Difficulties Faced by Undergraduate Students in English Public Speaking at a Malaysian University

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Received:11/31/2023    Accepted:03/05/2024    Published:03/20/2024

Abstract
The ability to speak English in public with confidence is essential for university students; both for their studies and employment purposes after graduation. Nowadays, employers seek staff who can speak English confidently. This study, therefore, aims to explore difficulties and factors that hinder effective public speaking among undergraduate students at a Malaysian university. The study employed a qualitative method through face-to-face semi-structured interviews and gathered data from a purposive sample of 44 undergraduate students. The interview data were analyzed using an inductive-thematic analysis: identifying natural units of meaning, labeling, categorizing, and organizing them, constructing narratives, and interpreting the findings. The findings showed that undergraduate students face various difficulties concerning English public speaking due to poor language skills in terms of grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, and fluency. Additionally, the findings revealed several factors that hinder public effective speaking among students, including dislike for English, nervousness, low self-esteem, lack of confidence, shyness, eye contact, gender differences as well as lack of idea, practice, and audience attention. These difficulties may result in students having a high level of anxiety during public speaking. This study offers valuable insights to educators in overcoming English speaking difficulties among undergraduates to enhance learning outcomes.

Keywords: Malaysia, public speaking, uncertainty reduction theory, undergraduate students

Cite as: Abdullah, A.T.H., Netra, I.M., & Hassan, I.H.(2024). Difficulties Faced by Undergraduate Students in English Public Speaking at a Malaysian University. Arab World English Journal, 15(1): 269-282. DOI: https://dx.doi.org/10.24093/awej/vol15no1.17
Introduction

Employment is the impetus and testimonial of students’ achievements in life upon completing their studies. Society sometimes judges that graduates will land a job once they have graduated if they wish. However, statistics show that more and more graduates have been unemployed in recent years in Malaysia. This information can be obtained from the report released by the Ministry of Education’s Graduate Tracer Study which tracks the status of graduates of higher learning institutions six months after graduation to ascertain whether they have started working, are continuing their studies, or are still looking for employment.

According to the 2017 Graduate Tracer Study Report, there were 124,075 graduates from public universities in Malaysia. From the figure, 65,592 (52.9%) were employed, 22,116 (17.8%) furthered their studies, 3,339 (2.7%) upgraded their skills, 6,252 (5%) waited for work placement and a sizeable number of 26,776 (21.6%) were unemployed. This figure was not much different from private higher learning institutions where they produced 98,816 graduates where 50,876 (51.5%) were employed, 16,778 (17%) furthered their studies, 1,507 (1.5%) upgraded their skills, 4,851 (4.9%) waited for work placement and a sheer number of 24,804 (25.1%) were still unemployed [1] (https://www.google.com.my/search: retrieved 16 June 2018-Source: Ministry of Higher Education, 2017- updated data as of 23 January 2018).

The notion of oral presentation skills or public speaking is the ability of a person to speak in front of an audience or crowd. The act of speaking in front of an audience or public is different from conversing with friends where the latter is less formal and unstructured (Choo, et. al, 2006). Besides, it does not need any preparation to do so. As for the setting in Malaysia, those who have graduated from high learning institutions like a university are presumed and subsequently expected to be highly proficient in the English language to compete in the work markets that are not only available in the country but also abroad. Some countries whose people use English most, albeit English is not their first language, such as Singapore and India, have enjoyed a marked increase in their economy.

One of the obvious causes of unemployment is related to their lack of oral communication skills. Some prospective employers complained that 50% of graduates have an unsatisfactory grasp of English communication skills (Mohd Azrizal, 2014). Some field experts explain that poor command of English, lack of confidence, and unrealistic expectations are some of the main job busters. The importance of mastering communication skills, be it in English or Malay language as well as skills in presentation or public speaking are among the important criteria for a graduate to be employed. Another study by Sarjit and Candice (2009) on analyzing the English language needs of human resource staff in multinational companies in Penang has shown a dire need for companies to train their staff to master good English for the sake of their career in the future.

In Malaysia, English is a compulsory subject for all university students, including Universiti Sultan Zainal Abidin (UniSZA). One of the English papers for first-degree programs at UniSZA is English for Academic Communication. This paper examines a variety of skills needed to perform academic tasks, such as reading strategies and taking notes from written and oral-aural texts (Hassan, Madarina, & Azmi, 2021). Students are assigned to produce academic assignments and make oral presentations Public speaking is one of the main components of this paper where the students are expected to be able to make a sound preparation and ultimately a sound presentation at the end of the course duration.

Although English public speaking has been introduced in their studies, the results in spoken language through public speaking are still rather poor and still not satisfactory. From the
observation made by the researcher, one of their weaknesses in the use of oral communication is a phenomenon known as public speaking anxiety, especially when delivering a public speaking presentation in front of the class. This phenomenon is defined as an individual’s level of fear or anxiety associated with either real or anticipated communication with another person or persons (McCroskey, 1982).

One of the researchers of this study has been teaching the English language at a college and university for almost two decades. From his observation, one of the weakest sides of an English learner is when it comes to speaking in front of the class or delivering a public speaking presentation. Notably, only a few students could easily deliver public speaking, but most of them miserably failed due to some factors. Not prepared, lack vocabulary or ideas, poor grasp of English grammar, and the most obvious thing is their problem with anxiety or stage fright when delivering a speech, even a simple one.

This matter has intrigued the writer to research the main problems faced by students when it comes to public speaking. The main reason why this research is worth doing is because of the need for a graduate to master good English public speaking or oral presentation skills that will be fully utilized once they are on the hunt for a job in the future where a candidate with good command in English, especially in giving oral presentation will have some advantages. Thus, this research sought to investigate difficulties in English public speaking faced by undergraduate students at Universiti Sultan Zainal Abidin, Malaysia. Specifically, the study aims to achieve the following objectives.

1. To identify language-related difficulties in English public speaking encountered by undergraduate students at the selected university.

2. To explore factors that hinder effective English public speaking among undergraduate students at the selected university.

**Literature Review**

**Oral Presentation Skills/ Public Speaking**

Unlike daily conversation, an oral presentation needs more detailed and complex preparation since it has to adhere to some characteristics and conditions to meet its objectives (Ahmad & Khan, 2023; Choo et al., 2006). According to Choo et al. (2006), there are three elements or characteristics of a good oral presentation. Firstly, an oral presentation is highly structured. It needs detailed planning and preparation. The management of time is very important since a speaker will only speak at a specified time. A well-timed and planned presentation is needed to meet the objective of the presentation. The audience might not pose questions during the presentation but they can be raised after the presentation. In this case, a presenter needs to anticipate any possible questions that are posed.

Secondly, an oral presentation uses more formal language. The choice of words or phrases in the conveyed speech is very crucial. A speaker cannot use a language deemed too strong or too colloquial since it can cause a negative reaction from the audience. A speaker is also expected not to use slang, jargon as well as bad grammar since it can enable the audience to give a bad impression of the speaker.

Thirdly, a good oral presentation needs a certain method of delivery. Unlike in daily conversation where people use a lot of interjections such as “you know” or “you see” and adopt a causal posture and use pauses and fillers such as “err” or “hmm”, in an oral presentation a speaker
needs to avoid these. Being an effective speaker one must make sure that he or she has a good projection of voice as well as good posture in front of the audience. Additionally, there are certain differences between public speaking and conversation as shown in the following table.

Table1. Differences between conversation and public speaking

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Conversation</th>
<th>Public Speaking</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Audience-centered</td>
<td>More audience-centered</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Loosely organized</td>
<td>Organized and planned</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Off the top of your head</td>
<td>Grounded in responsible knowledge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Often no clear purpose</td>
<td>Has a clear purpose</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Informal language</td>
<td>More formal language</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Speaker/listener changes roles</td>
<td>Speaker/listener roles are clearly defined</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Informal environment/small groups</td>
<td>More formal environment/larger group</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


**Self-Esteem and Self-Confidence in Speaking English**

Self-esteem relates to how people see themselves from a more holistic perspective and links to feelings of self-worth as well as the ability to do things. Self-esteem is more than feeling good about yourself. It is about being awarded for your abilities. It is about who you are, being able to acknowledge positive and negative aspects and still feel good about yourself as well as having a positive sense of identity (Ringganis & Darmayanti, 2023). Self-esteem is confidence in our ability, which represents our ability to cope with the basic challenges of life and confidence in our right to be successful and happy, the feeling of being worthy, deserving, and entitled to assert our needs and wants and to achieve our values. According to Hamidah (2023), “individuals with high levels of self-esteem “exhibit greater verbal fluency due to their decreased anxiety regarding potential speech errors” (p. 42). Therefore, as pointed out by Widiani (2024) self-esteem is an internal factor that shapes students’ speaking competence and performance.

On the other hand, self-confidence refers to a belief in an individual’s own abilities, capacities, and judgment (Ryan & Dosi, 2000). It is an attitude that allows individuals to have positive but realistic views of themselves and their situations. Self-confident individuals trust their abilities, have a general sense of control in their lives, and believe that, within reason, they will be able to do what they wish, plan, and expect. Having self-confidence does not mean that individuals will be able to do everything. Confidence is a belief in one’s ability to do something in a specific situation. This belief includes feeling accepted and on equal terms with others in that situation. According to Hamidah (2023), self-confidence is “an important factor in communication as it directly affects how willing the learners are to communicate with one another (p. 2). An individual with high self-confidence might have a strong belief in their ability to perform oral presentations. As reported by Hamidah (2023), individuals “with high levels of self-confidence tend to approach communication with a sense of assurance and optimism (p. 8).

**Difficulties in English Public Speaking**

Speaking is crucial to communication and represents an interactive process of developing meaning and producing information (Widiani, 2024). The “ability to speak English fluently and confidently opens up various opportunities, both academically and professionally” (Kondo & Ratuwongo, 2023, p. 6). However, students tend to face certain difficulties in English speaking, which may hinder their ability to communicate effectively, especially when they find themselves
in public. In this regard, several studies were conducted to explore difficulties and problems encountered by students at different educational levels in various contexts. For example, Ahmed (2016) investigated speaking difficulties encountered by English language students at Al Quds Open University, Palestine. The study found that some reasons impeded students from being good public speakers in front of an audience, including fear of mistakes, shyness, anxiety, and lack of confidence. The study emphasizes establishing environmental support and encouraging students to speak English more frequently.

Moreover, Arifin (2017) examined psychological problems and challenges in EFL-speaking classrooms in Indonesia. The study revealed that some psychological problems involved in speaking classrooms were due to factors such as a lack of confidence, speech anxiety, and low self-esteem. Students who have low self-confidence levels are hardly able to control themselves for public speaking in the classroom. Besides, they lose belief in themselves and think that their friends in the classroom misevaluate them. They were also afraid of making mistakes in their presentation. Syifa (2018) also revealed some factors were: nervousness, less preparation, and practice, lack of eye contact, content not being interesting, afraid of making mistakes, pronunciation not clear, lack of confidence, lack of vocabulary, grammar as well as problems with memorizing the content.

Additionally, Seli and Santosa (2023) used a cross-sectional survey to study the difficulties encountered by students of English Education at a university in Indonesia. According to the findings, difficulties encountered by students in English public speaking “include worry about making mistakes, lack of self-assurance, limited vocabulary, shyness, inability to elaborate on ideas, anxiousness, a lack of grasp of grammar, poor time management, and an unsupportive atmosphere” (p. 6).

Similarly, Kondo and Ratuwongo (2023) employed a cross-section survey to identify difficulties faced by 55 students at a public high school. The findings showed that the most significant difficulties faced by the students include poor vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation, followed by fear of making mistakes and lack of confidence. The study emphasized that “incorporating more speaking activities in the classroom and providing opportunities for regular practice can help students overcome their fear of speaking (p. 76). Moreover, Nguyen and Tong (2024) used a quantitative survey to examine problems in public speaking among 60 English-major students at a university in Vietnam. The findings revealed that “two most common problems were fear of making mistakes and being observed” (p. 17). Likewise, Shahparan (2024) used observations and interviews to explore the problems related to English speaking among first-year undergraduate students in Uzbekistan. The study found that the most common problem was poor vocabulary and fear of making mistakes.

In essence, previous studies were conducted in countries such as Indonesia (e.g. Seli and Santosa, 2023), Vietnam (e.g. Nguyen & Tong, 2024), and Uzbekistan (e.g. Shahparan, 2024). Studies conducted in the Malaysian context mostly focus on teaching or anxiety in English speaking (Abdullah, Alsohbo, & Hassan, 2022; Bandar & Abdul, 2017; Taly & Paramasivam, 2020; Zulkflee, Marimuthu, & Tahir, 2023). For example, Zulkflee et al. (2023) used a descriptive survey to investigate anxiety levels and factors causing anxiety during oral presentations among ESL learners in Perak, Malaysia. The study found that have moderately high anxiety levels. Therefore, there is inadequate research on difficulties faced by undergraduate students in English public speaking, which the current study aims to explore.
Theoretical Framework
This study adopts the Uncertainty Reduction theory developed in 1975 by Berger and Calabrese (Coopman & Lull, 2012). This theory discusses how individuals seek to decrease anxiety or uncertainty in communication and social circumstances. The theory suggests that individuals are inspired to gather information and reduce uncertainty about others, which in turn affects their communication strategies and behaviors. It addresses the source of speech anxiety. For instance, when individuals face an uncertain or unfamiliar situation, their level of anxiety increases. For most people, speaking in public is not an everyday situation. One may communicate with others every day, but probably not in a situation as formal and structured as a speech. The change in context from regular, everyday interactions with others to an unfamiliar public interaction, naturally makes one nervous. This area of uncertainty is also associated with public speaking. In this regard, Coopman and Lull (2012) further developed this theory in the context of the uncertainties of public speaking in terms of the role of a speaker, speaking abilities, ideas, audience response, and evaluation.

Methodology
Design
This research employs a qualitative method to gather and analyze data. As defined by Creswell (2012), represents a form of inquiry that focuses on understanding and interpreting the meanings individuals or groups ascribe to social or human phenomena. The essence of using a qualitative method is to gain a deeper understanding of the phenomenon under study.

Participants
The data were gathered from a sample of 44 undergraduate students from nine different faculties at Universiti Sultan Zainal Abidin (UniSZA), Malaysia. A purposive sampling technique was used to select participants from each faculty to ensure representation from various academic disciplines, including languages and communication, informatics and computing, Islamic contemporary studies, economics and management sciences, bioresources and food, medicine and health science, innovative design and technology, law, accountancy, and international relations, and applied social sciences. Only active undergraduates who were previously involved in English public speaking and were willing to participate voluntarily were selected as participants.

Research Instruments
A face-to-face semi-structured interview technique was used as a data-gathering instrument. The interview questions were designed to explore the students’ experiences regarding English public speaking. The questions asked to the participants include: Can you describe your overall experience in English public speaking? What are the major difficulties you faced during English public speaking? The participants were given the freedom to openly share their perspectives during the interview sessions. Barriball and While (1994) suggest that. Moreover, Creswell (2012) points out that semi-structured interviews yield unexpected insights and information beyond what researchers may anticipate.

Research Procedures
To ensure reliability, based on previous recommendations (Morse, Barrett, Mayan, Olson, & Spiers, 2002; Polit & Beck, 2017), pilot interviews were conducted with a small subset of participants to identify any potential issues with the interview guide or procedures. Additionally,
inter-rater agreement was determined by selecting a subset of interviews and getting them accessed independently by a different researcher. For content validity, the interview items and guides were assessed by subject experts for relevance and appropriateness as recommended in previous research (Lynn, 1986; DeVellis, 2017).

The interview data were analyzed using an inductive-thematic analysis based on the four stages suggested by Cohen, Manion, and Morrison (2007). These stages include identifying natural units of meaning, labeling, categorizing, and organizing them, constructing narratives, and interpreting the findings. According to Cohen et al. (2007), qualitative analysis is inherently interpretive, unlike numerical analysis. In the coding process, the interview data were carefully examined, and themes were identified, categorized, and interpreted based on the participants' responses. The interview data are presented based on the themes generated from the participants’ responses. Each respondent was assigned a code starting with the letter “P” (participant) followed by a number. For example, the first participant is coded as P1, the second participant as P2, and so on. The codes are typically used in data collection and analysis to keep track of the participant responses and to organize the data systematically (Hassan, Gamji, Nasidi, & Azmi, 2021).

Findings
The findings of this study are presented in this section. As mentioned in the introductory part, this study sought to explore the difficulties faced by undergraduate students in English public speaking at a Malaysian public university. The analysis performed in this study is based on the transcribed texts taken from semi-structured interviews with the students. The first objective of this study was to explore language-related difficulties faced by undergraduate students in public speaking. The outcomes related to this objective revealed two major themes as presented in the following tables.

Table 2. Poor language skills

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme 1: Poor Language Skills (grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, fluency)</th>
<th>SN</th>
<th>Codes</th>
<th>Quotations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| | 1 | Poor grammar | I think my grammar is a little bit low standard or I don’t have very good grammar when I speak in English and it could make someone I talk to not understand what I’m trying to say. (P31)  
My next problem was lack of grammar then err.. some because (twice) lack of the skill in the grammar or and the vocabulary I somehow cannot speak fluently in English. (P41)  
I am afraid if I make or say any wrong things such as I have to make grammatical errors and so on. (P21) |
| | 2 | Poor vocabulary | I have some difficulties in English public speaking because I think I have inadequate vocabulary when I speak in English. (P43)  
And my last reason is my problem is lack of vocabulary. I don’t have much vocabulary so, that err.. be my problem when I speak in English. (P18)  
I have less vocabulary and I am afraid I use the wrong word when doing public speaking. (P8) |
| | 3 | Poor pronunciation | I also err.. not very confident with err.. my vocabulary and pronunciation err.. because I’m from Terengganu so the dialect is different. (P42)  
So when I am having this anxiety, I tend to pronounce some words mistakenly. (P2)  
Besides, I don’t know how to use a proper word while talking far. (P22)  
It is hard to pronounce some words. (P16) |


Tables 2-3 highlight two major themes related to language-related difficulties faced by undergraduate students in English public speaking. The first theme entails poor language skills in terms of grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, and fluency that may hinder students’ effective communication in English public speaking. The second theme indicates that some students face challenges from a lack of interest in the language and limited exposure to English-speaking environments, which may contribute to difficulties in fluency and communication. The second objective of this study was to explore factors that hinder effective English public speaking among undergraduate students at the selected university. The findings related to this objective revealed three major themes as presented in the following tables.
## Table 4. Nervousness, low self-esteem, and lack of confidence

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SN</th>
<th>Codes</th>
<th>Quotations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| 1  | Nervousness | - One of the problems is I tend to get nervous in front of people like right now and I forget the words I’m going to say. (P33)  
- My main problem will be nervousness so when I think about it why do I feel nervous firstly is because I’m afraid of what people might think of me. (P35)  
- I’m shaking I’m nervous my heart will start beating very fast. (P38) |
| 2  | Low Self-esteem | - I have yes lack of confidence lack of vocabulary and low self-esteem. (P35)  
- I don’t have self-esteem even if I talk in Malay people (P1)  
- Cannot understand me so I am worried that if I talk in English people won’t get me at all so it’s hard for me to express what I mean. (P32)  
- I have low self-esteem when I am in front of the stage. I don’t like people to look at me. (P7) |
| 3  | Lack of Confidence | - I feel very awkward when I stand in front of the public and I get nervous because I’m lacking confidence. (P32)  
- When they want to speak in err.. in public so the first thing is like lack in confidence so this is this problem is face by me when I want to speak in front it’s just like I as my friend said. (P34)  
- Because of a lack of confidence, I could not speak English fluently ok next err.. because of lack of vocab I also could not speak English [laughing] ok err.. my hand will be shaking like now. (P36) |

Source: Prepared by authors

## Table 5. Shyness, eye contact, and gender differences

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SN</th>
<th>Codes</th>
<th>Quotations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| 1  | Shyness | - I’m quite a shy person and I don’t like to stand in front of people and I don’t like people to look at me with err... I don’t know what kind of look err. (P37)  
- I’m a very shy person so it is hard for me to speak in front of err.. people. (P40)  
- My problem with public speaking is I am shy. Not shy to myself but I am shy my speaking. (P18)  
- Firstly, I feel a bit shy when standing in front of people. Err.. because for me when I speak, people will focus on me. (P21) |
| 2  | Eye Contact | - I cannot stand when people are staring and looking at me. That situation makes me feel so awkward (P3)  
- We start talking we have to make eye contact is never to go so err.. where to look err.. makes me err.. sometimes lose my focus. (P29)  
- And my problem may be because I cannot look at people. I get something weird thinking in my head (P9)  
- Next, I am nervous to make eye contact especially if the audience is male. Because I will lose my focus on delivery. And also I cannot control my voice and my breath. I will become panic and sweat. it is just a natural nervousness that I have and the natural fear that I need to face when I am going to speak in public. (P24) |
| 3  | Gender Differences | - I am a little bit nervous when speaking in front of others, especially to girls, (P11)  
(The speaker is a male student).  
- However, based on the situation, some of my friends can do public speaking if all audience is female (P12) |

Source: Prepared by authors
Table 6, *Lack of idea, practice, and audience attention*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SN</th>
<th>Codes</th>
<th>Quotations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Lack of ideas/points/skills/knowledge</td>
<td>- I feel scared when people ask about something that I do not understand. (P26)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- I always see script when speaking especially speaking in front of an audience. So I need to remember the script. (P17)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- I don’t have many points to talk about in front of the others, for example, let’s say here I am speaking in front of you guys, I don’t have any point. (P23)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Lack of practice</td>
<td>- I feel I am unprepared I usually panic and lose control of myself and my thought will be scattered and as a result, I stutter like now. (P5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- My problems or difficulties in public speaking are having lack of preparation. (P6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- I become fearful or nervous and my speech is unclear because of improper preparation I had sweaty palms and my heart is speeding a little bit faster. (P19)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Lack of audience attention</td>
<td>- The audiences really when I get terrified when I see them get bored or worst even them not responding. (P4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- I worried when people are silent such as, I think in my mind that I made a mistake when I speaking. (P13)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Prepared by authors

As shown in Tables 4-6, the analysis revealed three major themes related to factors affecting university students’ English public speaking. The first theme shows students’ nervousness, low self-esteem, and lack of confidence as they express anxiety, self-doubt, and fear of judgment that may hinder their ability to speak confidently. The second theme shows that students struggle with maintaining eye contact, and gender-specific anxieties in English public speaking. The third theme involves a lack of ideas, practice, and audience attention, where students contend with inadequate preparation, difficulty maintaining audience engagement, and fear of judgment. Overall, these themes highlight various challenges encountered by students in English public speaking at the selected institution.

**Discussion**

This study sought to identify language-related difficulties and factors that hinder effective English public speaking among undergraduate students at a Malaysian public university. The findings revealed that students encounter difficulties in English public speaking due to poor language skills in terms of grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation. Additionally, some students face challenges from a lack of interest in the language and limited exposure to English-speaking environments. For non-language factors, the findings show students’ nervousness, low self-esteem, lack of confidence and eye contact, gender-specific anxieties, as well as lack of ideas, practice, and audience attention.

The findings reported in this study concur with Berger and Calabrese’s (1975) Uncertainty Reduction Theory which presumes that people may face uncertain or unfamiliar situations, thus resulting in their level of nervousness increased. However, according to the theory, people are motivated to reduce such difficulties through interpersonal communication. The findings of this
study also concur with several past studies, such as those conducted by Ahmed (2016), Arifin (2017), Kondo and Ratuwongo (2023), Seli and Santosa (2023), and Shahparan (2024).

Besides, some students indicated in their responses that they experience low self-esteem and low self-confidence during public speaking. Similar outcomes were reported in studies (e.g. Arifin, 2017; Kondo and Ratuwongo, 2023). In this regard, research shows that certain signs of nervousness in public speaking found in students include shaking hands, headaches, stomachaches, sweaty palms, and cracking voices. All these feelings and symptoms are referred to as speech anxiety which is the fear of speaking in front of an audience (Coopman & Lull, 2012).

The findings also showed that a lack of grammar and vocabulary also contributes to students’ performance in public speaking. These factors were mentioned in the research findings reported by Kondo and Ratuwongo (2023) who affirmed that a lack of grammar and vocabulary could obstruct the speech delivery process. Other factors such as environment and the perception that English was not a mother tongue also impede students’ presentation in public speaking. Some students also mentioned that they did not have many ideas during public speaking, and did not have adequate knowledge of what to speak about. This outcome concurs with the findings reported by Seli and Santosa (2023). Another issue expressed by the respondents is a lack of language fluency. The students mentioned that a lack of grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation has made their public speaking ineffective.

It is also found that some students experience shyness as one of the problems they face during English public speaking. The students themselves admitted that the shyness was from within and it was rather difficult to erase, let alone to talk in front of the public. Some students from the Faculty of Islamic Contemporary Studies, especially girls, seemed to be a bit apprehensive when it came to contact with another gender during public speaking. They mentioned that they tended to be very shy to talking in front of the public if the audience was from a different gender. The students prefer to perform presentations in front of students of the same gender. This kind of shyness is one of the research findings reported by Ahmed (2016) which focused on students from Al-Quds Open University in Palestine.

Moreover, a lack of preparation was also cited by the students as one of the reasons why they easily got panicky during a presentation. The other serious problem faced by the students was dealing with the grab of knowledge/ideas /points for presentation. Some of them mentioned that they tended to forget the contents of their presentation, always felt blank, and were bad at memorizing the speech that had been prepared much earlier. This outcome echoes the findings reported by Seli and Santosa (2023) which revealed that inadequate preparation is the source of poor performance during English public speaking.

The current study also found that there was a lack of confidence among the students in pronouncing some English words. The problem of pronunciation was reported in previous studies (e.g., Kondo & Ratuwongo, 2023; Syifa, 2018). On the other hand, some students admitted that they do not like English because they did not develop an interest in the language when they were very young in primary school and this issue continued till they entered university.

Additionally, the findings of this study revealed that students had problems with the skills of grabbing the audience’s attention. The students complained that they did not know how to get attention from the audience to give them new information and more importantly to make them believe and subsequently build a good rapport. Some students felt that the contents of their presentation were not interesting or entertaining enough for the audience. Also, the students felt easily intimidated when the audience did not pay attention to their speeches.
Conclusion
This study explored difficulties and factors that hinder effective public speaking among undergraduate students at a Malaysian university. According to the findings, undergraduate students experience various difficulties in public speaking due to poor language skills in terms of grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, and fluency. Additionally, factors that hinder public effective speaking among students include dislike for English, nervousness, low self-esteem, lack of confidence, shyness, eye contact, gender differences as well as lack of idea, practice, and audience attention. These factors may result in students having a high level of anxiety during public speaking. This is because, based on Berger and Calabrese’s (1975) Uncertainty Reduction Theory, students who face difficult or unfamiliar situations may have their level of nervousness increased and will consequently avoid public speaking.

The identified difficulties can be reduced if students’ knowledge, techniques, and skills needed in delivering English public speaking are enhanced. Thus, students should be trained to acquire skills, determination, and awareness of the importance of English public speaking to increase their chances of employment and successful careers. Students should be trained to think that English is not difficult, but rather fun and easy to learn. They should also be prepared with the skills needed for English public speaking, starting from preparation, gathering materials, and most importantly, confidence and knowledge of when to deliver public speeches. It is also advisable for students to improve their knowledge of grammar and enrich their vocabulary as well as practice to become proficient speakers. This study offers valuable insights to educators in overcoming English speaking difficulties among undergraduates to enhance learning outcomes. However, the study is limited to a qualitative analysis with a few participants at a single institution. Further research may include more samples from multiple institutions to offer a more holistic approach to understanding the problem.

Funding
This research is not funded.

Acknowledgments
Not applicable.

Conflicts of Interest
The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Authenticity
This manuscript is an original work.

Artificial Intelligence Statement:
AI and AI-assisted technologies were not used.

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Difficulties Faced by Undergraduate Students in English Public

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