An Overview of Public Speaking Anxiety among International Students

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Abstract

Public speaking is a crucial communication skill in various areas of life, including social, academic, and professional settings. This is especially true for international students, who are required to speak English. However, many students experience public speaking anxiety. Therefore, this study aims to describe the level of anxiety in public speaking among students of Guidance and Counseling (BK) International Class at Padang State University. The study uses a descriptive quantitative approach with total sampling of 59 students from the 2023 and 2024 cohorts. Data were collected through a four-point Likert scale questionnaire measuring four aspects: mood, cognitive, somatic, and motor. The results of the study indicate that the majority of students exhibit high levels of public speaking anxiety, with mood and cognitive aspects dominating. Meanwhile, somatic and motor aspects are relatively low. These findings underscore the need for counseling interventions to help students manage emotional stress and negative thoughts, thereby enabling their public speaking skills to develop optimally.

Keywords: Speech Anxiety, International Students, Communication, Counseling Guidance

INTRODUCTION

Communication is how a person interacts with others and is a crucial aspect that everyone should possess. Nearly every aspect of human life requires communication, particularly speaking with others to share ideas, thoughts, opinions, and knowledge. Speaking is an activity for self-expression or the act of reporting actions with precise words. Speaking can also be defined as the ability to communicate or express a sequence of current ideas. Furthermore, effective speaking involves not only conveying information but also ensuring that the message is understood accurately and fluently by the listener. As Derakhshan et al (2016) highlights, developing English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners' speaking ability necessitates a focus on both accuracy and fluency. Accuracy refers to the correct use of grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation, while fluency pertains to the ability to speak smoothly and without undue hesitation. These two elements are interdependent; while a speaker might be accurate, a lack of fluency can hinder effective communication, and conversely, fluent speech riddled with errors can obscure the intended meaning. Therefore, pedagogical approaches in language education often emphasize communicative activities that provide opportunities for learners to practice and refine both aspects of their speaking skills, ultimately fostering greater confidence and proficiency in real-world interactions. Building upon the foundational importance of speaking for self-expression and idea

sharing, public speaking emerges as a particularly vital communication skill in the modern era, especially for students in higher education.

Public speaking is one of the most important communication skills in the modern era, especially for students in higher education. Public speaking is not just about conveying information, but also a means of expressing ideas and thoughts, as well as building self-confidence and critical thinking skills (Ekawati, 2024; Berzenji, 2023). The ability to communicate is an important prerequisite for students to be able to express their hearts and minds so that it easier to complete their activities and assignment by participating in conversation with others (Ihsan et al., 2023). This skill has become increasingly crucial in the era of globalization and the 4th Industrial Revolution, where students are expected to possess strong communication competencies as one of the soft skills that support their success in the workplace (Ahmad Tajuddin et al., 2022; Teng et al., 2019; Robles, 2012). Unfortunately, many students experience psychological barriers when it comes to public speaking. One of the most common challenges is public speaking anxiety, the anxiety that arises when someone has to speak in front of an audience. Anxiety itself is defined as a state of uneasiness and apprehension of fear caused by the anticipation of something threatening (Ferreira Marinho et al., 2017). In conclusion, public speaking anxiety is a feeling of nervousness or anxiety that is naturally felt by individuals, especially in front of many people, due to stressors that trigger the individual to be afraid of expressing what they want to convey verbally.

Public speaking anxiety, often categorized under the broader concept of communication apprehension, has been identified as a common psychological barrier among students in higher education, especially in programs that demand interpersonal communication and presentation skills (Bodie, 2010). Many students have been faced with feelings of communication apprehension during presentations, which can significantly reduce their ability to express ideas and interact effectively with the audience (Thu & Tran, 2024). In Indonesia, the ability to speak in public is one of the basic competencies that students in various fields must master, including students in international programs that require proficiency in a foreign language as the primary means of communication. Unlike regular students, students enrolled in international programs face additional challenges, namely the requirement to speak in public in a foreign language, such as English, which is not the native language of the majority of Indonesian students.

One of the focal issues many international students experience in higher education is their fragility to adapt to the new challenging environment, including the ways to express their thoughts and opinions through oral communication publicly. Their burden increases as they must present their ideas in their non-native language, which can be incredibly stressful for international students(Anwar et al., 2022). This often causes psychological pressure, especially in relation to the demands of correct grammar, proper pronunciation, and cross-cultural communication adjustments. This is in line with research conducted at a university in Australia which found that dual conceptualizations of second language speaking anxiety as measured by the second language speaking anxiety scale are relevant for students (Woodrow, 2006; Ansari (2016) emphasizes that anxiety about speaking in public in a foreign language is closely related to low self-confidence, negative learning experiences, and a lack of academic support. Furthermore, Kamridah (2016) and Nemati (2020) explain that the phenomenon of foreign language anxiety has a significant correlation with anxiety when speaking in public, especially when students are asked to give presentations, participate in discussions, or engage in academic debates in front of an audience.

Public speaking anxiety is a psychological condition characterized by feelings of fear, nervousness, anxiety, or restlessness that arise when someone has to speak in front of a large audience. According to Gallego (2022), public speaking anxiety encompasses four key aspects: affective (emotional state), cognitive, somatic (physical symptoms), and motor (actual behavior). Students experiencing high levels of anxiety typically exhibit symptoms such as increased heart rate, cold sweats, negative thoughts, and avoidance of presentation tasks. Previous research, such as that conducted by Gulsah Tercan & Dikilatas (2015) shows a significant negative correlation

between communication skills and levels of public speaking anxiety. The lower a student's communication skills, the higher their anxiety levels tend to be. Moreover, the intensity of public speaking anxiety can vary depending on situational and individual factors. For instance, individuals who lack previous public speaking experience or who have negative self-perceptions tend to experience higher anxiety levels. In their research, (Ferreira Marinho et al., 2017; Ibrahim et al., 2021) found that students who received training in communication skills or participated in speech preparation workshops reported lower anxiety levels and demonstrated better presentation performance. This finding supports the importance of targeted interventions and practice in reducing public speaking anxiety. Recent studies also emphasize the importance of psychological factors such as self-efficacy and emotional intelligence in mitigating public speaking anxiety. A study by (Khalaf, 2024) showed that students with higher self-efficacy exhibited significantly lower public speaking anxiety.

For international students, this anxiety is often amplified by language barriers, cultural differences, and the pressure to meet academic and professional expectations in a foreign environment. Learning English as a second language is not an easy task because students encounter various challenges. These challenges are generally categorized into three groups which are learner factors, teacher factors, and language factors. Among these, learner-related issues have been studied the most, especially those involving the psychological traits of students. One significant factor affecting individuals in learning English or any other second language is anxiety, which is a psychological component. Earlier studies in second language acquisition emphasized cognitive aspects such as potential, ability, and study habits as they relate to the overall process of learning a second language. This second language is also often referred to as a foreign language. Later research shifted to emotional aspects that could either support or obstruct the learning process.

Many studies that followed focused on affective or personality traits that play an essential role in the success of language learning(Yassin & Razak, 2018; Matt et al., 2022). According to Macintyre and Gregersen (2012), anxiety can interfere with cognitive processing, reduce working memory capacity, and ultimately hinder a student's ability to articulate thoughts clearly in public speaking contexts. In the context of international students enrolled in the Guidance Counseling program, public speaking anxiety poses a serious challenge because the counseling profession in the future will require effective verbal communication skills. In the Guidance Counseling, students are expected to be able to convey information, build empathetic relationships with clients, and conduct counseling interventions openly and confidently. Therefore, if anxiety about speaking in public is not addressed, this can have implications for academic performance, active participation in discussions, and the development of professional identity as a counselor.

To better understand the effects of public speaking anxiety (PSA), it is crucial to explore how this form of anxiety manifests in academic settings and how it specifically affects international students pursuing a counseling-related degree. Students in Guidance and Counseling programs are frequently expected to engage in activities such as group presentations, reflective sharing, client simulation sessions, and peer supervision discussions—all of which require verbal expression in front of others. When students experience public speaking anxiety, they are likely to avoid these essential learning opportunities, which can limit their overall skill development. Based on observations in the field, many students still show low participation when they have to speak in class. They tend to be nervous, hesitant, and even choose to remain silent to avoid being judged by the audience. This situation underscores the need for a deeper understanding of the underlying factors, the actual conditions, and the dominant aspects contributing to public speaking anxiety among international students.

However, there are Guidance and Counseling students who have shown positive development in communication skills, such as being able to deliver presentations confidently, actively participating in class discussions, and expressing their opinions openly in front of lecturers and peers. This activeness reflects strong mental readiness and critical thinking skills, which are highly essential in both academic and professional settings. However, not all students

experience the same level of development. In reality, many students still show low participation during lectures. They tend to be passive, reluctant to ask questions, and even hesitant to express their opinions during class discussions. One of the main causes of this behavior is the anxiety that arises when speaking in public. Students feel nervous, anxious, and lack confidence when they have to appear in front of lecturers and classmates. This anxiety often leads them to avoid giving presentations, engaging in discussions, or even asking simple questions, which feels difficult for them to do.

This condition presents a serious challenge in the learning process, especially for students in the Guidance and Counseling program. Given the importance of communication skills, particularly the ability to speak in public in the counseling profession, and the challenges faced by international class students, it is necessary to conduct an in-depth study on the nature of public speaking anxiety within this group and its implications in guidance and counseling. The results of the study are expected to provide a clearer picture of students psychological conditions and serve as a foundation for designing more effective and responsive communication training and teaching strategies tailored to the needs of international students. Therefore, this research is important to provide empirical insights into public speaking anxiety among international students, with the hope of serving as a foundation for improving teaching strategies, counseling programs, and the development of soft skills within higher education institutions.

METHODS

Research Design
This study uses a descriptive quantitative approach, with the aim of obtaining a realistic picture of the level of anxiety about public speaking among international students. The descriptive method was chosen because it is suitable for describing phenomena as they are, without manipulating the research variables.

Research Participants
The study population consists of all students in the International Class of the Guidance and Counseling (BK) Program at Padang State University, from the 2023 and 2024 cohorts. The total population consists of 59 students, comprising 35 students from the 2023 cohort and 24 students from the 2024 cohort. This study employs total sampling, meaning the entire population is used as the sample due to its relatively small size and the feasibility of fully reaching all members.

Research Instrument
The research instrument used in this study was the Public Speaking Anxiety questionnaire from Annisa Fitri S.P., whose research was conducted at Medan Area University and permission for the use of the instrument was granted to the researcher. This study adopted a scale developed by the previously mentioned researcher, which uses a 4-point Likert scale to avoid the tendency of respondents to choose neutral answers, thus encouraging more definitive responses based on four aspects, namely mood, cognitive, somatic, and motor. Respondents were asked to provide answers on the options very agree (VA), agree (A), disagree (D), and very disagree (VD), with different scores for favorable and unfavorable items. To maintain the validity and reliability of the instrument, the researcher used the original instrument without substantial modifications, as it had already undergone previous validity testing and was proven suitable for measuring public speaking anxiety among students. Data collection was conducted by distributing the questionnaire directly to all samples of international counseling students. Respondents were asked to complete the questionnaire based on their actual experiences.

Data Analysis

Data analysis techniques used descriptive statistical analysis with calculations of total scores, means, and percentages. Anxiety levels were categorized based on score intervals, namely very low, low, high, and very high. Furthermore, frequency distributions are calculated to describe the overall trends in anxiety levels as well as in each aspect (mood, cognitive, somatic, and motor). Data analysis is conducted using percentage formulas for each category, enabling research results to be presented in the form of frequency distribution tables and percentage graphs. These results are then used to draw conclusions about the dominant aspects of anxiety experienced by students, as well as their practical implications for counseling and guidance services.

FINDING AND DISCUSSIONS

This study successfully described the level of anxiety in public speaking among international students at Padang State University. The study was based on data from 59 respondents. The level of anxiety was divided into four categories: very high, high, low, and very low. The frequency distribution results show that the majority of students fall into the High category, with 23 individuals (38.98%), followed by the Low category with 20 individuals (33.90%), the Very High category with 11 individuals (18.64%), and the Very Low category with 5 individuals (8.47%). These findings indicate that most international counseling students still have relatively high levels of anxiety when speaking in public.

Mood Aspects

In terms of mood, 58 (98% of the total) people were in the very high category, and 1 person was in the high category (2% of the total). This means that most students have anxiety about speaking in public, which is influenced by the very high mood category.

Cognitive Aspects

In terms of cognitive aspects, 47 (79.66% of the total) people were in the high category, while 12 people were in the low category (20.34% of the total). This means that most students have anxiety about speaking in public, which is influenced by cognitive aspects in the high category.

Somatic Aspects

In terms of somatic aspects, 23 (41.82% of the total) people were in the high category, while 36 people were in the low category (64.45% of the total). This means that most students have anxiety about speaking in public, which is influenced by somatic aspects in the low category.

Motoric Aspects

In terms of motor skills, 1 person was in the very high category (1.69% of the total), 5 people were in the high category (20.34% of the total), 24 people were in the low category (40.68% of the total), and 1 person was in the very low category (1.69% of the total). This means that most students have anxiety about speaking in public, which is influenced by the motor skills category of low. The picture of anxiety about speaking in public among International Class students can be presented in Table 1.

Table 1. An Overview of Public Speaking Anxiety Among International Students

Aspects	Domain Categories	Percentage
Mood	Very high	98%
Cognitive	High	79,66%
Somatic	Low	64,45%
Motoric	Low	40,68%

DISCUSSIONS

The results of this study confirm that public speaking anxiety remains a major challenge for international students. The high levels of anxiety in terms of mood and cognition indicate that emotional factors and negative thoughts dominate their anxiety experience. These findings support the views of Gulsah Tercan & Dikilatas (2015) regarding the close relationship between foreign language anxiety and speaking anxiety, particularly in the context of international learning that uses a foreign language. The very high emotional aspect indicates that students often feel afraid, nervous, and excessively anxious when speaking in public. Meanwhile, the high level of anxiety in the cognitive aspect indicates that students are often influenced by negative thoughts such as fear of failure, fear of being judged poorly, or doubt in their own abilities. This aligns with Kobra (2024) findings, which emphasize the role of negative learning experiences, low self-confidence, and lack of environmental support as the primary triggering factors.

Interestingly, despite high emotional and cognitive anxiety, respondents exhibited relatively low anxiety in somatic and motor aspects. This means that although they feel nervous and worried internally, physical expressions such as a racing heart or motor behaviors such as fidgeting or avoidance are well-managed. This may occur because international Guidance Counseling students typically receive communication training in lectures or presentation simulation practices, enabling them to control their physical appearance despite still feeling anxious mentally. These results support Ghaffari (2025) and Gursoy & Necla Karaca (2018) view that speaking practice can help reduce physical manifestations and anxiety behaviors, even though negative thoughts may still arise. Therefore, anxiety management for international Guidance Counseling students should focus on interventions to reduce emotional stress and restructure negative thoughts. This study also underscores the importance of campus counseling and guidance services in assisting students in overcoming speaking anxiety barriers. Group counseling, individual counseling, and intensive public speaking skill training can be effective strategies to help students develop self-confidence and reduce fear when speaking in public.

The Role Of Counselors

Facilitator of Personal Development. One of the primary roles of a counselor is to facilitate the personal development of students. Counselors help students build greater self-awareness regarding their emotions, thoughts, and behaviors, especially those related to anxiety when speaking in front of others. Through counseling sessions, students are encouraged to explore the root causes of their anxiety, which may stem from past experiences, social pressure, perfectionism, or fear of negative evaluation. During the counseling process, counselors can guide students to reflect on themselves and identify patterns of negative thinking that may worsen their anxiety. With increased awareness of these internal processes, students are more capable of taking adaptive actions to manage their anxiety in a healthier way.

Trainer of Communication Skills. In addition to being facilitators, counselors can also serve as communication skills trainers. Many students experience public speaking anxiety not only due to psychological factors but also because they lack practical communication skills. Therefore, counselors can offer simple, applicable training related to public speaking, such as breathing techniques to calm the nerves, positive body language, effective eye contact, and organizing a clear message structure. Such training not only helps students appear more confident but also enhances their overall communication competence. In some cases, counselors may collaborate with student development units or training centers to provide workshops specifically designed for students.

Application of Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT). An effective approach to addressing public speaking anxiety is the application of Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT). Through this approach, counselors help students identify and challenge irrational thoughts or cognitive distortions that often underlie anxiety. Students with public speaking anxiety commonly hold automatic negative thoughts such as "I will definitely fail," "Everyone will laugh at me," or "I'm

not good enough." In CBT sessions, these thoughts are critically examined and replaced with more realistic and constructive ones. CBT also includes behavioral exercises, such as gradual exposure, to help students face challenging speaking situations step by step in a safe and systematic manner.

Designer of Psychoeducational Intervention Programs. Another essential role of counselors is designing psychoeducational intervention programs aimed at equipping students with the social and emotional skills needed in academic contexts. These programs may be offered in the form of small group trainings, seminars, or workshops focusing on public speaking skills, anxiety management, and confidence building. To implement these programs effectively, counselors can utilize various methods such as simulated presentations, practice sessions with feedback, relaxation techniques, and group reflection. These interventions not only help students improve their performance in public speaking but also create a safe space where they can learn through experience without the fear of judgment.

Research Benefits

For students, This study provides significant benefits for students, particularly those who experience anxiety when speaking in public, especially in academic contexts such as class presentations, thesis defenses, or group discussions. By identifying the sources of their communication-related anxiety—whether due to lack of preparation, fear of negative evaluation, low self-confidence, or past traumatic experiences—students will gain a clearer understanding of the underlying factors contributing to their discomfort. This awareness is essential as it enables students to take proactive steps toward managing their anxiety. Through the insights offered by this research, students can learn and apply various coping strategies that are both practical and effective. These may include regular practice sessions, joining peer support or study groups, using relaxation techniques such as deep breathing or mindfulness, and gradually exposing themselves to anxiety-inducing situations to build tolerance. Moreover, understanding that anxiety is a common and manageable experience may help reduce the stigma and encourage students to seek help when needed. Overall, the study empowers students to take control of their emotional responses and build greater confidence in verbal academic communication.

For lecturers and academic instructors, the findings of this study can serve as a valuable reference for lecturers and educators in designing a more supportive and inclusive classroom environment. Recognizing that public speaking anxiety is a genuine barrier for many students can inspire teaching staff to adopt more student-centered pedagogical approaches. For instance, instructors may implement flexible presentation formats, encourage collaborative learning, and provide constructive and empathetic feedback rather than harsh criticism. Moreover, the study encourages educators to consider implementing scaffolding techniques that allow students to gradually build their speaking confidence. This may involve integrating low-stakes speaking opportunities before high-stakes presentations or providing options for alternative forms of assessment that align with learning outcomes without causing excessive anxiety. By understanding the psychological challenges some students face, lecturers can foster an atmosphere that promotes psychological safety, where students feel respected and supported regardless of their communication style or confidence level.

For counselors and student support services, this research offers practical implications for university counselors and mental health practitioners who support students dealing with academic stress and anxiety-related issues. The study highlights the need for counselors to develop and implement targeted intervention programs tailored to students with high levels of public speaking anxiety. Such programs may include individual counseling sessions, group therapy, psychoeducational workshops, or personal development services focused on communication skills and self-esteem enhancement. In addition to providing direct support, counselors can use the study's findings to design evidence-based intervention modules, such as those grounded in Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT), which has been shown to be effective in managing performance-related anxiety. These interventions can be adapted to suit the academic context and

student needs. Furthermore, the research encourages stronger collaboration between counselors, faculty members, and academic support staff in order to identify at-risk students early and provide a comprehensive support system. Creating a cohesive support network contributes to the development of an academic environment that is not only academically rigorous but also emotionally safe and inclusive.

For future researchers, this study also contributes to the academic field by offering a foundational reference for future research on student anxiety in public speaking contexts. Scholars interested in exploring related topics can build upon this study by conducting research in broader or more specific contexts—for example, by examining public speaking anxiety among different academic disciplines, comparing online and face-to-face presentation settings, or exploring the effects of socio-cultural background on communication anxiety. Additionally, future researchers may choose to use more longitudinal or experimental designs to evaluate the effectiveness of specific interventions or track changes in anxiety levels over time. They may also investigate correlations between public speaking anxiety and other psychological or academic variables, such as academic performance, social support, or personality traits. In this way, the current study not only addresses an important issue but also opens pathways for continued scholarly inquiry and innovation in higher education research.

In conclusion, the study offers multi-faceted benefits that extend across several key stakeholders in the academic environment. For students, it provides self-awareness and practical tools for managing anxiety; for lecturers, it highlights the importance of empathy and adaptability in teaching; for counselors, it offers a basis for program development and targeted interventions; and for future researchers, it lays the groundwork for further exploration and contribution to the growing field of academic mental health and communication. Together, these benefits support the overarching goal of creating a more inclusive, responsive, and supportive educational landscape where all students can thrive—academically, socially, and emotionally.

Implications On Guidance and Counseling

Guidance and counseling services play a crucial role in helping individuals overcome these challenges. Some services counselors can utilize include individual counseling, information services, and group guidance services. The goal of individual counseling is to motivate students to express understandings or perceptions related to behavior. The purpose of individual counseling services is to help find alternative problem-solving learners in making decisions with responsibility (Astuti, 2021; Banseng et al., 2021). In general, individual counseling can be understood as a collaborative and confidential process between a trained counselor and an individual (client) who seeks assistance in exploring, understanding, and resolving specific personal, emotional, behavioral, or interpersonal problems, with the goal of achieving improved psychological well-being and more adaptive functioning. Next, there are information services, services that enable individuals (clients) to receive, understand, and utilize a variety of information relevant to their needs. Here, students can be provided with information about effective speaking techniques, how to overcome anxiety, and the benefits of confidence in speaking. Information services are services that aim to provide knowledge, insight, and understanding to students regarding various aspects that are relevant to their needs, both in the fields of education, career, and personal and social development. Currently, information services in guidance and counseling can be delivered through various media, such as websites, online counseling, and social media platforms, which allow students to access information more easily and quickly (Al Habsy et al., 2024; Hazizah et al., 2024). The final implication of guidance and counseling services is group guidance. Group guidance is a service to assist (guidance) students through group activities. For group guidance to be achieved, it is necessary to have group dynamics. Group dynamics is intended so such troubled students can identify themselves through group friends (Rita & Handrianto, 2021; Ihsan et al., 2023). This service is a group activity that provides information and directs discussions so that group members become more social or help

group members achieve common goals. In this service, students who experience anxiety in public speaking will be encouraged to share experiences, practice together and provide support to build courage in speaking and reduce fear because they feel they are not alone in facing the same problem.

CONCLUSION

Based on the results of the research and discussion, it can be concluded that students in the International Class of Guidance and Counseling (BK) at Padang State University have a high level of anxiety when speaking in public. The majority of students fall into the high to very high anxiety category, particularly in terms of mood and cognitive aspects. This indicates that emotional factors such as fear, nervousness, and worry, as well as negative thoughts like doubt, fear of failure, and fear of being judged negatively, dominate students' anxiety when speaking in public. Meanwhile, somatic (physical symptoms) and motor (actual behavior) aspects tend to be lower compared to emotional and cognitive aspects. This finding indicates that although students experience strong mental and emotional pressure, they are relatively able to control physical manifestations and behavior when performing in front of an audience. This condition can be assumed to result from the learning process and presentation practice they have received during their studies. Therefore, addressing public speaking anxiety among Guidance and Counseling International Class students should focus on interventions for mood management and restructuring negative thoughts.

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