# An Analysis of the Basis of Public Speaking Anxiety

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## ABSTRACT

Glossophobia or public speaking anxiety is a prevalent issue experienced by many students when speaking in front of a large audience. Public Speaking Anxiety (PSA) is common among students, especially when they are required to perform well for the public speaking task. This study aims to find out students' perception of cognitive basis, behavioural basis, physiological basis and to examine whether there is any relationship between all three bases for public speaking anxiety. A quantitative study was done to analyse the basis of PSA by using the Public Speaking Anxiety Scale (PSAS) by (Bartholomay & Houlihan, 2016) to observe whether one type of anxiety influences the other. Three factors of PSA which are cognitive, behavioural and physiological were studied using a 5-point Likert Scale instrument consisting of 4 sections. Section A has 2 items on demographic profile. Section B has 8 items on Cognitive, section C has 4 items on Behavioural and section D has 5 items on Physiological. A purposive sample of 119 participants from a public university in Malaysia responded to the survey. The findings revealed that there is a strong positive correlation between the cognitive, behavioural and physiological basis of PSA and that each basis influenced the other. Furthermore, this study also found that the behavioural and physiological basis of PSA were noticeably significant during the speech of most students. Thus, it is crucial for higher education institutions to acknowledge and address PSA issues, especially for ESL and EFL learners, as the outcome affects their experiential learning.

**Keywords**: Public Speaking Anxiety (PSA), Bartholomay and Houlihan's Public Speaking Anxiety Scale (PSAS), English as a Second Language (ESL), English as a Foreign Language (EFL)

## INTRODUCTION

The fear of speaking in front of a large crowd is daunting for those who have experienced public speaking anxiety. According to Grieve et al. (2021), a common term used to describe the fear of public speaking is glossophobia which is derived from the Greek word 'glōssa', meaning tongue, and 'phobos', meaning fear or dread. This fear is also known as Public Speaking Anxiety (PSA) and is undoubtedly most prevalent in language learners (Ibrahim et al., 2021). University students are among those who are required to present or talk in front of a crowd. The need to perform well for their presentation or speech causes PSA among the students (Rahmat, 2019). As a result, many researchers have investigated the factors behind PSA and some have even looked into the strategies used to overcome fear of speaking in public. However, PSA is still an ongoing issue for tertiary education students.

In Malaysia, it has been found that PSA is prevalent among students and it impacts their academic performance and possibly reduces their future career opportunities (Hashim & Musa, 2025; Bin et al., 2024). Asnaini et al. (2025) studied English as Foreign Language (EFL) students who lacked confidence in speaking class and found that negative past experience as well as the psychological and emotional state of the students affected their ability in public speaking. The findings of Asnaini et al. (2025) study is relative to Bandura's (1977) view that negative past experience will affect a person's perception of their ability to perform well for future public speaking tasks.

Furthermore, Mora et al. (2025) researched on speech anxiety and found that complex tasks led to anxiety for students and it severely impacted the fluency of their second language speech. This indicates that the feeling of anxiety is a real issue among students that hinders their ability to perform well during public speaking. Bartholomay and Houlihan (2016) noted that PSA affects one in every five persons and that it limits an individual's ability to share thoughts or knowledge. Therefore, PSA remains a relevant issue to be studied and one of the angles worth looking into is the basis of PSA.

Essentially, many studies have looked into the various factors of PSA among university students worldwide. However, it remains an ongoing issue that requires further research. This is because many studies so far have focused on the factors of PSA in isolation and little is known about the correlation between different factors. Thus, this study aims to fill in the gap by answering the following questions;

How do students perceive cognitive basis in public speaking anxiety?

How do students perceive behavioural basis in public speaking anxiety?

How do students perceive physiological basis in public speaking anxiety?

Is there a relationship between all bases in public speaking anxiety?

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Social Cognitive Theory and PSA

Bandura (1986) introduced the Social Cognitive Theory (SCT) with the view that learning takes place through social interaction as human beings learn by observing one another and through imitation. This learning process occurs specifically through an active interplay between an individual's personal factors (cognitive), their environment (situational factors) and the behaviour of other people involved (behavioural). In relation to PSA, Bandura's social cognitive theory provides an understanding of how public speaking anxiety is a result of an individual's own thought and perception of public speaking (cognitive), thoughts on the environment or audience (situational) and the individual's own past public speaking experiences (behavioural). In addition, Bandura (1977), proposed four factors that affect a person's self-efficacy which are enactive, vicarious, exhortative and emotive sources of cognitive processes. These factors when found in a speaker's past experience will frame their perception of future performance in public speaking. Ultimately, the active processes encompassing internal and external factors during public speaking can all lead to public speaking anxiety for the speaker.

### Factors of PSA

There are several factors of PSA mentioned by different experts. These factors range from internal factors, such as personal cognitive factors experienced internally, to external factors, like the audience or environment. In Malaysia, Ibrahim et al. (2021) looked at public speaking anxiety among Malaysian undergraduate students and found several factors that led to PSA. These factors included cognitive and behavioural factors such as nervousness (internal) and audience size (external). Meanwhile, Grieve et al. (2021) studied university students in the United Kingdom and found that internal factors of PSA such as 'uncertainty about the topic' and external factors like 'fear of being judged' contributed to students' negative learning experience. More

recently, Thi Thuy Lin et al. (2025) surveyed university students in Vietnam and discovered that the fear of being evaluated negatively was the main factor of PSA for them. Essentially, many studies have looked into the various factors of PSA among university students worldwide. Hashim & Musa (2025) suggested that future studies on public speaking anxiety are crucial in order to corroborate the findings in the knowledge area. The factors investigated by researchers established concerns in higher education learning on Public Speaking Anxiety among EFL and ESL undergraduates in public universities.

**Past Studies on PSA**

Numerous studies have investigated the causes of public speaking anxiety (PSA) in the past. These studies explore the different method approaches, such as qualitative, quantitative, as well as mixed-method. Nevertheless, the studies highlight factors to delve into as strategies in overcoming PSA among EFL and ESL undergraduates in public universities.

Firstly, Ch'ng et al. (2025), conducted a mixed-method study on Exploring ESL Public Speaking Anxiety Among Undergraduates. 65 undergraduate students from a public university participated in the study. The data was collected using a questionnaire instrument, which employed the Public Speaking Classroom Anxiety Scale (PSCAS). The collected data was then analysed using thematic analysis to examine the cause of common anxiety-inducing situations. The findings revealed that significant factors that contributed to PSA were negative evaluation and communication apprehension. Additionally, the study suggested a supportive learning environment that builds the students' comfort levels and reduces fear as this may foster confidence in public speaking.

Next, the study by Thi Thuy Lin et al. (2025), also looked at factors regarding PSA among EFL undergraduates. 135 undergraduate students from a public university participated in the study. The data was collected using a questionnaire as the instrument. The findings revealed psychological factors contributing to PSA and the effectiveness of public speaking training in overcoming anxiety. Additionally, this study implied that the core factor of social anxiety is learners experiencing substantial fear of negative evaluation during public speaking.

Ibrahim et al. (2021) conducted a quantitative study on exploring the fear of public speaking through social cognitive theory. A number of 171 participants, who were undergraduates from a public university, responded to the study. The data was collected using a questionnaire instrument consisting of four sections: demographic profiles, situation factors, cognitive factors, and behavioural factors. The findings revealed that physical symptoms such as shaking hands were experienced by students during public speaking and oral presentations as a sign of fear. This anxiety directly affected their public speaking experience, negatively impacted their learning and resulted in 'fear of being judged' as an innate fear. Additionally, it was reported that anxiety is linked to factors such as the size of the audience, leading to nervousness among the participants.

Subsequently, a qualitative study conducted by Grieve et al. (2021) on students' fear of oral presentations and public speaking in higher education, found that factors contributing to specific fear in public speaking are linked to the negative effect on their higher education experience. 46 participants from undergraduate and postgraduate students from the selected public university responded to the four open-ended qualitative survey questions regarding fears, strategies, experience, and awareness in delivering public speaking anxiety. The thematic analysis identified six themes: fear of being judged, physical symptoms, uncertainty about the topic, negative effect on university experience, practice and preparation, and more practical support needed.

Last but not least, Rahmat (2025) carried out a quantitative pilot study on the influence of beliefs and expectations on PSA. The instrument used was a five Likert scale survey with items replicated from Bartholomay & Houlihan's (2016) PSA. The study found relationships between beliefs and expectations and behaviour as sources of public speaking anxiety.

Overall, several past studies have been conducted to investigate the causes of public speaking anxiety (PSA), applying different research approaches such as mix-method, qualitative, and quantitative in highlighting the

contributing factors: negative evaluation and communication apprehension, psychological factors linked to fear of negative evaluation, size of audience leading to nervousness, and impact which links public speaking fear towards experience of higher education learning (Ch'ng et al., 2025; Thi Thuy lin et al., 2025; Ibrahim et al., 2021; Grieve et al., 2021). Hence, an analysis on the basis of public speaking anxiety (PSA), regarding factors of Cognitive basis, Physiological basis, and behavioural basis, corroborates the findings on the growing body of literature relating to PSA factors stated.

**Conceptual Framework of the Study**

According to Spielberger (1986), the fear people face gets its source from state or trait anxiety. Trait anxiety refers to the person's behaviour while state refers to the environment that the person is in. The conceptual framework of this study is presented in figure 1 below. Does one type of anxiety influence the next type? This study is rooted from the factors of public speaking anxiety by Bartholomay & Houlihan (2016). There are three bases for public speaking anxiety. The first basis is cognitive where speakers lack confidence in speaking. The speaker could also be worried that the audience would think they are not good speakers. The next basis is behavioural. Among some indications of behavioural basis is that the speaker was seen fidgeting when speaking. The speaker's voice could also tremble. The last basis is physiological basis. The speaker may complain of falling sick before the speech. Next, the speaker may feel tense before giving the speech or sweat during the speech. This study also explores if there is a relationship between all bases in public speaking anxiety as shown in figure 1 below.

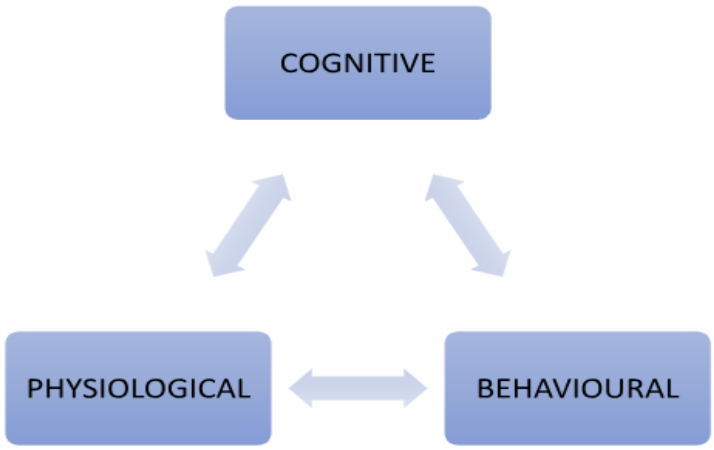


Figure 1- Conceptual Framework of the Study

Is there a relationship between all bases of public speaking anxiety?

## METHODOLOGY

A quantitative study is done to explore the relationship between all bases of public speaking. A convenient sample of 119 participants responded to the survey. The instrument used is a 5 Likert-scale survey. Table 1 below shows the categories used for the Likert-scale; 1 is for Never, 2 is for Rarely, 3 is for Sometimes, 4 is for Very Often and 5 is for Always.

Table 1 Likert Scale Used

| No | Category |
|---|---|
| 1 | Never |
| 2 | Rarely |
| 3 | Sometimes |

| | |
|---|---|
| 4 | Very Often |
| 5 | Always |

Table 2 shows the distribution of items in the survey. This study is replicated from the instrument by Bartholomay and Houlihan (2016) to reveal the variables in the table below. Section B has 8 items on Cognitive factors; section C has 4 items on Behavioural factors and section D has 5 items on physiological factors of PSA.

Table 2 Distribution of Items in the Survey

| No | Variable | Sub-category | Cronbach Alpha |
|---|---|---|---|
| B | COGNITIVE | 8 | .909 |
| C | BEHAVIOURAL | 4 | .791 |
| D | PHYSIOLOGICAL | 5 | .861 |
| | Total Items | 17 | .939 |

Table 2 also shows the reliability of the survey. The analysis shows a Cronbach alpha of .909 for Cognitive factors, .791 for Behavioural factors and .861 for Physiological factors. The overall Cronbach alpha for all 17 items is .939; thus, revealing a good reliability of the instrument used. Further analysis using SPSS is done to present findings to answer the research questions for this study.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Demographic Analysis

This section presents the demographic analysis of the respondents involved in this study.

Table 3 Percentage for Demographic Profile

| Question | Demographic Profile | Categories | Percentage (%) |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | Gender | Male | 37% |
| | | Female | 63% |
| 2 | Self-Rating English Proficiency | Can communicate in English | 94% |
| | | Cannot communicate in English | 6% |

Table 3 shows the percentages for the demographic profile of the respondents involved in this study. The study sample consisted of 119 respondents from a public university in Malaysia, with 63% female and 37% male. The respondents self-rated their English proficiency with 94% claiming that they can communicate in English and the remaining 6% claiming that they cannot communicate in English.

### Descriptive Statistics (mean)

### Findings for Cognitive Basis

This section presents data to answer RQ1: How do students perceive cognitive basis in public speaking anxiety?

Table 4 Mean for Cognitive Basis

| Item | M | SD |
|---|---|---|
| BCQ8: I do not feel satisfied after giving a speech. | 3.3 | 0.9 |
| BCQ7: I am not confident when I give a speech. | 3.1 | 0.9 |
| BCQ6: I cannot focus on what I am saying during my speech. | 2.9 | 1.0 |
| BCQ5: I am worried that my audience will think I am a bad speaker. | 3.6 | 1.0 |
| BCQ4: If I make a mistake in my speech, I am unable to re-focus. | 3.3 | 0.9 |
| BCQ3: I am nervous that I will embarrass myself in front of the audience. | 3.6 | 0.9 |
| BCQ2: I am afraid that I will be at a loss for words while speaking. | 3.7 | 0.9 |
| BCQ1: Giving a speech is terrifying. | 3.2 | 0.9 |

Table 4 shows the mean scores for cognitive basis. The highest mean is 3.7 for item BCQ2 (mean=3.7, SD=0.9) which reports that the learners are afraid that they will be at a loss for words during their speech. Next is item BCQ3 (mean=3.6, SD=0.9) which states that the learners were nervous that they might embarrass themselves in front of the audience. The lowest mean is 2.9 for item BCQ6 (mean=2.9, SD=1.0) that states that the learners cannot focus on what they were saying during their speech.

**Findings for Behavioural Basis**

This section presents data to answer RQ2: How do students perceive behavioural basis in public speaking anxiety?

Table 5 Mean for Behavioural Basis

| Item | M | SD |
|---|---|---|
| CBQ4: I find it difficult to make eye contact with my audience. | 3.3 | 1.1 |
| CBQ3: My voice trembles when I give a speech. | 3.1 | 0.9 |
| CBQ2: I fidget before speaking. | 3.0 | 1.0 |
| CBQ1: My hands shake when I give a speech. | 3.3 | 1.1 |

Table 5 presents the mean for behavioural basis. Two items share the same highest mean of 3.3. The first is item CBQ1 (mean=3.3, SD=1.1) which reports that the learners' hands shook when they gave a speech. Next is item CBQ4 (mean=3.3, SD=1.1) which states that the learners found it difficult to make eye contact with the audience. The lowest mean is 3 for item CBQ2 (mean=3, SD=1.0) that states that the learners fidgeted before they gave a speech.

**Findings for Physiological Basis**

This section presents data to answer RQ3: How do students perceive physiological basis in public speaking anxiety?

Table 6 Mean for Physiological Basis

| Item | M | SD |
|---|---|---|
| DPQ5: I do not feel relaxed while giving a speech. | 3.2 | 0.9 |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| DPQ4: I sweat during my speech. | 2.6 | 1.1 |
| DPQ3: My heart pounds when I give a speech. | 3.4 | 1.0 |
| DPQ2: I feel tense before giving a speech. | 3.2 | 0.9 |
| DPQ1: I feel sick before speaking in front of a group. | 2.7 | 1.1 |

Table 6 shows the mean for physiological basis. The highest mean is 3.4 for item DPQ3 (mean=3.4, SD= 1.0) which reports that when giving their speech, the learner's heart pounded as a physiological factor of PSA. Next is item DPQ2 and DPQ5 with the same mean and standard deviation of (mean 3.2, SD= 0.9), which reports that the learners felt tense before giving their speech (DPQ2), and they did not feel relaxed while giving the speech (DPQ5). Followed by the mean 2.7 for item DPQ1 (mean=2.7, SD=1.1) which reports that the learners feel sick before speaking in front of a group. The lowest mean is 2.6 for item DPQ4 (mean=2.6 SD= 1.1), the learners sweat during their presentation speech.

**Exploratory Statistics**

Findings for Relationship between all basis in public speaking anxiety

This section presents data to answer RQ 4: Is there a relationship between all bases in public speaking anxiety?

To determine if there is a significant association in the mean scores between all bases in public speaking anxiety, data is analysed using SPSS for correlations. Results are presented separately in table 4, 5 and 6.

Table 7 Correlation between Cognitive and Behavioural Bases

| | | COGNITIVE | BEHAVIOURAL |
|---|---|---|---|
| COGNITIVE | Pearson (Correlation | 1 | .739** |
| | Sig(2-tailed) | | .000 |
| | N | 119 | 119 |
| BEHAVIOURAL | Pearson (Correlation | .739** | 1 |
| | Sig(2-tailed) | .000 | |
| | N | 119 | 119 |

**Correlation is significant at the level 0.01 (2-tailed)

Table 7 shows there is an association between cognitive and behavioural bases. Correlation analysis shows that there is a high significant association between cognitive and behavioural bases (r=.739**) and (p=.000). According to Jackson (2015), coefficient is significant at the .05 level and positive correlation is measured on a 0.1 to 1.0 scale. Weak positive correlation would be in the range of 0.1 to 0.3, moderate positive correlation from 0.3 to 0.5, and strong positive correlation from 0.5 to 1.0. This means that there is also a strong positive relationship between cognitive and behavioural bases.

Table 8 Correlation between Behavioural and Physiological Bases

| | | BEHAVIOURAL | PHYSIOLOGICAL |
|---|---|---|---|
| BEHAVIOURAL | Pearson (Correlation | 1 | .660** |

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | Sig(2-tailed) | | .000 |
| | N | 119 | 119 |
| PYHSIOLOGICAL | Pearson (Correlation | .660** | 1 |
| | Sig(2-tailed) | .000 | |
| | N | 119 | 119 |

**Correlation is significant at the level 0.01 (2-tailed)

Table 8 shows there is an association between behavioural and physiological bases. Correlation analysis shows that there is a high significant association between behavioural and physiological bases (r=.660**) and (p=.000). According to Jackson (2015), coefficient is significant at the .05 level and positive correlation is measured on a 0.1 to 1.0 scale. Weak positive correlation would be in the range of 0.1 to 0.3, moderate positive correlation from 0.3 to 0.5, and strong positive correlation from 0.5 to 1.0. This means that there is also a strong positive relationship between behavioural and physiological bases.

Table 9 Correlation between Physiological and Cognitive Bases

| | | PHYSIOLOGICAL | COGNITIVE |
|---|---|---|---|
| PHYSIOLOGICAL | Pearson (Correlation | 1 | .742** |
| | Sig(2-tailed) | | .000 |
| | N | 119 | 119 |
| COGNITIVE | Pearson (Correlation | .742** | 1 |
| | Sig(2-tailed) | .000 | |
| | N | 119 | 119 |

**Correlation is significant at the level 0.01 (2-tailed)

Table 9 shows there is an association between physiological and cognitive bases. Correlation analysis shows that there is a high significant association between physiological and cognitive bases (r=.742**) and (p=.000). According to Jackson (2015), coefficient is significant at the .05 level and positive correlation is measured on a 0.1 to 1.0 scale. Weak positive correlation would be in the range of 0.1 to 0.3, moderate positive correlation from 0.3 to 0.5, and strong positive correlation from 0.5 to 1.0. This means that there is also a strong positive relationship between physiological and cognitive bases.

## CONCLUSION

Summary of Findings and Discussions

This section presents the summary and discussion of findings according to the research questions:

How do students perceive cognitive basis in PSA?

The findings showed that most students were aware of the cognitive factor of PSA in which a majority of the students feared that they would be at a loss for words during their public speech. This indicates that personal factors such as fearing that they might not be able to think of what to say affects students' public speaking ability and results in students having PSA even before they give the speech. In contrast, a small number of students reported that they were unable to focus on what they were saying during their speech.

This finding is consistent with Bartholomay and Houlihan's (2016) cognitive basis for public speaking anxiety in which the speakers lacked confidence because they are concerned with being evaluated negatively by the audience. Thus, it can be concluded that the internal thought of receiving negative judgement affected student's self-efficacy in this study and this is supported by similar findings from other previous studies (Ch'ng et al., 2025; Thi Thuy lin et al., 2025; Ibrahim et al., 2021; Grieve et al., 2021).

How do students perceive behavioural basis in PSA?

The findings revealed that most students noticed that their hands shook when they were delivering their speech

and were reluctant to make eye contact with the audience. This behaviour reflects that the students felt anxious during their public speaking and their feeling is noticeable in their actions. In comparison, only a small number of students reported that they fidgeted before delivering their speech.

This finding is similar to the findings of Ibrahim et al. (2021) in which students' hands shook as a sign of behavioural basis of PSA. However, fidgeting was only reported by a few students and hence differs from the findings of Bartholomay and Houlihan (2016). Significantly, it is also worth noting that the behavioural basis of PSA in this study was more prominent during the speech than before or after the public speech. Therefore, it can be concluded that there is a clear link between behavioural basis and students' feeling of anxiety during public speaking.

How do students perceive physiological basis in PSA?

The findings reflected that most students were aware of the physical factors of PSA. The majority of the students reported that their heart pounded when they were speaking in public. This signifies that the students were really anxious during their public speaking that it caused palpitations. On the other hand, a relatively small number of students reported that they were sweating during their speech.

This finding supports the findings by Rahmat (2025) in which the students' heartbeat became noticeably strong and irregular during public speaking as a result of their anxiety. Hence, it can be concluded that there is a proven link between physiological factors and PSA.

Is there a relationship between all bases in PSA?

The findings indicate that there is a strong positive correlation between all bases of public speaking anxiety which are cognitive basis, behavioural basis and physiological basis.

Essentially, this finding proves that one factor does relate to the other. For example, the cognitive basis of PSA in which students were afraid that they will be 'at a loss for words while speaking' strongly relates with the behavioural basis of PSA in which they experience 'hands shaking when giving a speech' and 'finding it difficult to make eye contact with the audience'. Subsequently, these behavioural factors of PSA strongly relate to students' experiencing physiological basis of PSA such as 'My heart pounds when I give a speech'. In short, it can be concluded that multiple factors of PSA simultaneously and interrelatedly affect students during a public speaking task.

**Implications and Suggestions for Future Research**

Theoretical and Conceptual Implications

This study highlights the importance of Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory in understanding the basis of Public Speaking Anxiety among ESL and EFL learners. The findings of this study corroborate with Bartholomay and Houlihan's (2016) three factors of PSA which are cognitive, behavioural and physiological. Moreover, this study confirms that students were aware of the internal as well as external factors of PSA during public speaking as aligned with Bandura's theory (1986) and that all three factors were in fact

interrelated. The strong positive relationship between cognitive basis, behavioural basis, and physiological basis of PSA proves Bandura's (1977) theory of self-efficacy. Hence, it is crucial for higher education institutions to address PSA issues more effectively, especially for ESL and EFL learners, as the outcome affects their experiential learning and disrupts their ability to perform well during public speaking.

**Pedagogical Implications**

The findings of this study have several implications for improving public speaking teaching and learning practices.

First, there is a need for teachers to increase speaking activities in the classroom several times before a public speaking assessment or presentation. This will help reduce students' anxiety and improve their self-efficacy in public speaking. In particular, simple speaking tasks can leave students' with a sense of accomplishment and naturally builds their confidence level to speak in front of a crowd. This study serves as evidence that prior experiences of public speaking influences students' perception of their own ability in delivering a speech in front of a crowd such as mentioned by Bandura (1977). Thus, successful speaking activities will make students more confident of their ability to deliver a good public speech.

Second, teachers can also include PSA as a topic to be introduced in public speaking classes. This exposure will enable students to address the PSA factors that they have experienced and work towards delivering a better speech. In fact, students can benefit from the strategies to overcome PSA during sharing sessions. Teachers can share their own tips to combat PSA and even create a space for students to share their thoughts or experiences in overcoming PSA.

Finally, teachers can also include warm up sessions before speaking class activities such as encouraging students' to share a fun fact, tell a short story or even sing a chorus from a popular song. This will reduce students' fear of public speaking as they get to talk about a familiar topic and build a good rapport with their audience. Ultimately, it will lessen their PSA and encourage them to deliver their main speech confidently.

**Suggestions for Future Research**

Future research could explore a wider range of factors contributing to public speaking anxiety. It would also be valuable to investigate effective speakers, specifically examining the positive beliefs and expectations they hold that may contribute to successful speech outcomes. Subsequent research could build upon demographic findings by exploring variables such as gender differences and the impact of language proficiency on anxiety levels. Moreover, incorporating qualitative data such as open-ended responses or interviews could enrich the results and offer a more nuanced understanding of students' subjective experiences.

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