variety of forms from the teacher as well as other students - must be delivered in a way so that students do not feel overwhelmed, embarrassed, or overly criticized.

Finally, the design for this guide was inspired by the PDF publication “English as a Second Language in California’s Community Colleges”, published in 2019 by the Public Policy Institute of California. Stock photos were found on stock.adobe.com and istockphoto.com websites, and two images were artificially generated (see endnotes).

Development of the Project

Toastmasters

This project stems from my own fascination with the experience of public speaking. I’ve never considered myself good at public speaking, and I hadn’t given much thought towards improving the skill until the fall of 2019, when I decided to become a member of a local ToastMasters club¹. My desire to improve my public speaking arose around the same time I was wrapping up my previous career in software development, and I was also seriously considering TESOL as a new career. Software development does not involve much speaking in front of

¹ Toastmasters is a non-profit educational organization which helps individuals with their communication, public speaking, and leadership skills. They operate clubs internationally.
crowds. I anticipated that my next career would be more public facing and people-focused.

Although Toastmasters does not have a mandatory meeting format, good club leaders provide a clear agenda and clearly defined roles for participants who have signed up before the meeting. Participants are encouraged to be welcoming, supportive and positive. Every meeting I have attended has included these traits in spades, and the meetings are always well planned. Organized and positive members keep the meeting moving with purpose. There are also opportunities for guests and newcomers to participate by introducing themselves and perhaps by making a short speech.

Toastmasters meetings are a kind of advanced speaking classroom. The meeting is very communicative. There is a good amount of opportunity to practice the language with room to make mistakes. Participants may present prepared five to ten minute speeches. Or, for the meeting segment called “Table Topics”, they may be called upon to spontaneously answer a question (or describe something, or give an opinion) in the time span of one to two minutes.

I am aware of two English learner themed Toastmaster clubs: ESL Masters, and ESL Club No.1. Both of these clubs are based in Southern California and attended predominantly by adults interested in improving their English skills. Due to the recent pandemic, many Toastmaster meetings (including these two clubs) are now held online, and occasional meetings held in person. I attended each of these clubs online (each were one hour and a half long meetings). The community I found online was very friendly, supportive and clearly committed to improving their English speaking skills. Although this was not a requirement for either club, they did have one or two native English speakers present, and each presented briefly on something of value to the English Language Learners (for example, idioms or tongue twisters).

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2 Club information for ESL Masters: https://eslmasters.toastmastersclubs.org/, and ESL Club No.1: https://esl1.toastmastersclubs.org/ (both on Facebook)
Because of the well organized format with clear roles assigned from the beginning, participants who have attended a meeting or two become quickly aware of the basic language they need to use (for instance: to announce who won the most votes in the impromptu speech, or to indicate how many “uh”s and “um”s were misspoken during each person’s speech). They can even prepare this language in advance.

Connections can be made in any context once you are allowed to let your guard down and open up. I could see that anxiety was an issue for the majority of us. One of the main challenges for participants in a Toastmaster meeting, or a speaking class, is to see the situation as non-threatening, to become comfortable and open to the experience. If the intention is to learn, these are critical pieces of the learning experience. Being provided time to speak in front of a group of others means being given power and holding power. In addition, there is power in sharing out to the audience. Although this experience can be intimidating, it can also lead to a transformative experience for everyone involved.

The experiences at my regular Toastmasters club meetings, of sharing with strangers who I otherwise would have never met, helped confirm to myself that I obtained joy in public speaking and in learning about other people and their stories. Although I thoroughly enjoy working alone on logically challenging detail-oriented problems, I also yearned to be in a supportive role, guiding others through problems and feeling rewarded by that engaging process. Teaching seemed like a good next step. As a teacher, I look forward to generating positive, empowering learning experiences. Public speaking is one route towards that kind of transformation.
Determining the focus

Since the fall of 2021, I have been volunteering with adult English programs. I can attest to the pressure students feel expressing ideas and thoughts in a new language. Learning public speaking skills is a critical chapter for the intermediate to advanced language learner, and is an important topic for the field of ESOL, for all of the reasons described in Chapter II.

Public speaking is commonly discussed in the context of business and professional development, leadership skills, and academic preparation. There are many books and online resources which go over the basics of public speaking skills: body language, eye contact, gestures, projecting the voice, etc. Any teacher can find this information and include them in their activities, and these are all helpful.

Core to any public speaking curriculum is also learning how to use the language itself to make a great presentation. It is an individualized process involving a number of linked stages. The speechmaker must ask questions like: What is my topic? Who is my audience? What language do I need to use? How do I organize my facts and ideas? What techniques can I use to deliver an effective presentation? The process of learning to create, shape and present language is central to any ESOL class.

After exploring all of the various aspects of public speaking, I decided I wanted to best understand the influence of affective factors in the student’s experience. I was especially struck by a paper by Dr. Lou Davidson Tillson (2015) in the Kentucky Journal of Communication. In 2009, Murray State University - where Dr. Tillson taught - began requiring that all college undergraduates take a public speaking class. Tillson’s paper opens with a quote about an experience shared by Dr. Jim McCroskey from several decades before. Dr. McCroskey is well known for his work in communication apprehension:
“One evening I received a phone call at home from a Penn State psychologist (McCroskey was an instructor there at that time). He asked me some questions about one of my students, wanting to know if this student was scheduled to present her speech the following day. I informed him that she was. I asked him why he wanted to know. He informed me that they had just rescued this student from an attempt to commit suicide by jumping off the top of one of the highest buildings at the university. She had indicated that she just could not face having to give another speech. Needless to say, this shook me up. I had never noticed this student to be any more reticent than any other students” (McCroskey, 2009, as cited in Tillson, 2015).

Dr. Tilson created a co-requisite Public Speaking Anxiety Management class in order to assist students who needed additional support with the anxiety they were feeling in the primary communications class. It occurred to me that this step of exposing college level communication students to the concepts around PSA should also be considered for English language learners.

Communication anxiety is troublesome, and yet, so much can be done to manage it and bring it under control. I found Graham D. Bodie’s (2010) paper “A Racing Heart, Rattling Knees, and Ruminative Thoughts: Defining, Explaining, and Treating Public Speaking Anxiety” very helpful towards understanding the various forms of and treatments for PSA. This contributed to the bulk of my writing in the section titled “Proven Strategies from Therapy Research”.

In this research journey of mine, and with sights towards my future as an ESOL instructor, I wanted to understand the techniques used in the classroom to address the anxiety students feel. With his goal in mind, I reached out to six current teachers of listening and speaking classes at community colleges in the Bay Area, California. These are the primary questions I asked:
1. Briefly explain a class or classes you have taught involving public speaking.

2. What are suggested approaches for helping English Language Learners adjust to the challenges and demands of oral presentations?

3. How has the experience influenced your students’ motivation?

4. Which strategies have proven to help ease the students into performing this language/life skill? Do you have them practice a lot; in small groups?

5. How have students handled the experience?

6. What are the impressions of audience members throughout the public speaking experience?

7. PSA is fear of evaluation by peers. What approaches or techniques do you yourself do to help the speaker feel welcomed, unintimidated and appreciated? And what are the instructions for the audience members to also provide this result?

8. How do you provide constructive feedback?

Using these questions as a starting point, I recorded these discussions over Zoom and transcribed the conversations. The content garnered from these conversations was very helpful and informative, and makes up the bulk of my section titled “Classroom Methods”. One may argue that adults who have enrolled themselves in a class learning another language may already be self-motivated enough to fight through the anxiety they face just learning the language. But my conversations with these teachers in the field have shown otherwise.

Theory

When it comes to finding a theoretical framework behind research on teaching public speaking to language learners, there are many concepts which easily present themselves and can
be explored: identity and the self, communicative and cultural competence, interaction, discourse, funds of knowledge, the list goes on and on. I decided mindset theory (“growth mindset”) was an appropriate foundation for this project. Much of the work in public speaking depends on pushing outside of one’s comfort zone. Confidence can be gained through practice, but also through the encouragement from supporters around you. If students feel safe in their classroom, have a supportive teacher cheering them on, and have peers who act as their audience and struggle along with them, this can be a good incubator for students preparing for real world interactions.

Some aspects of this research led me to writings by coaches, advisors, and learning gurus with long lists of advice about how to manage PSA. It is a popular topic sought out by people at all levels of business who need to speak and positively present themselves for marketing opportunities, for conventions, or for business meetings. I avoided including this kind of information in my project, since many of these resources fail to provide the necessary research backing up their points.

This project has been an enjoyable and interesting learning experience. This initially started as a curious fascination with public speaking and an attempt to improve my skills in this area. It has become a very involved research project allowing me to learn a great deal, to connect with experts in the field, and, most importantly, an opportunity for me to better understand the experience of my multilingual students.

The Project

The project can be found in its entirety in the Appendix.
CHAPTER IV
CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusions

Many multilingual learners coming out of ESOL community college and overseas EFL schools do not have sufficient speaking abilities in English to smoothly transition to English at the postsecondary level or to business contexts that require speaking. Instruction in ESOL and EFL classrooms, particularly for advanced English learners, should focus on the important skill of performing oral presentations to prepare their learners for a successful and productive future in their English speaking community and workplace. Oral presentations benefit students with skills in all four language areas, critical thinking skills, and collaborative learning skills. It also socializes students into their classrooms and into post-secondary contexts. But presenting orally is a complex task that takes time to develop, and can be especially intimidating and anxiety inducing. The ESOL/EFL teacher must help them with these skills by providing a safe and comfortable environment to practice and manage the anxiety.

Dweck’s (2006) mindset theory has been used to frame this body of scholarship. The growth mindset theory - primarily used in the area of K-12 education - is built on the principles of neuroplasticity. Cognitive training - mental activities meant to improve one’s academic skills - has demonstrated that a growth mindset can be adopted by children (Chen et al. 2022). Nordin and Broeckelman-Post (2019) propose that these same kinds of interventions can also function as a treatment for PSA in people of any age. A teacher encouraging students to adopt a growth mindset may: ask students to focus on what they can control; show them clear action steps through skills training so students can achieve their goal; encourage them to stay motivated and keep trying through lots of practice; make it clear that it’s an ongoing process - our abilities are
developed over time. These kinds of approaches reside in a similar vein as approaches to managing public speaking anxiety as summarized by Graham Bodie (2010):

- **Systematic desensitization** is an attempt to condition the mind to gradually become more comfortable by gradually walking them through the idea of doing public speaking. The goal is to disassociate anxiety from the triggering event, to essentially “grow out” of the anxiety.

- **Cognitive modification** attempts to replace the negative cognitions towards public speaking with more positive views. Cognitive modification uses two successful approaches: 1) **Communication-orientation modification** encourages individuals to develop a communication-oriented view of public speaking - to view public speaking as a conversation, not as a performance. Students who consider public speaking to be more similar to everyday conversation have shown more of a reduction of PSA than students who view it as a performance requiring special skills. Thus, like a growth mindset, this approach encourages thoughts and actions that lead students to view public speaking with a healthier, less anxious frame of mind. 2) **Positive visualization** - visualizing oneself as a competent speaker - is one way of training the brain to reduce negative thoughts attributed to anxiety.

- **Skills training** assumes that limited public speaking skills could worsen PSA. Gaining the knowledge and techniques necessary for effective public speaking reduces the ambiguity of the public speaking situation for the learner. As long as students stay motivated and continue to practice, they will grow to become more confident, less anxious speakers.

Public speaking can be highly motivating for students when they feel appreciated and when they
are given positive and constructive feedback. Fortunately, tools are available to support
ESOL/EFL students with the anxiety that comes with public speaking at the post-secondary
level.

**Recommendations**

The teacher’s guide generated from this research is primarily intended for teachers in the
ESOL/EFL speaking classroom. However, ELT administrators and anyone involved in ELT
teacher preparation programs may also find it useful. Since native and non-native speakers of
any language may need to do public speaking, non-ESOL/EFL teachers may also find this guide
useful.

Chapter II, the literature review, may be of interest to second language acquisition
researchers and to all teachers in the speaking classroom. This chapter describes how telling and
listening to personal narratives provides opportunities for enhanced language learning, greater
authenticity, affect, and motivation in the ESOL/EFL classroom. It also discusses the benefits of
oral presentations in the classroom. Finally, it covers a variety of practices which have proven to
help reduce public speaking anxiety (PSA) in the speaking classroom and beyond.

This research and the accompanying guide may also be helpful for anyone curious about
the topic of public speaking. This may include professors, administrators, and other researchers
in the field of SLA. It may hold significance for teacher preparation programs, specifically for
those planning on teaching oral presentation skills or public speaking skills to intermediate and
advanced English learners.
Improvements and Areas for Further Research

In hindsight, this project clearly incorporates applications from therapy research and applies them to the ESOL/EFL speaking classroom. As the researcher, I did not thoroughly explore existing literature in this area. Perhaps another version of this project would more explicitly discuss the details of such an endeavor.

My teacher’s guide contains the advice of ESOL teachers from Bay Area community colleges with over 40 years of accumulated knowledge gained in the classroom. There are some topics from these conversations which gave me the impetus to do additional research outside the scope of this project, but time did not allow it. For instance, the following questions begged more scholarly exploration: Is it a good thing to relax before a speech or should you concentrate on redirecting your anxiety into excitement? And where do you draw the line between helpful and overly critical feedback?

Several robust topics were also left unexplored, including:

Virtual Reality Exposure Therapy. Although I wrote about Lindner et al.’s 2018 quantitative study showing positive effects from this therapy, I did not include any recommendation in my teacher’s guide to engage students with it. Since the majority of my experience in the classroom has not concentrated on technology solutions for language learning, and so much of my teacher’s guide relies on teacher testimonies that also do not include them, I neglected to include this discussion in my final product. I encourage teachers and future scholars to further explore this topic for the public speaking classroom.

Storytelling. How can an emphasis on community, identity, or storytelling assist language
learners towards improved public speaking? Storytelling and life-centered topics is one area that was researched but never expanded upon in my teacher’s guide. Stories, as old as time - and a resource easily tapped in any student - are the primary hook to any form of speech intended to capture an audience’s attention. I neglected to focus on how this practice can improve the learning experience, and perhaps reduce PSA.

Critical Pedagogy. One area that is receiving more attention over recent years is critical pedagogy. Dr. Patrick Camangian at USF gave me much insight into the necessity of this critical approach for English teaching pedagogy. Critical pedagogy is a form of teaching that encourages students to write and speak about their own history, story, and lived experience as a form of social activism.

Critical Pedagogy is making inroads primarily in high school classrooms in low performing schools. The ESOL/EFL classroom stands to benefit from this approach, although I did not find a great deal of literature demonstrating so.

This area of research, education, and activism is connected to themes in this project because in many cases the student’s learning culminates in making speeches inside as well as outside the classroom. Therefore, providing students with public speaking skills has the potential to introduce marginalized voices in a society where most of the dominant narratives being told are those affirming myths of success and the “American Dream”, those loyal to status quo, or deficit narratives that blame black, indigenous, and people of color.

The teacher’s role needs to be expanded to include critical pedagogy in the English language learning classroom. We need to examine ideologies or acknowledge the inherently political and politicized nature of our curriculum, and we are positioned in such a way that we
are able to witness the consequences of government policy on newcomers to this country. We need to give students a foothold towards shaping their society as well as towards communicating across cultures. This will help our students be more engaged with the cultural and political systems affecting them.

**Concluding Remarks**

It is my hope that the techniques introduced in this guide will help ESOL/EFL teachers, and in turn, their students. I also hope other researchers will continue exploring ways to assist students with public speaking in the ESOL/EFL classroom. The advantages clearly outweigh the barriers to entry. In the words of Professor of Philosophy of Education Karl Hostetler: “It is in the power of every researcher and educator to do something to improve the lives of people” (2005, p. 21).
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APPENDIX

Techniques for Reducing Public Speaking Anxiety

in Adult English Learners
Techniques for Reducing Public Speaking Anxiety in Adult English Learners

A Teacher’s Guide

Andy Mardesich
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Introduction

"Nothing diminishes anxiety faster than action." – Walter Anderson

Adults learning English in colleges, universities, or academically oriented intensive English programs face many challenges. Perhaps the most challenging of these is public speaking. These students are enrolled perhaps not out of an interest in speaking, but because it is required in their educational program. For instance, one of the "Golden Four" requirements for admission into the California State college system is successful completion of a class in oral communication. The IELTS, one of the most common tests used by people wishing to study, work or get training for their jobs in an English-speaking country, includes a speaking task where test takers are asked to talk for 1-2 minutes.

Employers find public speaking one of the most desired and hardest to find skills in college graduates, in addition to other skills such as teamwork, leadership skills, interpersonal skills, and intercultural skills¹.

The benefits of oral skills are too many to name. You could get through your life not able to read or write, but it’s going to be very challenging to get through your life without having the skills and confidence to share your opinions and voice your ideas in an organized fashion, and in turn, to be heard. For someone learning the language and also adapting to the culture, gaining an ample amount of speaking skill can set them up for academic success and open up many career opportunities.

Some argue that for language learners, speaking is the hardest skill to learn. It involves a focus on the forms and functions of language to produce meaning and coherency. Fluent speaking uses clustering, redundancy, and reduced forms. It involves understanding the main facets of good pronunciation: stress, rhythm, and intonation, as well as being able to pause or correct one’s speech while thinking what will come next. Added to the difficulties of producing understandable, effective language are situational effects. A variety of pressures may be present when speaking to strangers and in high stakes situations, such as: when feeling judged, when sticking up for oneself, when needing to manage a situation, etc. Accounting for these situational effects, speaking may not come easily even for fluent speakers.

As teachers, we want to help students communicate with skill and confidence, no matter under what circumstances they find themselves in. The most important part of teaching is not only providing instructions and reviewing grammar tenses, but also being supportive human beings, coaches, guiding our students through the thorny, difficult stages of expressing themselves in a new language. It takes a lot of effort and focus, and their performance depends critically on the expectations we have for them. A teacher and their students together should approach the learning process with a growth mindset: If you believe your abilities can be developed by
engaging with challenging situations, your skill will improve over time.

This guide is intended for anyone teaching speaking skills to adult English learners at an intermediate to advanced level, with a focus on improving their public speaking skills. This guide will address the following questions:

- How should you structure your speaking class?
- What kind of classroom environment works best for a student to comfortably use their new language?
Managing Public Speaking Anxiety

What is Public Speaking Anxiety

Public speaking anxiety (PSA) is a “situation-specific social anxiety that arises from the real or anticipated enactment of an oral presentation”\(^2\). It is a type of communication-based anxiety in which individuals are affected physiologically (e.g., a racing heart), behaviorally (e.g., trembling, stammering), or cognitively (e.g., worrying, self-deprecating thoughts).

PSA is very common - it affects 70% of the population\(^3\). It has a profound influence on people. It can be truly debilitating! Teachers who demand participation from their students must take into account this widely shared psychological trait. Ignoring the affective factors potentially experienced by students when asking them to perform highly public facing tasks can leave students spooked, or worse\(^4\).

Foreign language anxiety

Foreign language anxiety - also known as xenoglossophobia - is a significant problem in the language classroom. It is the presence of negative, fear-related emotions - apprehension, worry, and nervousness - experienced when using a foreign language. Someone who does not suffer from PSA when speaking in their native language may struggle with this anxiety when trying to speak their target language in front of a native speaking audience.

How does public speaking anxiety manifest?

PSA - and likewise, foreign language anxiety - may manifest as a personality trait: one may feel PSA in all situations of speaking in public, even if the task is not particularly challenging or threatening. For example, the anxiety may appear when someone is talking on their phone while riding amongst strangers on a bus, or when being asked to say their name at an intake desk.

PSA can also be state-specific, where it only occurs in certain situations or contexts - especially in front of large audiences, when being evaluated, impromptu speeches, etc. Trait based anxiety is generally considered to be more pervasive and long-lasting since it is neurologically based - rooted to an individual’s personality.
Anxiety lies on a spectrum. We all feel anxious in certain situations, but some people struggle with it enough to render a clinical diagnosis. The effects associated with PSA can influence us at several stages: long before, during, and after speaking in public, and these effects can have lasting impact. Students who struggle with it may avoid the experience of presenting altogether, e.g., by skipping class; or the panic may only begin to appear when the speaker reaches the front of the class; or, once they’ve begun speaking, the speaker may suddenly feel their confidence disappear and the anxiety set in. The effects of this troublesome anxiety – always perceived by the speaker as being worse than by those observing – detracts from the primary goal of connecting with the audience and can lead students to have negative views of themselves as public speakers. It is imperative we help anxiety-stricken students.

**Why do we feel anxiety?**
PSA stems from a self-protective “fight or flight” response from a primitive part of our brain - the hypothalamus - that is very hard to control. We are wired to worry about our reputation, something that is easily threatened by public speaking. Even the best orators in the world have struggled with PSA - Cicero and Mahatma Gandhi to name just a couple.

**Why do language learners feel anxiety?**
English language speakers, learning in an English-speaking country, who do not have a strong grasp of the language, may feel a whole range of emotions in the classroom, including and perhaps feeding into an anxiety. They may feel displaced, isolated, stigmatized, unwelcome, ignored, ashamed, embarrassed, humiliated, angry, frustrated, afraid, and helpless. There are many possible reasons for this. Here is a partial list:

- Most immigrants experience stress when transitioning from one culture to another.
- Newcomers may have experienced trauma from an extreme event (war, gang violence, assault, etc.) prior to or during their migration to the U.S.
- They may be linguistically marginalized by the people in their environment.
- They may have limited formal schooling, and thus feel deficient.
- They may have been labeled as poor learners and treated as deficient.
- Their experience with public speaking is limited, or they may have zero experience.
- They may have had negative experiences speaking English and have developed habitual reactions that cause them to perceive speaking English as threatening.

**How to manage the anxiety?**
There is no magic wand that will make the anxiety go away. The key is to provide situations that will help your students learn to manage it, to bring the anxiety down to a level they can work with. Fortunately, there are a variety of strategies and tools that can be administered by ESOL/EFL teachers to help their students manage anxiety.
Proven Strategies from Therapy Research

Researchers in the fields of therapy and educational psychology have found several techniques towards helping decrease PSA. These techniques can be introduced at the beginning of the semester, before assigning public speaking tasks.

**Systematic desensitization** attempts to disassociate anxiety mentally and subconsciously from the public speaking experience through repeated imagined exposure. The process involves first having the subject relax by directing them through progressive muscle relaxation, deep breathing, or guided imagery. Then the subject is asked to imagine a stressful public speaking experience which introduces them to increasingly more anxiety producing situations. The subject would be asked, for example, to: “imagine reading about a speech”, later, “imagine watching a speech”, eventually, “imagine making a speech”. It is an iterative process whose purpose is to condition the mind to gradually become more comfortable with what are initially seen as threatening situations.

**Cognitive modification** attempts to replace the negative cognitions towards public speaking with more positive views. It involves working with students through their fears around public speaking, discussing the irrationality of the fears, and introducing coping mechanisms such as ways of thinking positively and repeating positive affirmations (aka positive self-talk). These are the two most popular techniques of cognitive modification:

1. **Communication-orientation modification (COM)** therapy tries to change an individual’s orientation towards public speaking. One may view public speaking as a performance requiring special skills and the audience is there primarily to evaluate you. Or one can have a communication-oriented view where public speaking is something considered to be more similar to everyday conversation. COM aims at persuading individuals dealing with high PSA to view public speaking as less of a performance and more of an act of communication.

2. **Visualization** is conditioning the mind to achieve goals using the power of positive thinking. It has proven to reduce negative thoughts attributed to anxiety. To perform visualization to handle PSA, a subject is asked to first relax, and then, with their eyes closed, visualize themselves as competent speakers through certain moments of their speech: when they are announced to speak, when they begin speaking, the last minute of the speech, and the moment immediately afterwards. While they visualize, they are asked to imagine as many sensory details as possible. The individual can customize their visualization script however they like. Top athletes use the visualization technique when preparing to compete. It has proven to help condition the mind and body for success.
**Techniques for Reducing Public Speaking Anxiety in Adult English Learners**

Skills training assumes that limited skills can worsen PSA. It is therefore important to provide the knowledge and techniques necessary for effective public speaking - skills like vocal and nonverbal delivery, and how to organize a speech. Gaining this important knowledge reduces the ambiguity of the public speaking situation for the learner, although it is the least effective technique for reducing anxiety of those mentioned here⁶.

Once students begin speaking in front of their peers, feedback plays a very important part in their self-efficacy. Encouraging, supportive, and positive feedback helps to tone down any self-doubt students have and helps bolster their self-esteem. Students accept they need to improve, and including comments about what should be improved in feedback is always helpful.

Skills training should arguably be built into the curriculum of any speaking class which includes public speaking. In the early stages of a public speaking class, if you know that some of your students are dealing with anxiety, it is recommended that the other techniques described above (e.g., systematic desensitization) should be introduced before diving into the development of public speaking skills. Addressing the anxiety in advance of addressing the skills is the best approach.

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**Identifying Student Anxiety**

It will quickly become apparent which of your students are shy and resistant to speaking up. They may look on edge or uneasy. If there is an interest in knowing this kind of information early in the semester, or even during the enrollment process, the following questionnaires are freely available:

- The Personal Report of Public Speaking Anxiety (PRPSA)⁷ has 34 statements which use a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Scores can range from 34 and 170. A score between 98 and 131 indicates someone with average PSA. A score higher than 131 indicates high PSA.
- The Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS)⁸ is a similarly structured, 33 item questionnaire which describes specific situations that might prompt anxiety for students in a foreign language learning context.

Both of these questionnaires are freely available (although, in order to obtain reliable answers, it’s recommended you translate them into the students’ native language to avoid comprehension problems). With information from these measurement tools, you can identify those students who may struggle with PSA and foreign language anxiety more than others.

Students who have been identified as having higher than normal anxiety should not be called out or treated differently. But it may be necessary for you to give these students a little extra attention, support, and encouragement.
**Classroom Methods**

The speaking classroom should, as you can imagine, involve a lot of speaking! To perform public speaking is challenging and does not come naturally for many of us. But we all have the ability to improve. Like training for physical exercise, students can be encouraged to think of their speaking ability as a muscle they can train.

You might consider yourself an introvert, yet you can act like an extrovert when the situation demands it. This is shown through the observed behavior of touted Harvard University psychology professor and lecturer Brian Little, as told in the book “Quiet” by Susan Cain. Professor Little is a self-proclaimed introvert who generally avoids social situations. But when lecturing, he is such a crowd pleaser that his classes often end in standing ovations. Little proposes that such dramatic out of character behavior can be accomplished when we are dedicated to “core personal projects”, to work that we consider important.

Speaking is not the end product of a class involving speechmaking but should be integral to the process. We help set the stage: the way we structure our classroom and activities can have a profound impact on their comfort level.

- What tools do we provide for our students if we want them to present orally?
- What tools and strategies can we provide our students so that they can be mentally prepared for their oral presentations?

**Conceptualizing public speaking**

A speech succeeds when the audience is engaged. Although speechmaking is unique, there are many similarities to a conversation. The two sides engage one another. It is common to begin a speech by engaging the audience in some way. Engaging the audience by instructing them, questioning them, joking with them, asking for input, helps them to be invested in what you’re going to say next. It allows them to have some skin in the game.

*Speechmaking should never be thought of as a one-person activity. It is an interaction between the speaker and the audience.*

The audience also plays an important role since they can help the speaker understand how well they are being heard or understood. Audience members can give immediate feedback like “talk louder”, or by physically gesturing to their ear to indicate they cannot be heard.

But no speaking class should jump directly into public speaking. The minute you tell the students they have to do a presentation they may immediately get nervous. It should build upon short answers to questions from the teacher, simple interactions between pairs of students, and group activities.
Making Connection

Connect with your students from the beginning

- Start the class with one routine that will allow you to connect with each of your students, so they feel recognized. It could be as simple as taking role, so they hear their name. Provide a question of the day to allow for one-on-one contact and help you remember their names. Have them answer questions like “What's your favorite animal?” or “What is a food you don't like?” This allows the students to warm up to the classroom environment and for you to establish a connection.
- Be an approachable, engaging, and empathetic teacher. Make eye contact. Know your students. Be culturally aware. Appreciate their cultural diversity. Avoid thinking in terms of deficits.
- Share moments of vulnerability and stress in your own life. Perhaps you have your own experience with public speaking anxiety. What was the experience for you and how did you deal with it? Dr. Liz Boner shares the moment with her students, when she was about to speak at a conference: “I feel like I can’t breathe. If I go around the room and talk to people before my speech, it makes it real, and there’s power in sharing that.”
- The first few classes should help you and your classmates get acquainted with one another. You can use statements like: “We're all in this together. We all have a shared goal. I want you to be comfortable with each other because that’s how you will learn.” A good teacher needs to be supportive and enthusiastic, to create a warm and comfortable classroom environment.

Self-disclosure: Breaking the ice
The teacher must get to know their students, and for students to get to know each other. Questions like: “Where are you from? How many languages do you speak? What do you like to do for fun? How do you want to be called? What pronouns do you want me to use with you? Tell me something special about you, something nobody will know about you?” Be mindful of cultural limitations such as gender, age, formality, and power issues. These kinds of questions can be used for the first assignment and perhaps done in written form, or as audio or video recordings on a learning management system (LMS), to allow the students to perfect their answers before presenting. Introductions allow students to feel comfortable with themselves, encourage sharing and interaction, and begin the process of establishing the community. It also allows the teacher to begin to assess and understand each student’s speaking/presenting abilities.
Introduce methods for relaxation and positive visualization
Consider introducing therapeutic methods proven to help students with PSA before they develop their speeches – perhaps a deep breathing or a visualization exercise, or a combination of both. Students can be encouraged to use these exercises before any speech they make (see previous section).

The first presentation: Make it brief
When to begin delegating periods of time when individuals must speak in front of more than one colleague at a time is up to you. This first presentation should be done in front of a small group of peers - not in front of the whole class and teacher - to make it less intimidating. The first presentation should be very simple. For example: ask students to present another classmate to the class or to a small group. This activity can be tied into the process of student introductions. Provide a list of questions for them to ask one another. The presenter must collect the facts about their partner, then share the information with the class. Show them how to introduce. Then ask them to try.

Give them flexibility to shape their presentation however they want: They can answer each question one at a time, or to just go with the flow, however they feel natural.

Approaching students’ first speeches
• Express to the students that presenting oneself on the first day of class may be hard for some, but once you present on the first day of class, it’s never that bad again.
• You can provide a guideline that students must talk for one minute. Delegate a timekeeper. If students don’t talk for one minute, gently encourage them to keep talking.
• Ask them to do a show-and-tell (e.g., reference a picture of someone in their wallet or on their phone), something central to the students’ lives. The teacher should share first, to model an example one-minute speech (e.g., I always carry my lucky pen). Then students can share something.
• Have students tell a story from their life. For example: “What’s in a name? Give a history on your nickname, your middle name, or your last name. Do you like your name?” This is an activity that doesn’t require any major research.
• Do a debrief afterwards: Ask students to feel free to share how they felt about their first speech. Most students will agree that it wasn’t as bad as they thought it would be.
• Early on, ask your students to practice (more about this later)
Interaction

**Bring purpose to the communication**

Through the course of a class, you should have students periodically getting up and doing something producing speech, a small thing, anything that helps get them more comfortable with speaking. It is a good idea to start a speaking class with activities that allow the students to mingle and converse with one another. Encourage students to raise their hand if they feel like there’s something they want to say. Look out for situations where one person continues to be the only one speaking. It should be a conversation.

Create a climate that is conducive to authentic communication. This will obviously require some scaffolding to get things started: clear instruction about what is expected of your students and practice in the sub-skills needed. From day one of class, it is important to offer your students opportunities to use language purposefully. Integrate communicative activities such as dialogues and cooperative learning activities. Students learn best when they communicate with purpose: to find information, break down barriers, talk about themselves, and learn about culture. They also build confidence to raise questions, voice ideas, and participate in dialogue when these activities are led by the students themselves and not by the teacher. Communicative activities are especially important for beginning level learners to help them move away from fear and self-doubt toward more confident learning.

**Think-pair-share gets them speaking**

In the large classroom, it is imperative to group up the students and require they all speak to each other. Students are less tense speaking to one or two students than they are to a larger group or to the class as a whole.

A very common pedagogical approach to teaching which encourages thinking, sharing, interaction is the well-known method called “Think-Pair-Share”: 1) The teacher asks a question or provide a problem to be discussed; 2) Each student talks with their partner or group members about their ideas or responses to the question; 3) One or more students (a group leader or some subset of students) “share out” – they present their ideas or responses before the whole class. The second, core part of this activity helps students share their own thoughts without as much pressure as they would experience in front of the entire class.

Students learn from each other through mutual brainstorming, while also improving their vocabulary and grammar. Make sure learners at different skill levels who are fluent in the same language are paired together so the students who are not as advanced can get peer help in their own language and not feel too overwhelmed. This activity also helps the teacher assess students on their comprehension of the learning material. Most importantly, it gets them speaking.

**Group exercises**

Concentrating on group activities helps to steer the classroom towards a more student-centric environment. Instead of acting in response to the teacher, students may perform different roles and negotiate meaning. Compared to a classroom wide activity, students in groups are more likely to encourage each other, to become more independent, to be more motivated, to take more risks and to scaffold each other’s efforts.

The final activity of a group exercise typically involves someone from the group sharing out
something they have concluded as a group. If the groups work together over an extended time, ask that they choose a different leader from the group each time you run an exercise like this. Pay attention to the ones that always like to talk. Those students are not shy. Ask the ones who are very confident to help the ones who are not as confident. Ask them to provide a chance for someone else to speak.

**Knowing that misunderstandings are commonplace**

When you are learning another language, it’s easy to lose track of what you’re hearing. This experience can give students feelings of failure and increase their anxiety. Make sure your students know it’s OK to make mistakes, to not understand sometimes. One strength is to learn to understand that we won’t know every word we are hearing in a conversation. Even in conversations between native speakers it is completely normal for something to be misunderstood. The key is how to manage that discomfort – learn to stop and say, “I want to understand what you’re saying.”

**Don’t reject a student’s home language**

If a student is trying to explain something but can’t find the words in English, they are welcome to use their home language. Allowing this approach is showing students that their prior knowledge and experiences are respected and valued. It also encourages them to collaborate between their peers. The teacher doesn’t have to understand. You’re helping them get into the mode of talking out loud.

**Students should be familiar with the language being used**

Teachers can find many resources within textbooks and other curricular materials which provide topics for group discussion activities. For example, a consensus building task may ask students to come to an agreement that involves compromise or negotiation. It may be a problem-solving activity or a ranking activity (e.g., pick the best candidate for a job based on the provided applications). Textbooks will also provide ample language materials (vocabulary that can be used in a presentation), including listening activities, and integrated activities that allow the students to practice with the language.

Allowing students ample time to familiarize themselves with the vocabulary and grammar around a certain topic can help their confidence level when performing a given speaking activity. Nowadays, it makes better use of classroom time for this work to be done asynchronously in an LMS.

By limiting the focus on a specific unit in the textbook, students will understand the limits of that they need to present and not be overwhelmed by large topic scope or having to think outside the box. For example, students may be asked to explain gift giving customs in their family. They won’t be pressured to look for additional language materials outside of what is provided.
Public Speaking Preparation and Practice

The best way for students to improve, and to gain confidence in their speaking, is to practice. Regularly encourage students to practice at home. Some of them will. But be aware that students with high anxiety tend to avoid anything to do with the experience - that includes writing, researching, and practicing the speech – all of the tasks which remind them of the most feared moment, delivering the speech. Even thinking about their presentation leads to anxiety. Many students simply avoid taking any steps towards preparation. Therefore, in-class practice is critical.

Your encouragement – and scaffolding the process of preparation through easily engaging activities – is key.

Getting started
In advance of the first prepared presentation:

- **Provide a variety of materials to students that describe the attributes of good presentations** For example, eye contact helps the audience feel engaged, pronunciations, words that might be difficult to pronounce etc.

- **As previously discussed, you need to provide activities that will get students talking.** All of your assignments can be framed as conversations, by providing a question/response format. Students do not need to think of them as presentations. Students can initially provide recorded answers online, allowing the teacher to review and assess their pronunciation and grammar.

- **Remember that individual presentations done in front of the whole class use up a lot of time.** These are good to do once and a while, in order to normalize the experience of speaking in front of the whole class. But for practice in class, it’s better to partner them up. Have partners watch each other’s presentations and write up some positive, constructive feedback. In general, establish a routine where students are regularly doing minimum one-minute speeches to a partner or to a small group.

- **Model the activity and explicitly communicate your expectations.** This helps students feel prepared.

- **Encourage a positive, supportive classroom culture.** Establish a culture of friendliness. Let classmates know they are here to be supportive of one other.

Implement policies which are explicitly designed to reduce prejudice and judgment. Discuss with your students what it means to be an active audience, to show that you’re listening and you care what the speaker is saying. If you’re class is being held online, ask students to turn their cameras on.

- **Help students recognize presentation skills.** You as the teacher can exemplify characteristics of a bad presentation: e.g., Read something without making eye contact. Read something without emotion. Talk too quietly. Mumble. Use poor posture. Then ask students, “what did I did wrong?”

“They’re all having fun in the group discussion, and then as soon as it’s a presentation, even though it’s in front of the same people they’ve been talking to, they still get nervous.” – ESOL Teacher Sepi Hosseini
**Additional tips**

- **Provide additional skill-based resources.** Consider providing videos to students (e.g., from YouTube or TikTok) on the subject of public speaking.

- **Provide examples of validating language which they can use in partner or group discussions.** This could include, for example, “That’s a really good point” or “That’s really interesting”. Hearing statements like "come on you can do it", or “you got this” are helpful to anyone struggling with PSA. Tell audience members they can nod their head when they agree. And a smile doesn’t hurt once and a while. After a class speech or a group speech, **make sure all audience members applaud.** Make it clear that all the knowledge students bring to the classroom, and their courage to stand up and speak, is appreciated.

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**Something to share with students:**

Practice – setting an intention on what you need to improve, and repeating the task - is one good way to fight the fear you may feel. The more comfortable you are with your speech, the less anxiety you will feel. Steve Jobs practiced his epic speeches for hundreds of hours weeks in advance. If you know what you’re saying, you’ll feed off the crowd’s energy instead of letting your hypothalamus run the show.

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**Watch the TedEd talk: “The Science of Stage Fright”**

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2 minutes is a good slice of time: In IELTS Speaking Part 2, test takers are asked to talk for 1 to 2 minutes. It’s recommended that when you go to a job interview, you shouldn’t talk for more than two minutes at a time.
Create support through structure

- Provide students with a rubric early on and provide students with a note-taking sheet with info on how to give a feedback sandwich. A feedback sandwich simply means: point out what someone has done well before pointing out what they need work on. Then, make sure you end your feedback on a good note. This is a very socially acceptable way to provide feedback, and a good skill for students to learn. If it’s just a negative comment spoken in front of the group or the class, that creates a bad vibe for everyone, especially the recipient. For you as a teacher, understand that hiding feedback that is critical for learning does not help the student. Feedback describing areas that can be improved can be provided by you one-on-one. (Feedback will be discussed more later).

- Provide Students with roles during presentations to keep the audience engaged. Roles could include:
  - The MC or Group Leader: Introduce each speaker. At the end of the speech, thank the speaker. Call out to 2 or 3 people in the audience to provide some feedback. Feedback is most valuable if you get it right then, in the minutes right after you finish, when you care most about your presentation.
  - Technical Assistant: if necessary for advancing slides
  - Timekeeper: This individual can help the speaker by holding up a green card when there is 1 minute of allotted time left, a yellow card at 30 seconds, and a red card when they have gone over time.
  - Cameraperson: Using presenter’s phone. Explaining this setup in advance may get some students more anxious. Some teachers may want to suggest it at the last minute. It can be optional since some students prefer not to be recorded. (See section on how recordings can help with individual practice)
  - Recorder for reporting back to the teacher a summary the presentation

One topic students can use for a speech in an ESOL class: Share something from your own culture. Describe their country and their culture from their own eyes. Ask them to answer the question: “What do you wish more Americans understood about your culture?”
Preparing more refined presentations
Once students have experienced doing at least a couple minute long speeches, you can begin preparing students for presenting a longer speech:
• Make sure students are familiar with what they are going to talk about, so they don’t try to perform their speech without preparation.
• Provide practical guidance and materials about how to effectively speak in public.

When panic strikes: Coping strategies
In advance of any speechmaking performance, provide students with tips about what to do if panic sets in: take a pause, take deep breaths, look at your index cards, etc.

If a student suddenly panics during their speech, allow them to leave the classroom and get a breath of fresh air. Give the class a 5-minute break. Meet with the student alone, give them encouragement. Explain that it happens to us all. See if they want to try again, but don’t pressure them into it.

In anticipation of events such as these, in classes with more experienced students, you could act out a speech gone wrong ahead of time. Pretend to be giving a speech and describe the panic setting in. Pretend to forget your lines. Then encourage the students to use the coping strategies listed above.

Let students know that if one of their peers does panic, the audience can give words of encouragement. Let them all know that the audience is very forgiving and it’s never the end of the world. They can try again.

(e.g., speech fundamentals, different types of speeches, techniques, and strategies; and examples of successful and unsuccessful presentations)
• Help and encourage students through the many milestones of developing their speech (the outline, 1st draft, final draft). Provide students with ample opportunities to meet with you one-on-one (in class and out of class). Invite the students to come listen to their presentation or watch/listen to their recording. Tell them what they did well, and also tell them what they could do better.
• Provide an area of the language which the student can concentrate on to improve fluency. For instance, intermediate students could work on improving their linking sounds.
• Help students with technology needs.
• As mentioned previously, set aside time in class for students to practice in class. Speech practice must be done in front of others (not alone in one’s bedroom) in order to reduce PSA.
• Practice presenting with someone who makes you feel comfortable and safe: to a friend, or to a family member. Their feedback will come out of love.
• If available, refer students to the school’s learning resource or tutoring center to help with any of the above areas.
• Ask your students to get a good night rest and a full healthy breakfast before their speech.
• Ask students to think about the audience when they are developing their speech. Why would the audience be interested? View their speech as more of an act of communication and less as a performance (refer to COM therapy from previous section).
Techniques for Reducing Public Speaking Anxiety in Adult English Learners

Presentations as a group
The added social and communication dynamics involved in group presentations can lead to poor execution and can feed into students’ anxiety. Encourage the group to agree on each other’s roles and responsibilities, and to prepare as best they can: on a unified view of the project, on key points they want to express, on well executed transitions, a good ending, and a plan for handling questions afterwards if that is the expectation. The upside is: when presenting as a group, there can be more cohesiveness and stronger feelings of support for each speaker since they are all involved in the task together. They can cheer each other on.

Group presentations for lower-level classes: Poster presentations
An exciting and unifying speechmaking activity involving a group, especially for lower-level students, is a poster presentation. Have four people work on a poster:

- The presentation session involves two members of the group standing next to their poster. They each trade off making speeches and answering questions from observers. They can choose individual segments of speech to be presented between themselves.
- The other two members act as audience members. Ask this half of the group to circulate around the room for half of the session time, observing speeches and asking questions.
- For the second half of the session, the presentations continue, but with the audience members and observers switching their roles.

Students report significant improvement after completing this activity, since it allows them to repeat their presentation several times (at least six or seven) to different people.

Other tips for speech practice and reducing anxiety in the classroom
- Teach songs in the classroom
- Let students know about language clubs and opportunities for meeting with conversation partners
- Introduce the concept of positive self-talk

“I tell them to go to the tutoring center to practice their presentation. The ones that go, you can see how they progress and get more relaxed.” – Teacher Johanna Carranza
Individual practice away from the classroom
Students definitely can improve when they spend time working on language tasks away from the classroom. Many ESOL programs include asynchronous learning, where – if the technology is available to them – students have opportunities to learn online when they are away from the classroom, on their own schedule. This so called “blended learning” helps students become more independent learners. With the plethora of available technology applications, there are many options for helping your students practice public speaking at home. Students may also find their home a more comfortable, safe environment to practice speaking.

Here are some approaches to solo practice away from the classroom:

- **Ask the students to record themselves using an audio or video format when they are practicing their speech, or as a stand-alone activity, to simply get them talking (e.g., have them record an audio journal). This helps them correct their errors independently. They can work on customizing and perfecting their presentation to their liking.**

- **Using recordings, students can transcribe part of their presentation and work on improving the grammar and vocabulary. Have them note areas where improvements are needed. Students can continue to re-record until they are satisfied. They can also share their video with the teacher for direct feedback. It’s not easy for many of us to hear our own voice or see ourselves on camera. But this type of practice really helps. Watching recordings will inevitably lead to greater motivation to improve one’s skills.**

- **With the understanding that we learn by observing and imitating other people, ask the students to shadow highly fluent English speakers. Shadowing is the process of listening and then repeating a short segment of a speech. It helps learners listen to aspects of fluent speech - features such as pronunciation, rhythm, melody, and stress. Some videos on YouTube provide accurate transcripts to help students repeat the words. All TED talks always provide an accurate transcript. You can also let students know that, with a pair of headphones, shadowing can be done while doing other things (e.g., while cleaning the house, going on a walk, etc.)**

- **Ask the students to answer a question a day. Have the students record a voice memo and email/text it to you or save it to the LMS.**

It’s very helpful for students to go back to their recording. Tools such as VoiceThread (voicethread.com) allow students to record themselves with video on or off. Students can record multiple attempts before they save and share the recording they are happy with.
Tips for what students can do moments before the speech:

- Have students get in pairs or triads and just run through the content (with or without notes), just to “get the jitters out”.
- Although relaxation exercises were mentioned as a method for preparing for a speech previously, some argue that people who try to relax before a speech tend to become cautious and vigilant. Anxiety does not simply disappear in the face of uncertainty. If you feel anxious when you are about to make a speech, you can try redirecting the energy of that feeling into another strong emotion like excitement. Especially if the speech is something that matters to you, there’s reason to get excited. One public speaking coach even suggests jumping up and down a few times before you are about to speak. This helps the nerves loosen up a bit. But it’s also understood that including a breathing exercise before class presentations helps to smooth out the nerves as well.
- Jump up and down and run into the room. This is a way to make things fun and can help people be less anxious.
- Is there a voice in your head that is always attacking you? The voice might say “I have a horrible accent”. Try to put that voice in the background. Look at what you’re saying and ask the more important questions to yourself: Is it understandable? Is my volume okay?
- If you are forgetting what you meant to say, give it time. Take a breath. Your brain will find the thought. Handheld notes are obviously helpful in these situations.

Presentations involve many factors and students must be aware that not all skills can be improved right away. It’s a dance. You want each of the things you are working on to become automatic. The hope is that by the time you are in front of people, all the elements have become automatic, and your nerves won’t cause you to forget what you learned.
Feedback

The process of providing feedback is relational and not just transactional. It is an opportunity for you to connect with your students, and for students to connect with one another. Students must know what aspects of speechmaking they could improve upon. They also must be aware of the usefulness of giving constructive and supportive feedback to one another. Students will use these interactions for their own self-assessment. Receiving positive, constructive, and appreciative feedback is highly motivating, and is an important part of building a positive community in your classroom.

For high intermediate and advanced students, it is important that students know you are always grading them on a rubric you share with them. Be transparent with what rubrics you are using to assess students. Many speaking assessment rubrics can be found via an online search.

The majority of feedback from you, the teacher, should be spoken directly to the student one-on-one, or in written form (on paper or through your LMS if you are working online).

Quality of feedback
Be very gentle with your feedback. Concentrate your feedback more on the context of what they’re saying than on how well they performed. For instance: “Wow, that sounded like a scary experience.”

Any negative feedback should not happen in class. For instance, if it’s a pronunciation issue, your feedback could be “I’m not sure what this word is you’re using. You can go to Google, put the word in and hear how it sounds”. Providing a critique to a student in front of their peers is very stressful and may discourage them from wanting to attend the class.

Don’t overwhelm the students with feedback. Help them focus on one to three goals for things they can improve. They can be goals they choose for themselves. Let those goals be doable. Otherwise, they will be sitting with failure, thinking “I do this wrong”, and this will just increase their anxiety. Acknowledge their strengths, and also acknowledge any improvements you have witnessed. “I can see this has improved compared to last time”. You may also provide them with a checklist to start them with milestones for self-assessment.

Peer feedback
Provide time for students to give genuine, sincere, productive, and relevant feedback during presentations to a partner, group, or to the whole class. After the end of every speech to a group or to the class, regardless of quality, it is very important the audience should clap or give some kind of verbal approval (or if you are a video call, somehow show that you are clapping). Students should show their appreciation for someone speaking, whether seated or standing. Students will stay attuned to the presentation if they are required to be involved with the feedback process.
After a presentation, you may ask the student audience members to fill in an evaluation form in order to rate the speaker and share their thoughts. Whether you have them put their name on the evaluation is up to you. Having them include their names does encourage honesty and accountability. Ask them to be kind.

Have them use the same rubrics you are using to grade your students (i.e. using a scale from 1-10). Have them identify the speaker’s main points and two or three things they really liked (strengths) about the presentation. Provide the students with some sentence starters. Ask them to write positive, polite feedback, including one thing the speaker could improve upon, phrased positively (not described as if it is a permanent weakness or limitation).

Peer feedback helps students build their confidence. It gives them energy to come back to the next challenge, with a list of one or two things they can work on to improve.

Encourage students to avoid the phrases people sometimes say when we are trying to speak: “Uh, Um, So”, that fill in the silence between our thoughts. When you find yourself saying these, this may increase your self-criticism and your anxiety in turn. It is difficult to train yourself to avoid this habit.

One way to help students avoid this habit is to introduce the concept of thought groups (aka “chunking”). Thought groups occur when you break a sentence down for easier listening. However, understanding where the pauses should be placed may not be easy for a language learner. Pauses are part of the intonation and rhythm used in language, so students may require your help to understand where the pauses should go.

Make students understand that pauses are OK. Let them know they shouldn’t be afraid of silence. Pauses are powerful because they grab the attention of the audience.

Peer review helps students build their confidence. It gives them energy to come back to the next challenge, with a list of one or two things they can work on to improve (e.g., grammar, organization, pronunciation, presentation skills), without worrying they will be criticized. When peers aren’t criticizing, this releases anxiety and worry. It helps students to focus. Telling people what they can do is better than telling them what they can’t do, because that helps people learn. Keep peer feedback minimal. Don’t focus on presentation skills. One thing they should give feedback on is clarity. It is good to address this. If something is misunderstood, that should be called out: “Can you please explain what you mean by…”

A focus on appreciation and improvement, not critique, releases anxiety and worry.
Conclusion

In order to learn successfully, we must be challenged. Public speaking provides plenty of challenges to ESOL/EFL students at all levels of proficiency. We all know it isn’t easy. But practice in this activity provides necessary steppingstones towards success in work, in academia, and in life. How best to deal with public speaking anxiety is also a challenge even the best, most fluent speakers struggle with. There are techniques available to you, the teacher, to deal with fear, anxiety, and stress. It is most important that we as teachers provide a safe and comfortable environment to allow our students to learn. The speaking classroom must be built with good support structures (scaffolding), clear rubrics, and plenty of opportunities for interaction through purposeful communication.
Endnotes

Note. Front cover image generated using the prompt "viewing standing Muslim woman slightly from the back slightly from the side looking at notes," and image on page 19 generated using the prompt “Asian English learning adults doing a poster presentation” by Bing Image Generator, DALL-E, 2023 (https://www.bing.com/images/create/).


