

Tackling Presentation Anxiety among ESL University Students

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ABSTRACT

Presentation anxiety is a common challenge among tertiary students, particularly those in English as a Second Language (ESL) contexts, where limited language proficiency, fear of negative evaluation, and cultural influences often undermine learners' confidence and communication skills. This paper explores the potential of Artificial Intelligence (AI) as a supportive mechanism to reduce presentation anxiety and enhance oral performance among ESL students. Drawing on recent literature, the review focuses on three key areas: personalised AI-driven speech coaching, real-time feedback, and the provision of secure practice environments. Findings show that AI-powered speech coaching tools can assist learners in improving pronunciation, vocabulary, and grammatical accuracy that foster greater confidence. AI advantages like real-time feedback mechanisms, including speech analysis and visual feedback, provide immediate, private, and constructive corrections that reduce anxiety. Moreover, AI-enabled practice platforms create safe, judgment-free environments in which learners can rehearse repeatedly, experiment with self-expression, and build self-efficacy before performing in real-life settings. Collectively, these elements contribute to lowering affective filters, enhancing communication competence, and encouraging self-directed learning. However, while AI shows promise as a supplementary support system, the review emphasizes the importance of balancing technology use with human interaction, ensuring that emotional, cultural, and pedagogical needs are also addressed. The paper concludes that integrating AI into ESL learning holds significant potential for mitigating presentation anxiety, yet calls for further empirical research to assess long-term impacts and best practices for its sustainable adoption in higher education.

Keywords: Presentation, anxiety, ESL learners,

INTRODUCTION

A remarkable proportion of university students, both locally and globally, experience presentation anxiety, particularly among non-native speakers. This anxiety sometimes originates from language-related problems, fear of negative evaluations, and low self-esteem (Lee, 2023; Karim & Noor, 2021). In the Malaysian setting, such adverse feelings from speaking are often felt deeply by learners (Tan, 2020; Ahmad & Rosli, 2019). Some of the strategies they use are memorisation, rehearsal, and avoidance (Rahman, 2018; Lim, 2022).

Unfortunately, another setback in this matter is the pedagogical approach, which traditionally fails to bridge the gap to adequately accommodate and concentrates neither on emotional tension nor linguistic difficulty regarding public speaking (Zulkifli et al., 2021; Fredrickson, 2020). Moreover, the limited adoption of advanced educational technologies in ESL classrooms means that opportunities for personalised feedback, realistic speaking practice, and confidence-building support remain underutilised (Cheong et al., 2022; Yusof & Hamzah, 2023).

In recent years, artificial intelligence (AI) has shown potential to address these limitations by offering personalised, interactive, and low-anxiety environments for speaking practice. AI-driven tools can provide instant feedback, personalised coaching, and a comfortable environment for practice, which can help students

gain confidence and ease their anxiety over time (Wong, 2022; Ismail & Tan, 2023). Furthermore, previous studies also indicate that AI has the potential to improve the quality of education and lessen future anxiety in learning situations (Al-Momani & Akour, 2023).

It is important to understand that the reasons students choose to use AI for learning a second language. It is a reflection of their needs for independence and self-directed study thus emphasise AI as important means (Chen & Liu, 2023). This highlights the pressing need for innovative, tech-based solutions that assist students in handling anxiety related to presentations. The research suggests that AI technology could help predict and alleviate presentation anxiety among ESL students in higher education by offering tailored speech coaching, immediate feedback, and a supportive space to practice. The review seeks to lay the groundwork for understanding how AI can create a more empowering and nurturing ESL learning atmosphere.

Aim & Research Questions

The overall aim of this paper is to explore how Artificial Intelligence (AI) tools can be leveraged to reduce presentation anxiety and enhance oral performance among ESL university students.

Research Questions:

RQ 1: How does AI-driven individualised speech coaching impact the reduction of presentation anxiety among ESL students in higher education?

RQ 2: In what ways does real-time feedback from AI technologies help lower presentation anxiety for ESL students?

RQ 3: How does a secure practice environment facilitated by AI tools influence ESL students' confidence during presentations?

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative research design, with data primarily derived from a review of existing literature. Relevant peer-reviewed journal articles, conference papers, and scholarly publications were identified through academic databases such as Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar using targeted keywords related to AI-driven speech coaching, presentation anxiety, and ESL learning. The selected literature was analysed thematically to identify recurring patterns, emerging trends, and gaps in current research. This approach provides a clearer understanding of the topic and forms the basis for addressing the research questions outlined in the study.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Learners can improve their public speaking skills through individualised speech coaching tailored to their specific needs and proficiency levels.

In Malaysia, the majority of university students who study English as a second language (ESL) often suffer from presentation anxiety, a common issue that would drastically inhibit their academic performance and self-confidence. This fear is most often triggered by the phobia of speaking in a foreign language, where the students are terrified of mispronunciations, grammatical errors, or failing to find suitable words (Horwitz, Horwitz, & Cope, 1986, referenced by Aporbo, 2024). Therefore, these language obstacles become a scary process even among well-performing students in their subjects. Also, cultural factors come into play, where some students who are from educational systems where there is less emphasis placed on oral communication, so it is more challenging to adjust to the demands of Western university classrooms on speaking (Cheng, 1997, as cited in Aporbo, 2024). Also, the fear of being judged on their accent or fluency will make ESL learners even more self-conscious and fearful (Fitriani, 2015).

Furthermore, the expectation of excellence in academics is another source of difficulty. Since oral speeches are

typically marked, ESL students must not only deliver and structure their ideas well but also display good language use—a double disadvantage which is unjust (Tuan, 1995). Thus, such pressure can lead to avoidance behaviours such as avoidance of classes, refusal to present, or overreliance on memorisation, limiting actual communication growth (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991). Hence, it becomes mandatory that teachers and institutions detect the impact of presentation anxiety on ESL learners and take necessary actions. Personalised speech training, language exercises and AI tools can help in building confidence, reducing anxiety and enhancing both language ability and presentation skills (Konyrova, 2024).

Other than that, AI tools are a huge help to ESL students in reducing presentation anxiety and helping language development. For example, features like instant pronunciation feedback, grammar correction and word suggestions help learners practice speaking in an environment free from fear of criticism (Zhang & Patel, 2021, quoted by Konyrova, 2024). Moreover, virtual speech tutors create opportunities for repetition without fear of criticism, which creates confidence in the long run (Brown & Green, 2019, quoted by Konyrova, 2024). AI can also simulate real presentation conditions so that students are better prepared. With personalised feedback and learning at their own pace, AI tools create a learning comfort zone, eventually reducing fear and maximising fluency and presentation skills (Smith & Johnson, 2020, as quoted in Konyrova, 2024).

In addition, both speech coaching and AI tools also assist ESL students in overcoming presentation nervousness, which is usually caused by fear of language errors, lack of confidence with cultural conventions and self-consciousness about accent or fluency (Aporbo, 2024). In fact, language learning websites based on AI provide a safe, low-stakes environment in which the student is free to practice speech without the sense of judgment (Konyrova, 2024). Besides, software offering immediate feedback on grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation allows learners to identify and correct their own mistakes and build confidence in the long run (Kukulska-Hulme & Bull, 2019, cited in Konyrova, 2024). The capacity to practice repeatedly with the help of AI speech simulators or practice presentation apps also helps students feel more confident and less stressed when speaking in public (Lee, 2020, cited in Konyrova, 2024).

Above all, this personal coaching allows learners to receive feedback and support in a supportive setting, which helps them develop public speaking confidence as well as language confidence (Fitriani, 2015, as referenced in Aporbo, 2024). In contrast to group classes, individual coaching is solely centred on the individual learner's strengths and limitations, so it is highly effective in addressing the causes of nervousness. Utilising AI-based software for practice that is flexible and self-directed, and also offers immediate targeted feedback, then this approach is even more powerful. These tools in combination can provide ESL learners with the means to overcome apprehension, to deliver more effective and assertive communication and eventually succeed in the classroom and even their workplace where public speaking is a requirement. By incorporating both technology and individualised instruction, teachers are able to offer ESL students the full support necessary to succeed and communicate in a productive way.

Real-Time AI Feedback's Contribution to Lowering Presentation Anxiety

Building on the previously highlighted advantages of personalised coaching and AI technologies, it's critical to investigate how real-time AI feedback might help ESL learners who are experiencing presentation anxiety. Effective oral communication and performance are routinely hampered by presentation anxiety, particularly for ESL (English as a Second Language) students and pre-service instructors. Speaking is the language ability that triggers the most anxiety, according to Mohammed, Fakhruddin, and Sazalli (2023). This is usually because of a lack of confidence and preparedness, communication anxiety, and a fear of getting bad marks. Furthermore, the psychological strain of public performance and peer evaluation intensifies emotional stress during oral presentations, which makes this anxiety worse.

While earlier approaches, such as delayed video playback and in-situ feedback, have been tried, these conventional methods frequently give inconsistent outcomes. They can raise awareness of delivery elements like tone, eye contact, and tempo, but they also run the danger of making students feel worse about themselves, particularly if they are already at risk for anxiety (Zheng, Chen, & Huang, 2025). On the other hand, new AI systems provide input that is more dynamic and psychologically beneficial. The AI-generated self-clone, an

avatar that uses sophisticated lip-syncing, voice cloning, and face-swapping technologies to replicate a learner's speech and presenting style, is one noteworthy invention.

According to a mixed method research that has been conducted by Zheng et al. (2025), students who saw these AI-clone movies really developed a more positive attitude in enhancing their pronunciation and tempo. These students also showed more self-awareness and self-compassion, both of which are crucial for overcoming communication anxiety. The emotional impact of AI feedback is consistent with a larger study by Beirat et al. (2025), which discovered that integrating AI into Jordanian classrooms reduced teacher stress and enhanced instruction overall. This study finds that instructors advocate the use of AI in offering support to students' learning environment.

By combining real time and emotionally intelligent AI support, it will help soothe the anxiety that ESL speakers are facing while doing presentations. Where language barriers exist and colliding with performance pressure, these tips not only help with oral delivery but also building students self-esteem. When hearing the feedback from AI similar to human real voices, it will produce a comprehensive and inclusive learning compound that will help students become competent and good communicators.

While personalized speech coaching offers helpful support from a human centered AI, it is not the same with every student. Each person might need a personalized or a custom system in AI in order to be functioning. Considering how big AI can get at some point, it is important to facilitate and enlighten this process. When there might be limited support from teachers, AI can help fill in as humans are not a system that can be free anytime. Traditional coaching provides emotional support, introspective practice, and real-time change but AI can provide more than that and can come out with a quick solution. Time is one thing that humans will never beat. In order to have enough time to get responses and feedback when facing anxiety in doing presentations, AI real time feedback is the key. In this case, AI-driven solutions emerge as powerful additions or replacements. AI can settle the core problems in anxiety while doing presentations and gives performance confidence from a new angle instead.

Students benefit from a secure practice environment where they can build confidence without fear of judgment

A secure practice environment is crucial in addressing presentation anxiety among ESL university students, particularly when incorporating new learning technologies. One major contributor of anxiety derives from fear of being judged or committing mistakes. This fear is usually intensified in environments that lack of support and guidance. Al Shaibani et al. (2022) stated that fear of negative evaluation has become the reason to frequently experience anxiety and many opted to repeated rehearsal as a coping strategy. Similar view is reported by Shamsuri et al. (2021), who revealed that a lack of confidence and fear of errors were primary causes of speaking anxiety and students emphasise the importance of practice opportunities and constructive feedback. In virtual presentation setting, the same challenges are further compounded by technical issues and minimal interaction. This will leave students feeling unprepared and unsupported (Azhar et al., 2022). Without a clearly structured environment where expectations are communicated and feedback is available, students may hesitate to participate fully or use available tools effectively. As proven by some studies, learners are more willing to practise and gradually gain confidence when they feel supported and free from harsh judgement (Shamsuri et al., 2021; Dewaele & MacIntyre, 2014).

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The findings respond the three research questions by exploring how AI-driven speech coaching, real-time feedback, and a supportive practice environment contribute to reducing presentation anxiety among ESL students in higher education. The discussion is based on the information gathered from the literature review and are presented based on the research questions.

Based on **RQ1**, the literature shows that AI-driven individualised speech coaching significantly reduces presentation anxiety by providing tailored feedback and targeted practice opportunities. Personalised coaching

helps address specific learner weaknesses, such as grammar, pronunciation, and fluency issues, while simultaneously boosting confidence. This one-on-one approach creates a supportive learning experience, enabling students to develop both public speaking skills and language proficiency. It also addresses cultural barriers and fear of judgment, which are common sources of anxiety among ESL learners (Horwitz et al., 1986; Cheng, 1997; Fitriani, 2015).

To answer RQ2, presentation anxiety can be effectively minimized or lowered by having real-time AI feedback. Unlike delayed or traditional forms of feedback, real-time responses provide immediate guidance on elements such as speech tempo, tone, and clarity. Advanced AI features, including avatars and self-clone simulations, foster self-awareness and self-compassion by allowing students to view and refine their performance in a non-threatening manner. These tools offer continuous support even when instructors are not available, bridging gaps in traditional coaching and helping learners manage stress during presentations (Zheng et al., 2025).

For RQ3, building ESL learners' confidence by creating a secure, judgement-free practice environment using AI platforms is considered vital in addressing learners' presentation anxiety. Active engagement in learning as well as willingness to take risks in developing their presentation skills can occur when learners feel safe to practice without fear of negative evaluation. Thus, AI-based tools provide a low-stakes setting where repeated practice is encouraged, and immediate feedback helps students correct mistakes independently. This supportive environment has been shown to gradually reduce fear, foster resilience, and promote overall speaking competence (Shamsuri et al., 2021; Dewaele & MacIntyre, 2014).

In summary, a comprehensive approach to mitigating presentation anxiety and improving ESL students' academic and professional communication outcomes can be achieved by integrating personalised AI coaching, providing real-time feedback, and ensuring secured practice spaces.

CONCLUSION

This paper have shown that presentation anxiety is a common hurdle for ESL university students. This anxiety often stems from language barriers, the fear of being judged, and a lack of self-confidence. While many still rely on traditional methods like rehearsing and memorising, these approaches often don't lead to significant improvements or the emotional support students need. Recent research indicates that using tools that provide personalised coaching, instant feedback, and a safe environment for practice can truly transform how students prepare for and handle presentations. Through the use of such resources students feel more in control and less anxious about public speaking and will eventually enhance their language skills as well as able to empower them. It is true that the adoption of the said technology is still on the rise but its great potential in enhancing classroom learning and providing better support among ESL learners in areas that they need most has swiftly endorsed by many. Moving forward, we need more research to find out how to effectively integrate these tools into various learning settings while still keeping the human element in language education.

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