

Exploring the Interplay Between Challenges and Engagement in Oral Presentation Assessments Among ESL Undergraduates

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ABSTRACT

Oral presentation assessments are widely used in English as a Second Language (ESL) classrooms to promote communication skills and higher-order thinking. However, students' experiences of this method of assessment often reflect a complex relationship between perceived benefits and challenges. This study investigates the underlying dimensions of students' perceptions of oral presentation assessments and examines the relationship between perceived challenges and student engagement. The research design is a quantitative survey. The participants were undergraduate ESL students from different academic disciplines. The instrument measured 4 main constructs: perception of the assessment, engagement, skill development and challenges. Descriptive analysis revealed that students reported high levels of perceived skill development and engagement, and very high levels of challenges, suggesting that oral presentations are both rewarding and challenging. Correlation analysis then revealed a moderate positive correlation between perceived challenges and engagement, indicating that higher engagement might be related to higher awareness of difficulties with the task. The findings suggest that oral presentation assessments are simultaneous learning experiences that are both highly engaging and highly challenging. The study emphasises the importance of pedagogical strategies that provide appropriate support while maintaining a level of challenge to improve student learning outcomes in ESL contexts.

Keywords: Engagement and Motivation, ESL Higher Education, Oral Presentation Assessment, Speaking Anxiety.

INTRODUCTION

Oral presentation assessments are widely used in higher education, but students do not always see them in the same way. For some, they are useful platforms to practice communication and confidence. For others, they are stressful tasks that highlight fear of judgment. This contrast shows that perceptions are shaped by more than one factor, and it is not easy to reduce them to a single dimension. The complexity of these perceptions makes oral presentations an interesting site of inquiry. Although many educators argue that oral presentations help students develop transferable skills, there is still uncertainty about how students themselves view the process. Some studies suggest that presentations increase engagement and motivation, yet others point to challenges such as unclear criteria, peer pressure, and anxiety (Binh & Hang, 2025; Lin, 2023). These mixed findings indicate that the relationship between challenges and engagement is not straightforward. It may be that difficulties discourage participation, but it may also be that overcoming them strengthens involvement. The evidence remains uneven.

This study, therefore, asks two questions. First, what are the underlying dimensions of students' perceptions of oral presentation assessments? Second, how do perceived challenges relate to their engagement? These

questions are not only technical but also interpretive, as they address how students make sense of assessment practices that are both formative and evaluative. While one might expect engagement to decline when challenges dominate, it is equally possible that students find value in facing those challenges (Aziz, Wan Mohamed, & Mohammad Nor, 2022). The relationship is likely complex rather than linear. By focusing on student voices, this research aims to contribute to current debates on assessment design. It highlights both the promise and the difficulty of oral presentations, which continue to inspire and frustrate learners in equal measure (Denman & Al-Mahrooqi, 2018).

Oral presentation assessments are often seen as ways to improve communication and critical thinking in higher education. However, students' views on these assessments are mixed. Some students find them valuable, while others see them as stressful and confusing. This inconsistency shows that we do not fully understand what influences these perceptions. Previous studies have looked at anxiety, fairness, and skill development, but they rarely examine how these factors work together to create broader patterns of perception. There is a gap in understanding the underlying reasons why students respond differently to the same assessment. Another problem is how perceived challenges relate to engagement. Research has found that challenges like performance pressure or unclear rubrics can hinder participation (Binh & Hang, 2025). However, some evidence suggests that facing difficulties might encourage resilience and greater involvement (Aziz, Wan Mohamed, & Mohammad Nor, 2022). These mixed results indicate uncertainty. The relationship is complex, and it is unclear how challenges impact engagement among different student groups. Most studies look at either the benefits or the drawbacks, with few attempting to connect both aspects in a single framework. Therefore, the issue has two parts. First, we do not have a clear understanding of what influences students' views on oral presentation assessments. Second, the relationship between challenges and engagement is still not fully explored. It is important to address these issues because oral presentations are commonly used, and their success depends on how students perceive and engage with them.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Dimensions of Students' Perceptions of Oral Presentations

Oral presentation assessments are widely used in ESL and higher education to help develop communication skills and critical thinking (Binh & Hang, 2025). Research shows that students find oral presentations helpful for improving fluency, confidence, and their ability to organise and express ideas clearly (Lin, 2023). From a teaching standpoint, oral presentations fit well with the idea that learners build knowledge through meaningful communication and interaction (Hassan & Roy, 2024). Studies also show that these assessments promote deeper thinking, especially in areas such as critical thinking, argumentation, and awareness of the audience (Denman & Al-Mahrooqi, 2018).

However, students' views on oral presentations are not simple. Past research suggests that their experiences involve several related factors, including how effective they think the assessment is, their level of engagement during the task, and the learning outcomes they perceive (Aziz, Wan Mohamed, & Mohammad Nor, 2022). For example, engagement often leads to higher motivation, better focus, and a stronger sense of ownership over learning activities (Tam, 2026). At the same time, students frequently assess oral presentations based on fairness, relevance, and how well they connect to course goals, influencing their overall view of this assessment method (O'Riordan et al., 2025).

Another important dimension relates to the emotional and psychological responses students bring into oral presentation tasks. Anxiety, self-consciousness, and fear of negative evaluation often shape how learners perceive the fairness and usefulness of these assessments (Binh & Hang, 2025). At the same time, positive emotions such as pride and satisfaction can reinforce the sense of achievement when presentations go well (Lin, 2023). These emotional reactions are not isolated; they interact with engagement and motivation, influencing whether students see oral presentations as supportive or discouraging. Recognising this emotional dimension helps explain why perceptions vary widely across different student groups.

A further dimension concerns the social and collaborative aspects of oral presentations. Students frequently evaluate these tasks based on peer interaction, audience response, and the extent to which presentations foster a

sense of community in the classroom (Hassan & Roy, 2024; Denman & Al-Mahrooqi, 2018). When presentations are framed as shared learning experiences, they can enhance engagement and deepen understanding. However, when peer feedback is perceived as harsh or irrelevant, students may disengage. This social dimension highlights the importance of designing oral presentation assessments that balance individual performance with collaborative learning outcomes.

Despite these findings, much of the current research tends to look at these elements separately, focusing only on attitudes, engagement, or learning outcomes. This fragmented approach makes it hard to fully understand how these factors come together to shape students' experiences. There is a need to view students' perceptions as involving several interacting dimensions within the overall assessment context. Identifying these dimensions offers a clearer understanding of how students interpret and react to oral presentation assessments, leading to better teaching practices.

The Relationship Between Challenges and Student Engagement in Oral Presentations

While oral presentations offer significant learning benefits, they are also frequently associated with challenges that can influence students' engagement. One of the most widely reported issues is communication apprehension, particularly in ESL contexts where students may experience anxiety related to language proficiency, fear of negative evaluation, and public speaking (Pysarchyk et al., 2025). Such affective barriers have traditionally been viewed as factors that hinder participation and reduce engagement in oral tasks. In addition to anxiety, students often face practical challenges, including limited preparation time, insufficient training in presentation skills, and lack of constructive feedback (Kho & Ting, 2024). These factors can contribute to feelings of uncertainty and reduced confidence, potentially affecting students' willingness to actively engage in oral presentations. From a theoretical standpoint, these challenges can be understood through the lens of affective and cognitive load, where excessive demands may overwhelm learners and impede effective participation.

However, emerging perspectives suggest that the relationship between challenges and engagement may be more complex than previously assumed. Rather than simply diminishing engagement, certain levels of challenge may actually stimulate greater involvement in the learning process (El-Hamid et al., 2025). This aligns with the concept of "productive struggle," where encountering difficulty can promote deeper cognitive engagement and persistence. In the context of oral presentations, students who invest more effort in preparation and delivery may become more aware of the challenges involved, leading to a simultaneous increase in both engagement and perceived difficulty. Furthermore, the interaction between challenges and engagement can also be interpreted through motivational frameworks, particularly those emphasising task value and self-efficacy. When students perceive oral presentations as meaningful and relevant to their academic or professional development, they may remain engaged despite experiencing difficulty (Lan et al., 2024). In such cases, challenges do not necessarily act as deterrents but instead become integral to the learning process. This suggests that engagement is not solely determined by the absence of difficulty, but rather by how students interpret and respond to these challenges within a supportive learning environment.

Despite this potential interplay, empirical research examining the direct relationship between perceived challenges and engagement remains limited. Most studies continue to treat challenges as purely negative factors without exploring their potential role in shaping meaningful learning experiences. Addressing this gap is essential for developing a more nuanced understanding of how oral presentation assessments function within ESL classrooms, particularly in balancing challenge with effective instructional support.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a cross-sectional survey design, a common approach in educational research when the aim is to capture perceptions at a single point in time (Abequibel et al., 2021). The sample consisted of 330 undergraduate students from different faculties, which provided a broad view of how oral presentation assessments are experienced across disciplines. While the sample size is sufficient for descriptive analysis, it does not necessarily represent all possible student perspectives, and this limitation should be acknowledged. The main instrument was a structured questionnaire. Items were developed to measure dimensions such as

effectiveness, engagement, fairness, and perceived learning outcomes. Questionnaires remain one of the most practical tools for gathering large-scale data in higher education, though responses can sometimes be shaped by social desirability or interpretation of wording (Al-Naabi & Al-Abri, 2021). To reduce these risks, the items were piloted with a small group before distribution.

Data were analysed using SPSS, focusing on descriptive statistics which include frequencies, means, and standard deviations, to provide a clear picture of student perceptions. Reliability of the instrument was tested using Cronbach's alpha, which is widely recognised as a standard measure of internal consistency in survey research (Taber, 2018). Overall, the methodology was designed to balance breadth and clarity. The cross-sectional design offered a snapshot of perceptions, while reliability testing added confidence in the instrument. Still, the design does not allow causal claims, and findings should be read with this limitation in mind.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Underlying Dimensions of Students' Perceptions of Oral Presentation Assessments

Table 1 Underlying Dimensions of Students' Perceptions

Construct	Description	Mean Score
Skill Development	Critical thinking, communication, argumentation	3.82
Engagement	Interest, enjoyment, motivation	3.67
Assessment Perception	Views on effectiveness, fairness, necessity	3.57
Challenges	Anxiety, time, training, feedback issues	3.93

The questionnaire consisted of 40 items, grouped into four dimensions: skill development, engagement, assessment perception, and challenges. Descriptive analysis was conducted using SPSS, with mean scores calculated for each construct.

Skill Development recorded the highest positive mean score ($M = 3.82$). This aligns with findings that oral tasks enhance fluency and transferable skills in higher education (Binh & Hang, 2025, 2021; Lin, 2023). This suggests that students strongly perceive oral presentations as contributing to their learning, particularly in areas such as communication, critical thinking, and argumentation. While this finding highlights the pedagogical value of oral presentations, it should be noted that perceptions of skill development may vary depending on prior exposure and individual proficiency. Engagement was moderately high ($M = 3.67$). Students reported being reasonably engaged during oral presentation tasks, indicating that these assessments can foster motivation and active participation. However, engagement levels were not as strong as skill development, which implies that while students recognise the benefits, sustained involvement may depend on contextual factors such as task design and feedback (Hassan & Roy, 2024).

Assessment Perception yielded a mean score of 3.57, reflecting generally positive but less strong views. Students acknowledged the relevance of oral presentations to course goals, yet concerns about fairness and clarity of criteria tempered their overall perception. This echoes research emphasising the importance of transparent assessment practices (O'Riordan et al., 2025). This dimension illustrates the importance of transparent assessment practices. Challenges emerged as the highest overall mean ($M = 3.93$), indicating that students face significant barriers. These include anxiety, time constraints, and limited training. The prominence of challenges underscores the dual nature of oral presentations: they are pedagogically valuable, yet affectively and practically demanding (Aziz, Wan Mohamed, & Mohammad Nor, 2022; Tam, 2026).

Taken together, the findings reveal a tension. Students simultaneously recognise the benefits of oral presentations (skills, engagement) while also experiencing substantial challenges. This dual-nature interpretation aligns with existing ESL literature on speaking anxiety and cognitive load in performance tasks.

It suggests that oral presentations function as both opportunities for growth and sources of difficulty, a paradox that requires careful instructional design to balance.

Comparative View of Students' Perceptions

Table 2 Comparative View of Students' Perceptions

Dimension	Positive Perceptions (Benefits)	Negative Perceptions (Challenges)
Skill Development	Strong gains in communication, organization, and confidence (M = 3.82).	Gains sometimes overshadowed by anxiety and uneven preparation.
Engagement	Moderately high involvement, motivation, and ownership of learning (M = 3.67).	Engagement can drop when tasks feel unclear or overly demanding.
Assessment Perception	Generally positive views of relevance and fairness (M = 3.57).	Concerns about fairness, unclear criteria, and alignment with course goals.
Challenges	Some students report growth through “productive struggle” and resilience.	Highest mean score (M = 3.93) → anxiety, time constraints, lack of training, and cognitive overload.

This comparative chart highlights the paradoxical nature of oral presentation assessments. On one hand, students clearly value the benefits, reporting strong gains in communication skills, confidence, and moderate levels of engagement. On the other hand, they also identify persistent challenges—particularly anxiety, time constraints, and unclear criteria—that temper these positive perceptions. The table shows that while oral presentations are pedagogically useful, they remain affectively and practically demanding. This duality reinforces the idea that oral presentations function as both opportunities for growth and sources of difficulty, requiring careful instructional design to maximise benefits while minimising barriers.

Relationship Between Challenges and Engagement

Correlation analysis revealed a moderate positive relationship ($r = 0.562$) between students' perceived challenges and their engagement in oral presentation assessments. This finding is striking because challenges are often assumed to reduce participation. Instead, the data suggest that students who report greater difficulty also demonstrate higher engagement.

One possible explanation lies in the concept of productive struggle, where encountering difficulty encourages persistence and deeper involvement. Students who invest more effort in preparation and delivery may simultaneously become more aware of the barriers they face, leading to increased recognition of challenges alongside heightened engagement (Algouzi et al., 2023). Another interpretation is the assessment intensity effect. Oral presentations demand preparation, performance, and interaction, which naturally increase both engagement and perceived difficulty. The intensity of the task may therefore drive students to be more involved while also amplifying their awareness of obstacles (Stephenson et al., 2025).

A third perspective highlights the cognitive–affective overlap in ESL speaking tasks. Engagement often coexists with anxiety, pressure, and self-awareness. Students may remain highly engaged because they value the task, even while experiencing stress (Portugal-Toro et al., 2025). This duality underscores the complex nature of oral presentation assessments: they are not simply easy or difficult, but rather demanding tasks that foster involvement while triggering apprehension.

Finally, motivational frameworks suggest that when students perceive oral presentations as meaningful and relevant to their academic or professional development, they remain engaged despite difficulty. In such cases, challenges become integral to the learning process rather than deterrents (Razawi & Mohamad, 2024). Overall, the correlation result strengthens the argument that challenges should not be viewed solely as negative. Instead,

they may play a constructive role in shaping meaningful engagement, provided that instructional support helps students manage the affective load.

In conclusion, this study has shown that oral presentation assessments occupy a complex space in higher education: they are valued for their role in developing skills and fostering engagement, yet they are equally marked by significant challenges. The findings highlight a dual nature—students perceive clear learning gains but also report anxiety, time constraints, and fairness concerns. Importantly, the correlation between challenges and engagement suggests that difficulty does not simply deter participation; instead, it can stimulate deeper involvement when students view the task as meaningful.

Based on these insights, several recommendations emerge. First, instructors should provide structured training and clear assessment criteria to reduce uncertainty and perceptions of unfairness. Second, integrating supportive feedback and scaffolding can help students manage anxiety while still benefiting from the productive struggle inherent in oral tasks. Third, designing oral presentations as collaborative learning experiences may balance individual performance demands with peer support, enhancing both engagement and resilience. Finally, institutions should consider embedding socio-affective strategies—such as confidence-building activities and gradual exposure to public speaking—into curricula to strengthen students' self-efficacy.

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