

Barriers To Effective Presentation Skills Among Architecture Undergraduates

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ABSTRACT

Effective presentation skills are essential for architecture undergraduates as they are required to communicate design ideas, justify decisions, and engage in critical discussions throughout their academic and professional development. However, many students still face difficulties in articulating their ideas with confidence and effectiveness, especially in a critique-based architectural learning context. This study explores the barriers affecting presentation skills among architecture undergraduates at a Malaysian public university. The study was conducted using a qualitative case study approach with 20 undergraduate architecture students who were selected through purposive sampling. Data were gathered from semi-structured interviews and thematic analysis was used to analyse the data. The findings revealed three interconnected themes: psychological barriers, language and cognitive organization challenges, and delivery-related challenges. Participants reported feeling anxious due to fear of negative evaluation, difficulties with communicating design concepts in English, difficulty structuring ideas under pressure, and difficulties with engaging audiences during presentations. The results indicate that barriers to presentation are interrelated among the students of architecture, where emotional, communicative, and performance factors all play a part in influencing the ability to articulate design ideas effectively. This study emphasises the need to incorporate communication development into the architectural education along with technical design training. The results offer practical implications for teachers and curriculum designers in designing opportunities for presentation practice, feedback, and confidence building, which will help students to be more proficient in their communication skills and more competent in their professional lives.

Keywords: Presentation Skills; Architecture Education; Communication Barriers; Public Speaking Anxiety; Qualitative Study

INTRODUCTION

Oral presentations are being seen as an important skill for workplace readiness in today's environment. Good presentation skills help students to express their ideas confidently, to participate in academic discussions, and to prepare for their future careers (Anuar et al., 2026). But there is still a mismatch between the communication skills employers want and the communication skills many graduates possess. Malaysian employers continue to express concerns about graduates' ability to communicate clearly and confidently in professional settings, with limited English proficiency and low communication confidence frequently cited as contributing factors to graduate unemployment (Zhan et al., 2024; Osman et al., 2025). Although the country has been investing in higher education, about 40% of the country's unemployed population are fresh graduates, and many graduates are unemployed or underemployed after graduation (Aljohani et al., 2022; Basir et al., 2022). These trends emphasize the importance of fostering graduates' communication and presentation skills in addition to their academic and technical knowledge.

Public speaking anxiety is one of the most common challenges faced with effective presentations. Fear of negative evaluation is also noted as a major cause of this anxiety, and students' fear of being evaluated by lecturers and peers demoralizes their confidence and willingness to speak (Raj et al., 2024; Ch'ng et al., 2025). This anxiety can impact students' thought and speech organisation, oral delivery and confidence in presentations. However, psychological factors are not the only influences on presentation performance. Some students might also struggle with language, organisation of the presentation, preparation and use of presentation technology, which may impact the quality of the presentation.

While previous research has identified several factors that influence students' presentation performance, including communication apprehension, anxiety, language problems, and problems with delivery, many of these factors have been studied independently. Thus, there is a lack of research that examines how psychological, structural and technical barriers work together to affect students' presentation skills in a specific higher education context (Tsang, 2020; An et al., 2022).

Therefore, this study aims to investigate the interconnected barriers to effective presentation skills among Architecture undergraduates at a Malaysian public university. The study aims to contribute to the existing literature by exploring how the barriers work together to affect the performance of the presentation and to offer practical implications for teachers and curriculum designers to create strategies that enhance students' presentation competence and readiness for the workplace.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Presentation Skills in Architectural Education

Architectural education demands a high level of presentation skills since architecture students must present their design ideas, explain their decisions and respond to feedback throughout their academic course. Architectural presentations usually involve students to convey their design concepts in several ways of representation, including verbal statements, drawings, physical models, and 3-D visualisations (Afify et al., 2021). Students are expected not only to clearly present information, but also to explain the 'how' and 'why' of their designs and be able to participate in critical discussions with lecturer(s) and fellow students.

Presentation skills are not only essential for their studies but are a key component of the professional life of an architect as well. Architects regularly communicate with clients, consultants, and other stakeholders who rely on the architect's ability to convey a message that is clear and convincing. Therefore, presentation skills are one of the key employability skills for architecture graduates, where failure to communicate design ideas effectively can limit their capabilities in entering the professional world (Mari et al., 2022).

Although the subject of presentation is covered in the architectural programmes, there are numerous students who still have problems in delivering presentations. Previous research indicated that the difficulties are not only related to the lack of technical knowledge but also psychological, communicative and practical difficulties that affect the students' presentation performance in general (Bukhori et al., 2021; Kadir@Shahar & Abdul Raof, 2020). The results suggest that successful presentation depends on the combination of several skills, not on the mastery of one area of the presentation.

Psychological, Structural and Technical Barriers to Presentation Skills

Previous research has identified several interconnected barriers that influence students' presentation performance. The most common issue that is frequently reported is language proficiency, especially when students are expected to present in English as a second language. Students' presentation skills may be limited due to limited vocabulary, pronunciation problems and lack of fluency, which can make students less confident in presenting their ideas (Aziz et al., 2022; Waluyo & Rofiah, 2021). These language problems are even harder in the context of architectural education, where students should be able to communicate the specifics of their design and support the decisions made in their design in a short amount of time.

Apart from language-related issues, structural factors such as preparation, organisation, and time management also contribute to presentation effectiveness. Students are expected to organise information logically, prioritise key content, integrate visual materials effectively, and establish coherent relationships between verbal explanations and design representations. Poor preparation or lack of organisation in the presentation of design in architecture studio can impact students' capacity to explain their design rationale clearly. The presentation competence is not only about delivery skills, as mentioned by Mayer (2023), it is also about planning, structuring and communicating information in a logical and audience-centred way.

Technical factors also affect the performance of presentation, especially in design-based subjects where digital presentation software, visual layout, architectural drawings and multimedia are widely used. Students may lose confidence in their presentation or have trouble using presentation software, visual materials, or unexpected technical problems may interrupt the presentation. Moreover, other delivery skills like voice projection, eye contact, body language and audience interaction are still the important part of the successful presentation (Priya, 2024). Together, these results indicate that the effectiveness of the presentation depends on a mix of psychological, structural, and technical factors, which act as a whole during the process of the presentation, and not as separate problems.

Understanding Presentation Barriers from Architecture Students' Perspectives

Among the various barriers affecting presentation performance, the psychological factors particularly public speaking anxiety have consistently been identified as one of the most significant challenges experienced by university students. The negative evaluation anxiety, which refers to a fear of making mistakes, receiving criticism, and being judged by lecturers and peers during public speaking, is a common fear of students in the context of public speaking anxiety (Ch'ng et al., 2025). The concerns can lower students' confidence, diminish their active involvement, and impact their ability to present ideas effectively.

For architecture undergraduates, these psychological challenges might be exacerbated by the nature of architectural education that involves critique. Students must not only present their work in design studio but also explain their design process and decisions to the lecturers, external assessors, and other students. The pressure students may feel is strongly related to the academic assessment, and they may find it stressful when answering the questions or justifying their design decisions (El-Latif et al., 2020). While constructive feedback is crucial for students' design thinking skills to be developed, evaluative situations can increase anxiety for students who believe that they are not confident enough to speak in public.

While previous studies have examined language proficiency, presentation organisation, communication anxiety, and delivery skills, these factors have largely been investigated independently. Hence, the combined effect of psychological, structural and technical barriers on presentation experiences in the context of architectural education has been explored to a limited extent (El-Latif et al., 2020). Addressing this gap, the present study adopts a qualitative approach to explore architecture undergraduates' experiences of presentation challenges, providing a more holistic understanding of the factors that shape their presentation performance.

METHODOLOGY

This study used a qualitative case study to identify the barriers that hinder the presentation skills of architecture undergraduates in a public university in Malaysia. A qualitative approach was deemed suitable as it allows the researcher to obtain a deep understanding of how participants experience, perceive, and interpret a specific phenomenon in the context in which it occurs (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This method enabled the researchers to investigate the effects of psychological, structural, and technical issues on students' presentation experiences, as the critique-based education is one of the methodologies used in architectural education.

The participants consisted of 20 undergraduate architecture students selected through purposive sampling. These participants were selected because they had participated in numerous design studio presentations and formal critiques during their programme. The data were gathered from semi-structured face-to-face interviews where respondents could describe their experiences with presenting in detail and the researchers could delve into the issues that arose by asking follow-up questions.

The interview protocol was adapted from Tsang (2020) and to ensure relevance to the architectural context, the interview questions were contextualised around students' experiences in design studio presentations and organised into three broad domains identified from the literature. The domains included were psychological factors (presentation anxiety, fear of negative evaluation), structural factors (preparation, structure, time management), and technical factors (presentation software, visual materials, and technology-related issues). These domains were used as a guide to the interviews, but participants were encouraged to talk about other experiences that they felt had an impact on their presentation performance.

All participants were informed and consented prior to data collection. The interviews were conducted face-to-face, audio-recorded with participants' permission, and transcribed verbatim for analysis. Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase thematic analysis was used to analyse the collected data, which included familiarisation with the data, initial coding, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and reporting on the themes. To enhance the trustworthiness of the findings, participants were given the opportunity to verify the accuracy of their interview transcripts (member checking), while peer debriefing was conducted throughout the coding process to improve the credibility and consistency of the analysis.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The thematic analysis of interviews with 20 architecture undergraduates revealed that presentation difficulties were shaped by multiple, interconnected factors rather than a single underlying issue. Although participants had extensive experience presenting during design studios and critique sessions, many continued to encounter challenges when communicating their ideas confidently and effectively. Their experiences suggest that presentation competence in architectural education extends beyond possessing technical knowledge, requiring students to simultaneously manage emotional responses, communicate complex design concepts, and engage audiences during evaluative presentations. Three themes emerged from the analysis: (1) psychological barriers related to anxiety and fear of evaluation, (2) language and cognitive organisation challenges, and (3) delivery challenges and coping strategies. Together, these themes demonstrate how emotional, linguistic, and performance-related factors interact to shape students' presentation experiences.

Table 1 Themes Generated from the Thematic Analysis

Theme	Description	Participants' Responses
Psychological Barriers: Anxiety, Fear of Evaluation and Loss of Confidence	Anxiety triggered by audience evaluation and fear of making mistakes during presentations.	• "I feel absolutely anxious and afraid if I go blank..."; • "It gets even harder when you feel like all eyes are looking at you."; " • ".....My hand will be shaking."
Language and Cognitive Organisation Challenges	Difficulties communicating design ideas in English and organising information during presentations.	• "In English, I have a lack of confidence about it."; • "Had problem on choosing the right word...make more nervous"; • "I convey my points too fast which causes me to forget easily."
Delivery Challenges and Coping Strategies	Difficulties engaging audiences and strategies adopted to manage presentation anxiety.	• "I have some difficulties with engaging listeners."; • ".....I use the body gestures."; • "I memorise my point before, that's how I make my conversation smooth"

Psychological Barriers: Anxiety, Fear of Evaluation and Loss of Confidence

The most prevalent barrier faced by the participants was psychological. The participants were not worried about their knowledge of architectural concepts, but mostly about their performance in front of lecturers and peers. Design critiques were frequently seen as a very evaluative environment that required not only an explanation of the project but also the ability of the students to defend their design choices with confidence. As a result, presentations were emotionally draining experiences and participants connected error to failure and poor performance with their own shortcomings.

Participants consistently described anxiety as arising from the fear of forgetting information or being unable to communicate their ideas effectively. One participant admitted, "I feel absolutely anxious and afraid if I go blank because sometimes the words I want to say do not come out from my mind." Similarly, another participant informed that "it gets even harder when you feel like all eyes are looking at you," highlighting how awareness of being observed intensified feelings of nervousness. These responses indicate that they were focused on evaluating their audience prior to presentation, making it hard for them to communicate with confidence.

This study also revealed that presentation anxiety was not just a feeling of discomfort, but often physical symptoms as well. One participant explained that "it is very bad when presenting because my hand will be shaking," illustrating how nervousness affected both physical composure and verbal delivery. Collectively, these accounts indicate that anxiety reduced students' ability to organise their thoughts, recall information, and communicate naturally during presentations. The experiences of the participants do not indicate poor preparation, but rather indicate that emotional pressure got in the way of participants' ability to demonstrate knowledge they had already acquired.

The results obtained are consistent with the previous studies that showed that fear of negative evaluation is one of the highest factors that cause public speaking anxiety among university students (Tsang, 2020; Raj et al., 2024; Ch'ng et al., 2025). Similarly, An et al. (2022) found that communication apprehension frequently reduces students' confidence during oral presentations. The findings of the present study, however, suggest that anxiety may be especially strong in the context of architectural education as students are required to advocate for their personal design concepts instead of just presenting factual information. The critique-based culture of architectural education opens a field for students to be continuously evaluated, which in turn raises the psychological load on the presentation (El-Latif et al., 2020). As communication confidence is becoming one of the key employability skill competencies (Zhan et al., 2024; Osman et al., 2025), assisting students in managing presentation anxiety should be considered a critical component of architectural education, not just an elective communication skill.

Language and Cognitive Organisation Challenges

In addition to psychological anxiety, participants reported significant difficulties in conveying architectural concepts in English and structuring presentations. The difference between the traditional presentation in a classroom course and the architecture students' presentations is that they must explain the abstract design concepts, justify the design decisions and correlate verbal explanations with drawings, models and visual representations. These multiple communication needs seemed to make presentations more cognitively complex, especially for students with English as a second language.

Language confidence also emerged as a recurring concern throughout the interviews. One participant reported that "in English, I have a lack of confidence about it," while another explained that they "had problem on choosing the right word... make more nervous." Participants did not talk about grammar as their main focus but rather about the challenge of conveying complex design ideas in an accurate and spontaneous manner. This frequently led them to focus more on finding suitable words than on putting their ideas across, with a consequent impact on the fluency and coherence of their presentations.

Some of the participants also reported that organizing information was more difficult as anxiety arose during presentations. One participant shared that "I convey my points too fast which causes me to forget easily," suggesting that the pressure to speak fluently often disrupted the logical sequence of ideas. Rather than providing

a clear explanation, students reported that they rushed through key information or forgot their explanation. These responses suggest that language issues and organisational issues were closely linked, with the lack of confidence in English seeming to add to students' cognitive strain during the presentation.

The results of this study align with the results of the previous studies conducted by Aziz et al. (2022) and Waluyo & Rofiah (2021), which found that English proficiency and vocabulary are two common obstacles for Malaysian university students in delivering oral presentations. The present study proposes that the challenges mentioned above are heightened in the context of architectural education, since students are required to convey technical language, to explain the design reasoning and to respond to questions from evaluators. This finding also reflects Kho et al.'s (2026) observation that language anxiety reduces students' self-efficacy and willingness to communicate in academic settings.

Moreover, Mayer (2023) states that it is important for students to structure the information into a coherent presentation for an audience to follow. This is a challenging task for architecture students because it is essential that verbal explanations accompany the visuals, such as plans, models, and renderings (Afify et al., 2021). As a result, the enhancement of presentation competence must not be limited to the development of general English skills, but also to the development of the communication skills required in a certain field of study which helps students to express their design ideas clearly and confidently.

Delivery Challenges and Coping Strategies

The third theme is on students' challenges in delivering the presentation and coping strategies they used in addressing these challenges. The participants had a good understanding of their design project, but they noted that there was more to good presentation than just the explanation of the information. They should deliver ideas with confidence, hold the attention of the audience and show good verbal and non-verbal delivery skills. This implies that presentation competence is not about conveying information, but it is about making the design knowledge relevant for an audience.

One of the most common challenges cited by participants was the challenge of capturing the audience's attention when giving presentations. One participant explained that they "have some difficulties with engaging with listeners," indicating that interaction with the audience remained a challenge even when students were familiar with their project content. Effective communication in architectural critiques involves not only presenting prepared explanations but also engaging in dialogue, interpreting feedback, and holding the attention of evaluators. Thus, if there is a lack of confidence in audience engagement, students may be unable to show off the full extent of their design ideas.

Furthermore, participants also reported on several personal approaches that they use to combat nervousness and enhance their delivery. One participant shared that "to reduce the nervous problem I use the body gesture," suggesting that physical movement and non-verbal communication were consciously adopted to manage anxiety during presentations. Another participant said, "I memorise my point before, that's how I make my conversation smooth." Students' responses are evidence of them developing coping strategies to accommodate the challenges of presenting. This type of support can be useful, but constant memorization can limit students' ability to react spontaneously, especially in the context of critique where they are likely to be asked questions and participate in discussion.

These findings are consistent with Priya (2024), who highlighted that public speaking performance is influenced by multiple delivery factors, including body language, confidence, and interaction with audiences. Bukhori et al. (2021) also stated that communication competency of architecture students should combine verbal expression, presentation technique, interpersonal skill, and technical design skill. The present findings further extend these discussions by showing that students often compensate for limited confidence through self-developed strategies rather than through systematic training in presentation delivery.

Given the professional expectations of Architecture graduates, the importance of delivery skills is especially pertinent. Architects in practice need to be able to convey their design concepts to clients, consultants and other parties with differing levels of technical expertise. Mari et al. (2022) pointed out that employers appreciate

architecture graduates who can express ideas and communicate effectively in professional contexts. Thus, presentation training should not only involve preparation of the content but also provide students with opportunities to practice audience engagement, spontaneous communication and professional presentation behaviours. Architecture programmes can enhance students' ability to transfer from the academic criticism to the professional communication environment if they can help them develop these skills in conjunction with technical design skills.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

This study explored the barriers affecting effective presentation skills among architecture undergraduates at a Malaysian public university. The results indicated that the students' presentation problems were related to three interconnected aspects, namely psychological, language/cognitive organization and delivery aspects. The participants encountered anxiety caused by fear of evaluation, problems in communicating complex architectural concepts in English, problems in structuring information for presentation, and limited ability in engaging the audience effectively. Rather than existing as isolated issues, these barriers interacted with one another, where anxiety affected students' confidence, language difficulties increased cognitive demands, and delivery challenges influenced their ability to communicate design ideas persuasively. This study explores how students' experiences contribute to understanding presentation challenges in architectural education, where communication must combine technical knowledge, visual representation, and verbal explanation.

The results suggest several implications for architectural educators and curriculum designers. Communication competence must be incorporated into the preparation of an architect as an inseparable part of architectural knowledge and technical skills, which are traditionally the focus of architecture programmes. Confidence and the ability to communicate design ideas clearly may be developed through structured presentation activities, discipline-specific language support, simulated critique sessions, and ongoing formative feedback. In addition, students should be encouraged to break the habit of relying on a "coping mechanism" (memorisation) and learn to communicate flexibly to be able to communicate spontaneously with audiences. Incorporating presentation skills with technical design skills can better equip architecture graduates for a professional practice that requires effective communication, collaboration, and the capacity to articulate ideas.

Nevertheless, this study has several limitations that should be considered when interpreting the findings. The study involved only 20 architecture students from a single Malaysian public university, which may limit the transferability of the findings to other institutions, cultural contexts, and architectural education systems. Furthermore, the findings were derived solely from students' self-reported experiences through interviews and may not fully reflect their actual presentation performance or observable communication behaviours. Future research could address these limitations by including architecture students from multiple universities and different academic levels, while incorporating additional data sources such as classroom observations, presentation assessments, and feedback from instructors or industry practitioners to provide a more comprehensive understanding of presentation-related challenges. As this study adopted a cross-sectional design, future longitudinal research is also recommended to examine how presentation skills develop throughout architectural education and to identify the learning experiences and pedagogical interventions that most effectively support students' communication development.

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