

Bridging the Communication Gap from Anxiety to Proficiency: A Pre- and Post-Assessment Study of Student Pitching Performance in Higher Education

Nur Syazwani binti Mohd Zolkifli^{1*}, Irda Haryani binti Tahir², Siti Rahmah binti Abdullah³,

Atiqah bte Shaharuddin⁴, Nur Hazwani binti Mohd Muhridza⁵, Rika Diana binti Busri⁶

^{1,2,3,4,5,6}**Language Academy, Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, Universiti Teknologi Malaysia,
81310 UTM Johor Bahru, Johor, Malaysia**

***Corresponding author**

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ABSTRACT

This study explores how university students feel about their pitching and presentation skills before and after completing a formal pitching assessment for UHLB 3132 Professional Communication Skills 2 (PCS 2) course. This article aims to assess students' prior knowledge, expectations, and their confidence levels in pitching prior to the completion of the assessment and to evaluate students' ongoing challenges, self-assessed improvements, and perceived usefulness of pedagogical support after delivering their pitch. The pre-assessment survey was administered before the students started their pitching assessment, while the post-assessment survey was administered after they had completed the assessment. Data were gathered through two Google Form surveys from multiple faculties in Universiti Teknologi Malaysia. The results show that most students had no previous pitching experience and were concerned about managing their nervousness and maintaining speech fluency, although post-assessment respondents generally felt confident during delivery. Teaching support and interactive in-class practice were perceived as helpful in building students' confidence and developing their speaking skills.

Keywords: Pitching Skills, Presentation Confidence, Higher Education, Student Self-Efficacy, Pedagogical Support

INTRODUCTION

Background of the Study

At Universiti Teknologi Malaysia (UTM), UHLB 3132 Professional Communication Skills 2 (PCS 2) is designed specifically to address real-world communication demands. As a core language course, it equips undergraduate students across various technical and non-technical disciplines with essential workplace communication strategies, focusing heavily on persuasive speaking, pitching, professional interactions, and structural clarity. To bridge the gap between theory and execution, the course employs a blended learning model incorporating online learning modules, direct instructor support, and targeted classroom exercises. Assessing student perceptions and challenges both before and after completing the pitching assessment in this course provides critical insight into how effective these pedagogical strategies are at building public speaking self-efficacy.

Universities aim to prepare graduates for professional environments in which clear and persuasive communication is essential. Graduates may be required to present business strategies, pitch new products, or defend project

proposals. However, many university students still struggle to speak fluently, use appropriate body language, and maintain audience engagement during presentations. To address these challenges, UHLB3132 combines digital learning materials, classroom instruction, and practical speaking activities. Examining students' perceptions before and after the pitching assessment may help instructors understand the challenges students experience and the forms of instructional support they find useful.

Problem Statement

Students from various faculties at UTM are required to develop the English communication skills needed in professional settings. Although many students can express basic ideas, they may find it difficult to communicate persuasively during a pitching assessment. The task requires them to use several techniques, including an opening hook, storytelling, a clear explanation of the problem and solution, supporting justification, and a persuasive call to action. Students who are unfamiliar with these techniques may feel overwhelmed when preparing their content and practising their delivery within a limited period. This may contribute to speaking anxiety, dependence on memorised scripts, and difficulty engaging an audience. Understanding students' concerns before the pitching assessment and their perceptions afterwards may therefore help instructors provide more appropriate support.

Research Objectives

This study aims to examine students' readiness, anxiety-related concerns and perceived skill development in relation to a formal pitching assessment. The objectives are:

1. To assess students' prior knowledge, expectations and confidence in pitching before they undertake the assessment.
2. To examine the challenges students reported, their perceived improvement and their views on the usefulness of the instructional support after completing the assessment.

Comparing response patterns from the pre- and post-assessment survey samples may provide practical guidance on how blended learning and classroom support in UHLB3132 Professional Communication Skills 2 can help students develop more confident and persuasive pitching skills.

LITERATURE REVIEW

University students across academic disciplines need persuasive speaking skills to communicate effectively in professional settings. However, theoretical knowledge and classroom instruction alone may not fully prepare students for formal pitching and presentation tasks. Many students continue to experience public speaking anxiety, particularly when they are required to present before an audience as part of an assessment.

Public Speaking Anxiety and Student Self-Efficacy

Public speaking anxiety or commonly operationalized as communication apprehension, remains one of the most frequent challenges faced by university students (Bodie, 2010). Their belief in their capability to perform a presentation task directly shapes their real performance and state during delivery. Apart from that, students with low public speaking self-efficacy tend to believe that oral presentation as a hard hurdle for them to be able to survive to speak and deliver a presentation which leads to heightened physical distress and broken speech flow.

Speech anxiety can happen due to lack of basic speaking experience. Whenever they are needed to pitch, but without any preparation or practice, the fear of negative evaluation increases. Despite that, experiential learning studies confirm that mastery experiences by simply completing a speech or pitch, dramatically build self-efficacy over time (Tsang, 2020). While internal nervousness often persists even after several presentations, real stage

exposure significantly reduces physical worries regarding non-verbal delivery and gestures (Goberman et al., 2011). More recent research confirms that public speaking anxiety remains a significant concern in higher education. Lintner and Belovecová (2024), in a study involving 1,745 university students, found that public speaking anxiety was influenced by several student characteristics, highlighting the need for targeted instructional support. Their findings reinforce the importance of examining students' confidence and anxiety in specific assessment contexts, including formal pitching tasks.

Structural Signposting & Reducing Cognitive Load

Students may fear losing their place during a presentation, particularly when they rely on memorised scripts rather than understanding their content. Forgetting a word or phrase may increase nervousness and result in long pauses. Signposting language can provide students with a clear structure for their delivery. Transition phrases such as "First, let us examine...", "Moving on to..." and "In conclusion..." help speakers organise their main points and guide their audience through the presentation. A clear structure may also reduce the demands placed on students' working memory, allowing them to concentrate on explaining their ideas rather than recalling a script (Schreiber et al., 2012). More recently, Algouzi et al. (2023) found that structured, technology-supported presentation workshops helped EFL undergraduates develop aspects of presentation competence, including organisation, content and delivery. This suggests that explicit structural guidance, combined with opportunities to practise, may support students in delivering their presentations more confidently.

Blended Learning and Instructor Feedback

Blended learning combines online materials with face-to-face instruction and practice. Online modules and instructional videos allow students to review basic knowledge at their own pace, while classroom activities provide opportunities for active practice (Kilisa et al., 2026). However, oral presentation is a performance-based skill that also requires active practice. Short, low-stakes speaking activities give students opportunities to rehearse their delivery and gradually develop confidence (LeFebvre et al., 2018). Recent research also suggests that combining online resources with classroom instruction can support students' English-speaking development (Kilisa et al., 2026). In addition, specific instructor feedback can help students recognise their strengths and identify aspects of their delivery that require further improvement (Van Ginkel et al., 2017).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is guided by Vygotsky's (1978) Sociocultural Theory of Cognitive Development, particularly the concepts of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), instructional scaffolding (Wood et al., 1976), and the More Knowledgeable Other (MKO). Vygotsky viewed learning as a social process in which cognitive development occurs through guided interaction. In this study, the framework helps explain how blended instructional support may assist students in developing their pitching skills and managing presentation anxiety. The ZPD refers to the difference between what students can accomplish independently and what they can achieve with appropriate guidance.

In this study, the pre-assessment survey identifies students' initial pitching experience, confidence, anxiety-related concerns and learning expectations. The post-assessment survey examines their self-reported confidence, continuing challenges, perceived skill development and views on the instructional support provided. These two sets of responses provide insight into students' perceptions before and after receiving guidance and completing the pitching assessment.

The blended learning activities are viewed as forms of instructional scaffolding. Online MyLinE activities, lesson slides and demonstration videos provide conceptual support, while signposting exercises and classroom practice offer structural and practical guidance. The instructor acts as the More Knowledgeable Other by modelling

pitching techniques and providing specific feedback. These forms of support may help students move towards more independent pitching performance within their Zone of Proximal Development. This interpretation is consistent with recent studies showing that structured presentation practice and blended instructional support can assist students in developing their speaking and presentation skills (Algouzi et al., 2023; Kilisa et al., 2026).

METHODOLOGY

Study Design

This study employed a descriptive pre- and post-assessment survey design supplemented by qualitative open-ended responses. The surveys examined students' readiness, perceived challenges and perceived skill development in relation to an academic pitching assessment. The study involved students from multiple faculties at UTM. Instructional support was delivered through a blended learning approach comprising MyLine modules, instructor-led lesson slides and interactive classroom practice focusing on presentation techniques.

Participants and Sampling

Data were collected from students who enrolled in the mandatory UHLB 3132 Professional Communication Skills 2 (PCS 2) course across two evaluation phases:

- **Pre-assessment phase:** A baseline survey gathered information about students' previous pitching experience, initial confidence, anticipated challenges and learning expectations.
- **Post-assessment phase:** A follow-up survey examined students' self-reported confidence, continuing challenges, perceived skill development and views on the instructional support provided.

A total of 349 students completed the pre-assessment survey, while 250 students completed the post-assessment survey. Gender distributions were similar across the two samples. Female respondents comprised 63.9% of the pre-assessment sample and 64.0% of the post-assessment sample, while male respondents comprised 36.1% and 36.0%, respectively.

Participants represented ten distinct faculties and schools in UTM, reflecting a multi-disciplinary sample. The highest number of respondents came from the Faculty of Science (28.4% pre-assessment survey/27.2% post-assessment survey), Faculty of Civil Engineering (22.1% pre-assessment survey/18.4% post-assessment survey), School of Human Resource Development & Psychology (14.0% pre-assessment survey/16.8% post-assessment survey), and Faculty of Management (12.6% pre-assessment survey/20.0% post-assessment survey). Additional disciplines included Faculty of Computing, Faculty of Built Environment and Surveying, Faculty of Educational Science & Technology, Faculty of Mechanical Engineering, Faculty of Chemical & Energy Engineering, and Faculty of Electrical Engineering.

Research Instruments

Data were collected using two Google Form questionnaires and distributed before and after the students' pitching assessment.

Instrument 1: Pre-Assessment Survey

Section 1: Demographic Details & Background: Collected students' gender, faculty, and prior pitching experience (Yes/No).

Section 2: Pre-Pitching Assessment: Evaluated students' familiarity with persuasive techniques using 3-point Likert scales (1=Not familiar, 2=Familiar, 3=Very familiar), multiple-choice options on preferred feedback and preparation strategies, and multiple-selection items regarding delivery challenges and their learning goals.

Section 3: Qualitative Input: Collected open-ended feedback on specific expectations and desired outcomes for the UHLB 3132 Professional Communication Skills 2 (PCS 2) course.

Instrument 2: Post-Assessment Survey

Section 1: Demographic Details: Collected students' gender and faculty affiliation.

Section 2: Post-Pitching Reflection: Measured self-reported delivery confidence on a 3-point Likert scale (1=Not confident at all, 2=Confident, 3=Very confident), identified the easiest presentation segments, and identified challenges that remained after the assessment using multiple-response items.

Section 3: Pedagogical Inputs: Evaluated the perceived usefulness of three specific teaching supports and overall instructional helpfulness.

Section 4: Qualitative Input: Gathered open-ended responses regarding two skills that students perceived they had developed during the task.

Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistics. Frequencies and percentages were calculated to summarise students' responses and compare patterns between the pre- and post-assessment samples. As the two surveys were analysed as separate datasets, the findings were interpreted as differences between the samples rather than changes among individual students. Responses to the open-ended questions were analysed thematically and grouped into recurring categories, including voice and delivery control, structural signposting, and audience interaction.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the findings on students' initial pitching experience, anticipated challenges and confidence before the assessment, followed by their post-assessment confidence, reported challenges, perceived skill development and views on the instructional support provided. The findings are discussed in relation to public speaking anxiety, presentation skills and blended learning.

Students' Basic Knowledge, Expectations and Confidence

Students' Preparation and Perceived Skill Development

In the post-assessment survey, students reported using several strategies to prepare for their pitching presentation. Rather than memorising a complete script, 41.0% practised the main ideas and attempted to explain them in their own words, while 28.7% reported speaking naturally based on their knowledge of the topic. These strategies suggest that some students focused on understanding their content rather than relying entirely on word-for-word memorisation.

In the open-ended responses, 48.4% of students reported developing storytelling skills, including creating a strong opening, explaining the problem and proposed solution, providing justification, and ending with a persuasive call to action. Students also mentioned learning to control their speaking pace, vary their tone to emphasise key points, and maintain eye contact with the audience. These responses indicate that students perceived development in both

the structure and delivery of their pitches. This finding is consistent with Algouzi et al. (2023), who found that structured presentation training supported the development of organisation, content and delivery skills.

Student Confidence and Pitching Experience

In the pre-assessment survey, 62.5% of respondents reported that they had never delivered a pitch or persuasive presentation. In addition, 80.5% hoped to develop their public speaking confidence, while 71.3% anticipated that managing nervousness would be one of their main challenges during the pitching assessment.

In the post-assessment survey, 96.0% of respondents rated themselves as confident or very confident during their pitching delivery, while 4.0% reported that they were not confident. These findings show that the post-assessment sample generally reported high confidence. However, they should not be interpreted as evidence of statistically significant improvement because no inferential statistical test was conducted, and the responses were not matched at the individual level. The findings nevertheless suggest that students may feel capable of completing a pitching task even when some nervousness remains, which is consistent with research showing that speaking anxiety may persist alongside developing self-efficacy (Tsang, 2020).

Table 1 Comparison of Selected Pre- and Post-Assessment Findings

Indicator	Pre-Assessment Sample	Post-Assessment Sample	Interpretation
Previous pitching experience	37.5% had previous pitching experience	Not measured	Most pre-assessment respondents had no previous pitching experience
Desire to develop confidence	80.5% hoped to develop their confidence	Not measured	Developing confidence was a common learning expectation
Self-reported confidence	Not reported in the table	96.0% felt confident or very confident	The post-assessment sample generally reported high confidence
Managing nervousness	71.3% anticipated difficulty managing nervousness	66.4% reported nervousness as a continuing challenge	Nervousness remained common in both samples
Body-language concerns	29.2% anticipated difficulty using appropriate body language and gestures	19.2% reported body language as a challenge	The percentage was lower in the post-assessment sample

Nervousness remained a prominent concern across the two survey phases. Before the assessment, 71.3% of respondents anticipated difficulty managing their nervousness. After the assessment, 66.4% of respondents continued to identify nervousness as a challenge, while 63.2% reported difficulty speaking fluently. As the pre- and post-assessment surveys involved separate samples, these percentages should not be interpreted as evidence

of individual improvement. Nevertheless, the findings suggest that students may continue to experience anxiety even when they feel confident enough to complete their pitching task. This is consistent with previous research showing that public speaking anxiety may persist despite increased experience and self-efficacy (Tsang, 2020; Lintner & Belovecová, 2024).

Body-language concerns were reported by 29.2% of the pre-assessment sample and 19.2% of the post-assessment sample. Although the percentage was lower after the assessment, this difference cannot be attributed directly to classroom practice because the responses were not individually matched. However, the finding may indicate that post-assessment respondents felt more familiar with using gestures and body movement during a pitch. Structured presentation practice has similarly been associated with the development of delivery skills, including audience engagement and non-verbal communication (Algouzi et al., 2023).

Usefulness of Pedagogical Support

Teaching Tools

Among the three forms of instructional support evaluated, in-class signposting exercises received the highest usefulness rating. A total of 71.2% of post-assessment respondents rated these exercises as very useful. Activities involving phrases such as “The main issue is...” and “To conclude...” provided students with a structure for connecting and organising their ideas. This suggests that students valued practical guidance that they could apply directly during their pitching delivery.

Online MyLinE activities were rated as very useful by 69.2% of respondents, while 64.0% gave the same rating to the lesson slides. The videos and questions provided through MyLinE allowed students to review the pitching content before attending class. Overall, 73.6% of respondents rated the instructional support as extremely helpful, while the remaining 26.4% rated it as helpful. These findings indicate that students responded positively to both online materials and classroom activities, although direct practice received the highest rating. This pattern is consistent with Kilisa et al. (2026), who found that combining online resources with face-to-face speaking activities supported students' speaking development and encouraged positive perceptions of blended learning.

Instructor feedback was also important to the students. In the pre-assessment survey, 71.9% preferred detailed feedback on their individual strengths and weaknesses rather than general comments. This preference suggests that students wanted clear guidance on specific aspects of their pitching performance. Previous research similarly indicates that targeted feedback can help students recognise areas for improvement and develop their presentation competence (Van Ginkel et al., 2017). These findings provide the basis for the pedagogical implications discussed in the following section.

Pedagogical Implications

A key finding was that 71.2% of the post-assessment respondents rated the in-class signposting exercises as very useful. Teaching specific language structures, including transition phrases, opening hooks and calls to action, provides students with a framework for organising their pitches. Rather than simply asking students to be organised, instructors can demonstrate how these structures are used during a presentation. A clear verbal structure may also reduce the demands placed on students' working memory and help them move away from rigid script memorisation (Lucas, 2020; Algouzi et al., 2023).

Although 96.0% of the post-assessment respondents rated themselves as confident or very confident, 66.4% continued to identify nervousness as a challenge. This suggests that confidence and anxiety may coexist during a pitching assessment. Instructors could therefore include short, low-stakes pitching activities throughout the

semester. Repeated opportunities to speak in a less threatening environment may help students become more familiar with public speaking and manage their anxiety before the formal assessment (Tsang, 2020).

Students also responded positively to both online MyLinE activities and face-to-face signposting exercises. These ratings indicate that students valued the flexibility of online preparation alongside opportunities for active classroom practice. Instructors could use a blended approach in which presentation principles, examples and preparatory materials are provided through MyLinE, while classroom time is used for practice and instructor guidance. Recent research similarly supports combining online resources with face-to-face activities to develop students' speaking skills (Kilisa et al., 2026).

Detailed instructor feedback was preferred by 71.9% of respondents, compared with 21.5% who preferred general comments. This suggests that students value feedback that identifies their specific strengths and areas for improvement. Instructors could use a diagnostic rubric covering aspects such as vocal variety, signposting, eye contact and audience engagement. Specific and actionable feedback may help students understand their current performance and identify what they need to improve in future presentations (Hattie & Timperley, 2007; Van Ginkel et al., 2017).

CONCLUSION

This study compared students' perceptions before and after completing a formal pitching assessment in UHLB3132 Professional Communication Skills 2. Before the assessment, 62.5% of respondents reported having no previous pitching experience, while 71.3% anticipated difficulty managing their nervousness. In the post-assessment sample, 96.0% rated themselves as confident or very confident, although 66.4% continued to identify nervousness as a challenge. These findings suggest that students may feel capable of delivering a pitch while still experiencing public speaking anxiety. Body-language concerns were reported by 29.2% of the pre-assessment sample and 19.2% of the post-assessment sample. Among the instructional resources evaluated, in-class signposting exercises received the highest usefulness rating at 71.2%, followed by MyLinE activities at 69.2% and lesson slides at 64.0%. Overall, the findings highlight the perceived value of structured guidance, classroom practice, online preparation and instructor feedback in supporting students' pitching confidence and presentation skills.

RECOMMENDATION

To support students in future pitching assessments, three practical strategies are recommended. First, instructors could incorporate short, low-stakes pitching activities before the formal assessment. These activities would give students opportunities to practise speaking before an audience, use appropriate body language and become familiar with the presentation setting. Regular practice may also help students manage nervousness and develop confidence gradually. Second, instructors could provide explicit instruction in signposting language. Sentence starters and transition phrases can help students organise the opening, problem, solution, justification and call to action. These structures provide students with a clear framework while allowing them to deliver the content in their own words. Finally, instructors could provide detailed and individualised feedback during practice sessions. Feedback that identifies both strengths and specific areas for improvement can help students refine their delivery before the formal assessment and avoid repeating the same difficulties.

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