



**'UNDER THE MAGNIFYING GLASS':
STUDENTS' PERSPECTIVES ON ORAL PRESENTATIONS
AND ANXIETY IN THE EFL CLASSROOM**

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Abstract:

This research was prompted by a perceived conflict between the pedagogical implications of research into anxiety in the context of second language (L2) learning and some of the instructional practices employed in language classrooms. It examines learner anxiety in relation to a frequently used classroom activity: the oral presentation. The participants were Hungarian university EFL students' (N=39), who, as part of their course requirements, were asked to give a 5-10 minute classroom presentation in one of their regular language development classes. To examine students' affective responses to this experience, data were collected in two phases. To have a quick survey of their immediate reactions, right after their talk participants were requested to rate on ten-point rating scales (1) how pleasant/unpleasant they felt during the presentation and (2) how much anxiety they experienced. To elicit an in depth account of their perceptions of and feelings about presenting their talks, they were invited to reflect upon their experiences in more detail, answering a set of open-ended questions within 24 hours. Based on participants' self-ratings of anxiety and overall feelings during the talk and their post-presentation reflections, the paper explores how anxiety-provoking it is for students to give an L2 classroom presentation, what the specific sources of anxiety over oral presentations are, and how important a role anxiety plays in shaping learners' subjective experience of delivering a speech in the target language. Giving insights into participants' views on the gains and pains of oral presentations the study has important implications for foreign language teachers.

Keywords: anxiety, oral presentation, public speaking, affective factors, emotional reactions, positive/ negative emotions, feelings, language learning experiences, EFL

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1. Why a study of anxiety and oral presentations?

Anxiety might be evoked by various aspects of the unique experience of learning a foreign language (FL/L2) in a classroom setting (Horwitz et al., 1986; Young, 1991, 1999). This study examines learner anxiety in relation to a classroom activity frequently used in university EFL classes: the oral presentation. The motivation for exploring students' perspectives on giving a talk in the target language (TL) comes from what could be perceived as a conflict between the pedagogical implications of research into anxiety related to L2 learning and some of the instructional practices we employ in the language classroom.

Studies have consistently demonstrated that no matter the instructional setting and the TL studied, higher levels of anxiety are associated with lower levels of L2 achievement and lower course grades (Horwitz, 2001; MacIntyre, 1999, 2017). Furthermore, higher anxiety is also linked to lower willingness to communicate in the L2 (Baker & MacIntyre, 2000; Yashima, 2012) and less motivation (Ushioda, 2012). In light of these findings, it is not surprising that the most important message of anxiety research for language teachers is that if they are to make their students more successful, more motivated, and willing to communicate in the TL, they must be aware of the affective side of L2 learning and pay attention to learners' emotional needs. The main recommendation is that FL teachers "*make the learning context less stressful*" (Horwitz et al., 1986; Horwitz, 2017), "*establish a positive affective climate*" (Arnold, 2011), "*create a low-anxiety classroom atmosphere*" (Young, 1999). However, the dilemma teachers face is that some of the classroom activities that seem ideal from the point of view of maximising communicative opportunities with the TL might appear as less than ideal from the point of view of catering for learners' affective needs, specifically minimising their anxiety.

One such activity is the oral presentation. On the one hand, its pedagogical benefits are widely recognised. It is a learner-centred/student-lead activity (King, 2002), which gives learners the opportunity to speak for an extended period of time (Koch & Terrell, 1991). Another benefit is that learners use the TL to communicate with other students in a natural and meaningful way (Brooks & Wilson, 2014; Girard et al., 2011), which is a welcome addition to the usual teacher-learner interaction pattern in the classroom (Koch & Terrell, 1991). Besides, it is also ideal from the point of view of skills integration, as preparing for and delivering their talks students use all four language skills in a naturally integrated way (King, 2002). What is more, they practice their language skills in an authentic manner (i.e. they collect, organise, share, and discuss information on a topic), which closely resembles real-life language use (Brooks & Wilson, 2014).

On the other hand, however, it is also common knowledge that speaking in front of an audience (i.e. speaking in public) for most people is associated with fear and anxiety even in the native language (McCrosky, 1984). Thus, it seems logical enough that it is even more so if the talk is to be delivered in a foreign tongue.

In fact, studies of anxiety in the context of L2 learning confirm this idea. They have consistently shown that although reading, writing and listening in a foreign language can all be a source of anxiety, it is oral communication that learners tend to find the most anxiety-provoking (Kim, 2009; MacIntyre, 2017; Price, 1991). Many students, even those at more advanced levels of proficiency, find it difficult to speak-up and volunteer answers in class, and because of their anxiety avoid or minimise speaking in the L2 (Ely, 1986; Horwitz et al., 1986; Ewald, 2007; Tóth, 2011). As for different classroom activities, speaking-oriented ones have received higher anxiety ratings by learners than any other in-class activity (Koch & Terrel, 1991). Research has also shown that even within speaking-focused activities learners report differing levels of anxiety depending on classroom organisation. Even though there are students who feel anxious even during pair-work (Tóth, 2011), most learners typically feel more comfortable when speaking in pairs or small groups. However, large group or full class activities are generally regarded as more anxiety-provoking (Koch & Terrell, 1991; Young, 1990).

Although few studies have focused specifically on oral presentations with a view to how much anxiety they actually produce, this activity, typically performed by one student in front of the whole class, has been reported to be particularly stressful relative to other speaking activities (King, 2002; Koch & Terrell, 1991; Young, 1990). As this is perfectly in line with my own perceptions in my university EFL classes, I have decided to investigate how serious an issue anxiety about oral presentations actually is, and whether the gains of using this speaking activity outweigh the pains caused to learners. As asking students to do classroom presentations seems to be at odds with the idea that small group activities provide a more supportive and intimate, thus more ideal setting for practising oral communication, this research agenda seems particularly relevant in the context of tertiary education, where oral presentations are standard practice both in EFL and English medium content classes.

To explore the learners' perspectives and gain insights into their perceptions of and feelings about giving a talk in the TL, this study examines participants' affective reactions to an actual classroom presentation they participated in in one of their regular university EFL classes.

My research questions are as follows:

- 1) How anxiety-provoking is it for students to give an L2 classroom presentation?
- 2) What are the specific sources of anxiety over oral presentations?
- 3) How important is anxiety in shaping learners' subjective experience of giving a talk in the TL?
- 4) What do learners have to say about the gains and pains of oral presentations?

2. Method

2.1 Participants

The participants were 39 students from a Hungarian university, in the second year of their English Studies BA programme. All of them were majors or minors in English, enrolled in second-year language development classes in three intact groups taught by the author. Of the 39 students, 31 were female and 8 were male. This sort of distribution, with a majority of female participants, is quite typical in Hungarian English Studies Programmes. All of the participants were of typical university age (between 20 and 24), and they had studied English for an average of 11.2 years at the time of the study. Their proficiency level was around B2+.

2.2 Procedure

As part of the course requirements participants were asked to give a 5-10 minute oral presentation in English, related to one of the broad topic areas dealt with in that semester. These were *Arts & Entertainment* and *Health & Lifestyles*. Students were free to decide which one to choose and what aspect of the given topic to explore and present to their classmates. It was also up to the students whether or not they wanted to use any visual support for their talk. With one or two exceptions, most participants used PowerPoint or Prezi slides.

To examine participants' affective responses to giving their talks, data were collected in two phases. To tap into their immediate reactions to the experience, in the first phase of the study, they were asked to give hot feedback immediately after their talks, completing a two-item affective questionnaire. They had to indicate on ten-point rating scales (1) how they felt during the presentation (1 = very unpleasant, 10 = very pleasant) and (2) how much anxiety they experienced (1 = I was totally calm, 10 = I was very anxious and all but panicked).

To elicit an in depth account of participants' perceptions of and feelings about presenting their talks, and thereby triangulate their self-reported ratings, as a second step, they were invited to reflect upon their experiences in more detail, answering a set of open-ended questions. These addressed issues like

- 1) what it was like to speak in front of their group-mates;
- 2) what problems/difficulties they experienced during the presentation;
- 3) what aspect of their performance they were satisfied/dissatisfied with;
- 4) how they prepared for the presentation;
- 5) whether they rehearsed their talk or not;
- 6) whether they like giving presentations in the TL and in their L1; and
- 7) whether they would like to have similar presentation tasks in the future.

None of the questions asked about anxiety explicitly, to give students the chance to bring up or not the topic in their reflections. My aim with this was to assess to what extent anxiety was or was not an integral part of their experience of making an oral presentation. Participants were requested to write up their reflections as soon as

possible, until the experience was still fresh in their mind, and send them to me via e-mail within 24 hours.

To assess participants' self-perceived anxiety level and the pleasantness/unpleasantness of the experience, descriptive statistics and frequencies were used. To examine the relationship between the two affective variables Pearson correlations were computed. The post-lesson reflections were coded for recurring themes and analysed qualitatively, using the constant comparative method (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994).

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 Self-perceived anxiety and pleasantness/unpleasantness of the experience

In this section, first I examine (1) how much anxiety participants experienced during their presentations and (2) how positive or negative experience it appeared to them. Second, I will look at the relationship between the two, to probe into a potential anxiety effect on participants' overall experience of delivering their talks.

Table 1 presents descriptive statistics for participants' assessments of their anxiety level on a scale of 1-10. As shown, scores ranged from 2 to the maximum 10 and the mean anxiety score of the 39 students was 6.51 ($SD = 2.28$) on the ten-point scale.

Table 1: Descriptive statistics for self-rated anxiety

	Mean	SD	Actual Range (Possible range)
Anxiety score	6.51	2.28	2-10 (1-10)

This can be regarded as relatively high, especially if we examine the distribution and frequency of students' anxiety scores (Figure 1). A look at the distribution shows a Bell curve with a skew toward scores on the high end of the distribution, with the tail in the low anxiety section. This indicates that the low end of the scale (scores 2-4) was endorsed merely by a few participants ($n = 8$), whereas the high anxiety end (scores 7-10) was incomparably more populous. Of the 39 students as many as 22 (56.4%) rated their anxiety level higher than the sample mean (i.e. ≥ 7), indicating that for them giving a talk in the TL was a rather stressful experience.



Figure 1: The distribution of participants' anxiety scores

Figure 2 shows the distribution of participants according to self-perceived anxiety level. With anxiety ratings of 2-4 categorized as low anxiety, 5-7 as moderate, and 8-10 as high anxiety, as many as 14 out of the 39 participants (35.9%) reported high anxiety, eight of them (20.5%) low anxiety, and 17 (43.6%) a medium level of anxiety. These results show that for most participants delivering their speech was a rather anxiety-inducing experience, as the majority of them (79.5%) experienced at least moderate or even high levels of anxiety, and only a minority reported to feel a low level of anxiety.

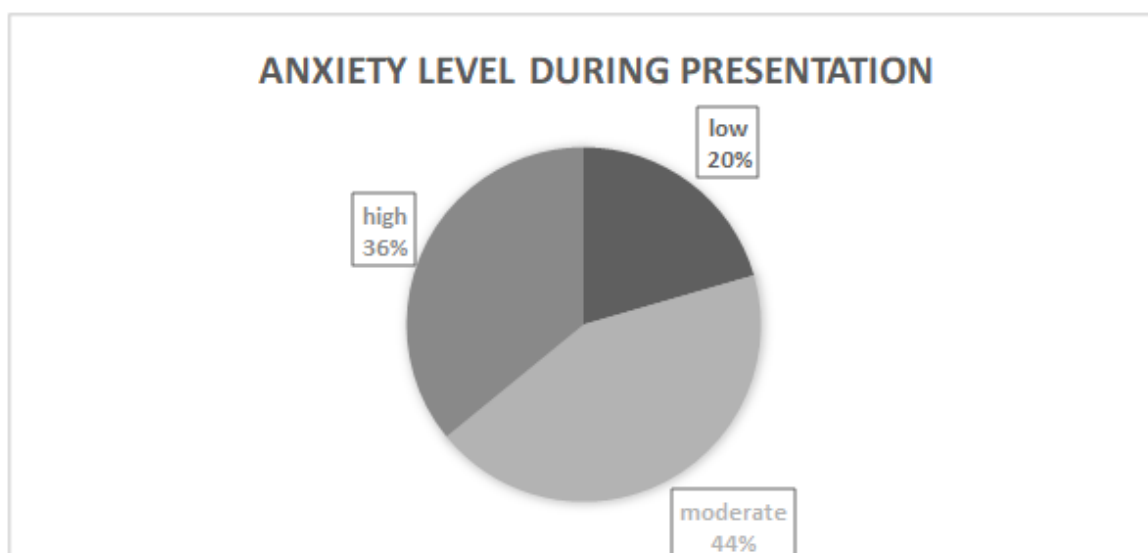


Figure 2: The distribution of participants according to self-rated anxiety level

In light of these findings concerning self-perceived anxiety, one would expect that participants did not particularly enjoy presenting their talks, as previous research has found a negative relationship between learners' anxiety level and how pleasant or

unpleasant experience a given L2 interaction appeared to them (Dewaele & McIntyre, 2014; Tóth, 2017). The results of the present study show that on average participants rated the experience of giving a classroom presentation 6.92 on the ten-point scale ($SD=2.05$). Figure 3 presents the distribution of ratings on the pleasantness/unpleasantness scale.

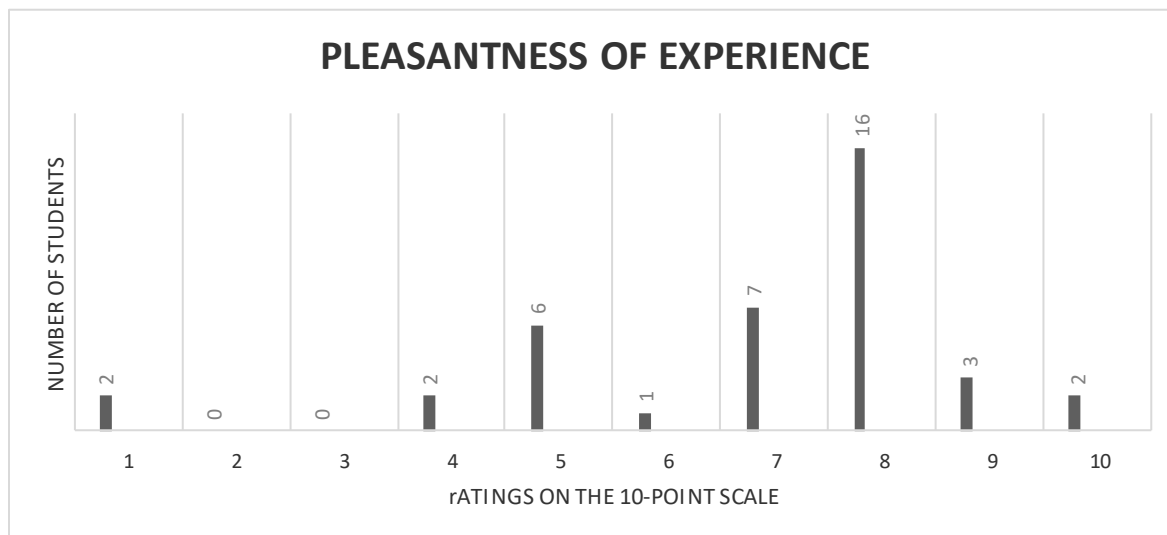


Figure 3: Distribution of ratings on the pleasantness/unpleasantness scale

As shown, the vast majority of the participants, 28 out of 39 students (71.7%) gave a higher rating than the sample mean (i.e. ≥ 7), indicating that for them giving a presentation in the TL was felt to be a positive rather than negative experience. There were only two students in the sample for whom presenting their topics was a very unpleasant experience, as evidenced by their rating it 1 on the ten-point scale. Finally, for the remaining nine participants (23.1%) it was neither too unpleasant nor very pleasant, as shown by their ratings of 4-6.

In order to see how participants' anxiety related to how pleasant or unpleasant they felt during the presentation correlation analysis was used. A negative relationship was found between learners' anxiety scores and their ratings on the pleasantness/unpleasantness of experience scale, suggesting that the higher anxiety they experienced the less pleasant an experience presenting their talks appeared to them. However, the correlation was not significant ($r = -.294$; $p = .069$). A close look at participants' post-presentation reflections will help the interpretation of this finding.

3.2 Anxiety

In this section, I discuss how importantly anxiety figured in participants' reflections and what these retrospections have revealed about the specific sources of anxiety over classroom presentations. The reflection data have lent support to the numerical finding that with the exception of a small minority (20.5%), most participants (79.5%) in this study experienced anxiety (moderate or high) during their presentations. Looking back on the experience, almost every respondent started their reflections with some reference

to anxiety, which suggests that the issue was uppermost in their mind. The reflections have revealed that participants' anxiety over presentations has essentially stemmed from four closely related sources, working together simultaneously and separable only for the sake of analysis. Specifically, (1) the communication situation itself, (2) audience-related fears, (3) self-related concerns, and (4) talk-related concerns.

3.2.1 The communication situation

Most participants expressed the view that it was the communication situation itself that brought about their feelings of anxiety in the first place. They pointed to different, salient features of giving a classroom presentation that triggered fear and anxiety in them. One of these was the fact that the presenter had to 'get up and leave their place', 'move to the front' and 'stand in front of the group' as if on stage or before a panel of judges or jury. To quote some students: *"I'm standing and they're sitting, and they are many. This is terribly intimidating"* (#8), *"You have to stand in front of a whole group of students who are sitting and watching you"* (#29), *"It's very difficult to get up and speak in front of so many people"* (#4), *"It was because I had to stand in front of the others that I felt so very anxious and uncomfortable"* (#38). What these comments suggest is that feeling different from members of the audience, i.e. the asymmetrical communication situation (I'm alone vs. they are many, I'm standing vs. they're sitting, I have to leave my usual place vs. they enjoy the safety of their own place, I speak vs. they only listen), constitutes an important element of anxiety over oral presentations.

Another factor related to this is the feeling of getting spotlighted and suddenly being the centre of attention, which most participants perceived as very uncomfortable or even threatening. To quote some comments:

"It's frightening to be the focus of others' attention. To a certain extent you feel this when speaking up in front of the others in a class discussion from your own place, but it is much worse when giving a presentation. The feeling intensifies and becomes overwhelming." (#4)

"I get really embarrassed and inhibited when everybody's attention is on me." (#26)

How being attended to might translate into a feeling of being exposed is graphically described by another participant who compares the feeling of standing in front of classmates to being scrutinized under a magnifying glass: *"It feels like I'm under a magnifying glass, with all my potential mistakes exposed"* (#8).

The third element of the situation participants pointed to as an important anxiety trigger was the physical manifestation of attention directed at the presenter/speaker, which they described as a feeling of 'having all eyes on you'. Not only was this felt to be uncomfortable, but also highly distractive and confusing, as shown by the following comments: *"all those eyes fastened on me made me too nervous"* (#19), *"with so many eyes on me, I didn't even know what I wanted to say"* (#2), *"it is those watching eyes that made me*

completely confused" (#8). Anxious participants seemed to be aware that it was for this very reason (i.e. not to be distracted and confused) that they subconsciously tended to minimise or even avoid eye contact with the audience. As they put it: *"I found it difficult to keep eye-contact"* (#35), *"To be honest I didn't really dare to look at them"* (#8).

3.2.2 The audience

Another clearly identifiable anxiety trigger the reflections have pointed to was the audience, more precisely, classmates. Even though every participant was both a presenter and a member of the audience (i.e. in theory they could have experienced a feeling of 'we're in the same boat'), interestingly enough, when in the role of the presenter they tended to see each other as *"strict judges"* (#8) rather than fellow presenters. They described two different kinds of fears concerning groupmates' reactions. One of these referred to the presentation and manifested itself in troubling questions like 'will they like it?', 'do they find what I have to say interesting?', 'are they listening?', 'I hope they are not bored, are they?', 'what's on their mind?' While these reflect worry over how their chosen topics or the message of their talks will be received by peers, the other fear was of a more deep-seated kind: how they themselves will be viewed by the others. As one student aptly put this: *"You present not only the topic but yourself too"* (#4). Concerns of this kind were revolving around the presenter/speaker as a person, e.g. 'what will/do they think of me?', 'will they find me ridiculous?', 'will I be laughed at?', 'what if I make mistakes or get stuck or confused before them', 'will they judge me?' These worries are indicative of anxiety over what opinion peers will have of them and their abilities, behind which is a fear of not making a desired impression or even losing face. The following quotes give unique insights into how these peer-related worries might intrude upon consciousness, making it difficult for the presenter to stay focused:

"You're standing in front of the others and rather than concentrating on what you want to say, you are dwelling on what the others might think of you." (# 34)

"I imagine 'surely they're judging me, they notice what is good and what is bad', and as I'm speaking I can't help thinking about what's on their mind, part of my brain is occupied with this, only this." (#8)

3.2.3 Self-related concerns

The reflections have revealed that besides the asymmetric communication situation and the audience, participants' self-related perceptions, in particular their awareness of their bodily reactions during their speech were another major source of anxiety. Students tended to complain about 'shaking legs', 'trembling hands', 'racing' or 'pounding hearts', 'blushing', and having a 'shaky' or 'panicked voice', as shown by the following comments. *"I noticed it many times as I was speaking that my legs were trembling, this is how my anxiety manifests itself"* (#6), *"I was shaking like a jelly – it was very embarrassing"* (#8),

"When I knew it was my turn my heart started racing" (#25), "I felt terribly anxious, my hands were trembling, my voice was trembling..." (#9), "Shortly after I started to speak my voice began to quaver, which made me feel uneasy" (#18). Not only did these physical manifestations of anxiety cause uncomfortable feelings to presenters, they made them feel even more vulnerable and anxious for fear of looking visibly anxious and being found out as an anxious person. The reflections have revealed that participants were trying hard to hide or suppress their nervousness so that their peers would not notice it. However, they felt they were fighting a losing battle: their body language and the obvious signs of their anxiety would betray them anyway. To quote some students:

"It was tough enough to feel I cannot control my anxiety, but it was even worse to know that everybody can see it." (#8)

"My biggest problem was that I was extremely anxious, and I was afraid that the others will feel this, and this is what actually happened, I think, unfortunately." (#30)

"I was hoping that my anxiety is not so visible, that it does not undermine my presentation, but I think it was visible, which was embarrassing." (#35)

"As I was very nervous, my voice started to tremble, which made me feel uneasy. I did my best to regain composure so that they wouldn't hear how anxious I was." (#27)

These comments show how ashamed and pathetic participants felt for not being able to hide their nervousness from each other.

3.2.4 Talk-related concerns

The fourth big category of participants' concerns related to various aspects of delivering their speech. On the one hand, these had to do with potential problems they anticipated before and during their talks. These materialised in fears like what if I ... 'forget what I want to say', 'lose track of my thoughts', 'leave out parts of my talk', 'can't find the right words', 'make grammar mistakes', 'mispronounce words' – to give just a few examples of the most frequently mentioned issues emerging from the reflections. Another important anxiety trigger, on the other hand, was when during the speech they realised that their fears or some of them did actually come true. In other words, participants felt anxious in anticipation of problems they might encounter during their presentations, and their anxiety further intensified when they indeed experienced the anticipated difficulties or became aware of the mistakes they made, which they tended to attribute to the negative effect of anxiety. To give some sample comments: *"Because of my anxiety I made many mistakes, which made me feel uneasy" (#7), "In stressful situations like this, my pronunciation is awful, words simply come out strange – this is very embarrassing" (#9), "I felt very awkward when I forgot basic words and expressions because of my nervousness" (#31), "During my speech I was so anxious that I couldn't think clearly and felt*

confused, it was a very unpleasant feeling” (#32), “It happened several times that I lost my train of thoughts, I was too nervous to stay focused” (#10). As shown, participants’ anxiety essentially centred around two main issues. Language concerns, which related to their use of the L2 and had to do with potential and/or real problems with pronunciation, word retrieval, and accuracy. Furthermore, concerns of a more complex kind, deriving from the cognitive demands of performing their speech, including memory issues and the challenges of real-time speech production. The reflections have shown that the process of delivering their talk was particularly anxiety-provoking for participants who wrote out and memorised their speech rather than trying to speak freely, relying just on an outline or some key points. The reason for this is that in order to make a good impression and appear spontaneous, they pretended presenting their speech as if they had been thinking on their feet, while in fact they were merely trying to recall their pre-written speech. However, due to momentary lapses in concentration and memory they were not able to keep up this image for the duration of their talk, which resulted in confusion and embarrassment. To quote some participants:

“During my presentation, I kept thinking about whether I can remember everything I wrote down, which was very confusing, as I couldn’t pay attention to anything else.” (#34)

“Obviously, if you want to give the impression that you’re improvising, while the fact is that you have a fixed text in mind – this is frustrating and makes speaking harder, at least this is what I experienced.” (#35)

“Sometimes my brain stopped and I left out a couple of things from what I had memorised, and when I wanted to continue I had a hard time formulating my thoughts as I couldn’t come out of the written text.” (#38)

What these comments show is that operating in a mode in-between recalling a written text word for word and speaking freely was an important contributor to anxiety during the presentations.

3.3 Anxiety but not negative experience?

In light of the wealth of first-hand information participants presented in their reflections about the sources, various manifestations, and workings of anxiety, it is even more puzzling that although most of them (79.5%) reported moderate or high levels of anxiety, nearly the same percentage (71.7%) perceived delivering their presentations as a positive rather than a negative experience (cf. 3.1). When talking about anxiety students also referred to positive feelings and emotions they experienced during their presentations, as well as a delicate interplay between the two. In this section, I look at the reflection data from this angle with the aim of helping the interpretation of the finding that even though participants’ self-perceived anxiety related negatively to how

pleasant/unpleasant they felt during their presentations, the correlation between the two was not significant (cf. 3.1).

3.3.1 Anxiety and positive emotions can go hand in hand

One of the important findings emerging from the reflections is that experiencing anxiety does not automatically exclude positive feelings and emotions. On the contrary, one might experience both negative and positive affect during the same L2 encounter. According to students' retrospections, the fact that a presenter/speaker feels anxious when delivering the talk does not necessarily mean that the whole experience is negative altogether. What most participants felt is better described as an amalgam of anxiety and other feelings/emotions. For instance, joy, happiness, or contentment felt over being able to talk about and share with the others something they were passionate about, a topic or issue particularly important or personally relevant for them. Another source of positive feelings for participants was seeing that they succeeded in making their classmates interested in what they were talking about and had their full attention.

To give some sample comments:

"I was very anxious during the presentation, which made me lose my train of thought sometimes, but all things considered it was a good feeling to talk about someone who is important for me and see that the others are listening attentively and even find what I'm talking about interesting." (#31)

"Even though I was anxious, I was really happy to introduce these peopleⁱⁱ to the group, and it felt good that I managed to arouse their interest." (#35)

3.3.2 Managing anxiety can bring about positive feelings and emotions

Not only have the reflections shown that anxiety and positive emotions can go hand in hand, they have also provided insights into the dynamics of the interaction between the two in the context of presentations. Anxiety, no doubt, can make the subjective experience of delivering a speech emotionally taxing and very unpleasant, however, managing it can turn the same experience into a positive one. Participants talked about feelings of enjoyment, happiness, success, and satisfaction resulting precisely from being able to regain composure during the talk and successfully managing to keep anxiety in check. This is probably because they experienced what it feels to be in control as opposed to being controlled by anxiety, which must have been a very liberating experience. To quote some students:

"Anxiety is a big problem for me. I know it's visible, everybody can see that I tremble all over my body, my voice is trembling, I don't know where to look, my pronunciation is

ⁱⁱ Gliders. This student was a passionate glider herself, and her presentation was about gliders she regarded as role models.

strange, etc. At the same time if I manage to fight my nervousness I really enjoy delivering my presentation.” (#9)

“I felt really good during the presentation. I wouldn't have believed that despite my anxiety I would be able to deliver my talk fluently and I would remember more or less everything I wanted to say.” (#24)

“I am very satisfied for being able to cope with my bad stage fright, I managed to stay relatively calm, thus my thoughts did not fall apart because of anxiety.” (#19)

3.3.3 Less anxiety than before can evoke positive feelings and emotions

Finally, participants' reflections have also revealed that although feeling anxious during an oral presentation is unquestionably a very unpleasant and embarrassing experience, feeling less anxious than on past occasions can be a source of positive feelings and emotions. As evidenced by the following quotes, despite experiencing anxiety, students might enjoy giving a talk and even feel satisfied and successful if they realise they have made some improvement with regard to dealing with their anxiety, as it gives them a sense of achievement. Such small achievements – 'I am still not at ease when giving a presentation, but more comfortable than before' – might communicate the idea that one day they might leave the problem of anxiety behind and feel easy about presenting in the L2.

“Earlier I didn't like giving presentations. Actually, I would have liked to like them, but because of my anxiety, I just couldn't. Now was the first time that I had felt less anxious, and this is why I was able to enjoy it.” (#31)

“I'm satisfied that this time I wasn't so anxious. Earlier I tended to be extremely anxious when I had to speak in front of a group of people, whether small or large.” (#12)

The positive feelings/emotions participants experienced besides and despite their feelings of anxiety as described in this section must have played an important part in their subjective experience of delivering their presentations. This might explain why in spite of the anxiety most of them felt during their talks, their overall experience tended to be more positive than would have been expected based solely upon their anxiety level.

3.4 Oral presentation as a language class activity

The positive feelings/emotions described above must have also affected participants' general appraisal of the oral presentation as a language class activity, as in response to the reflection question 'Would you like to have similar presentation tasks in the future? Why/why not?' the vast majority of the participants (84%) answered 'yes'. As shown in Figure 4, only two out of the 39 students (5%) responded with a firm 'no', saying

presentations are far too anxiety-inducing for them, and they would prefer not to have such emotionally taxing activities in their EFL classes. The rest of the participants (11%) expressed ambivalent feelings. Because of the intense anxiety they experienced during their talks they said 'no' for future presentations, however they found it important to note that they considered this task useful and were aware of its potential benefits. In other words, rationally, they would have liked to say 'yes', but emotionally they felt compelled to answer 'no' to save themselves from similar uncomfortable for them situations in the classroom.

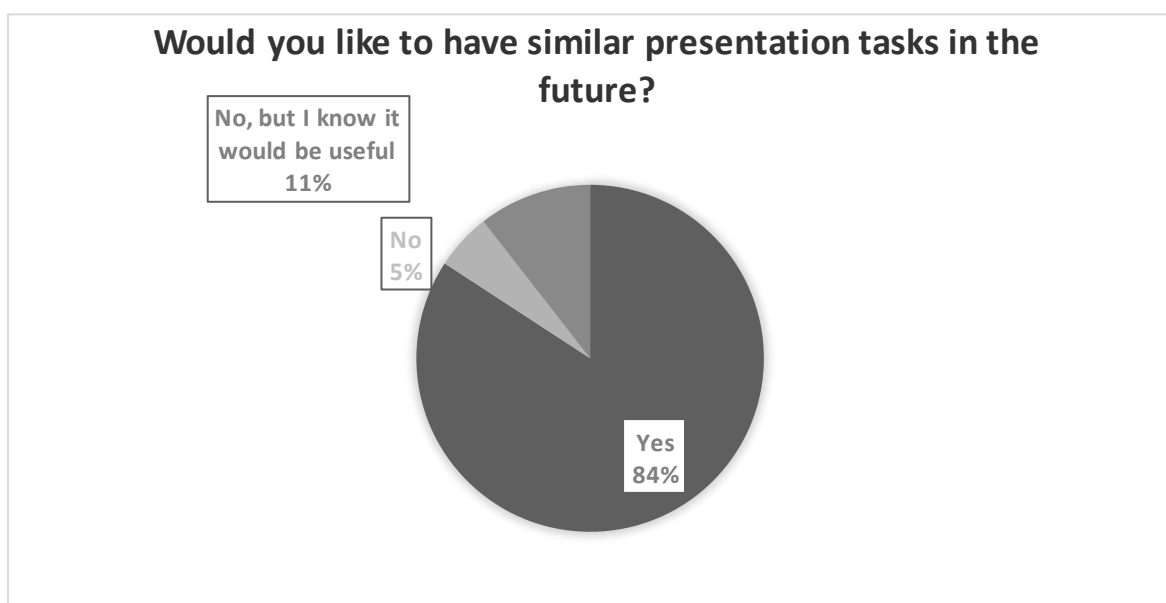


Figure 4: Participants' attitudes to oral presentations in their EFL classes

The reflections have also brought to light the reasons behind saying 'yes' for future presentation tasks, which give a picture of students' views about oral presentations as a language class activity. Table 2 presents a summary of participants' ideas on the perceived usefulness and benefits of presentations in the EFL classroom, arranged in ten main categories identified in their responses.

Table 2: The benefits of oral presentations in EFL classes in light of participants' reflections

Benefits	No. of comments
develops language skills/systems speaking: practising continuous speech/ fluency/ speaking for an extended period of time/ spontaneous language use; improving delivery skills, pronunciation vocabulary: learning new vocabulary; context/ presentations make words stick better/ make words memorable; activating passive vocabulary	14
I can read and speak about topics important/ relevant/ interesting for me gaining knowledge about a topic; showing/transmitting my knowledge, informing the others, raising awareness of something important, sharing my thoughts/ideas with others; I can be creative, I can be/show myself	14
helps to cope with anxiety/nervousness/stage fright/communication apprehension	14

gaining (self)-confidence; getting used to performing in public/ speaking in front of a large number of people; becoming a good speaker	
As a member of the audience ... I enjoy other people's presentations; interesting topics, informative/ instructive talks; getting to know each other/ other people's opinions; learning from observing others; practising listening	11
real-life/meaningful/practical task, it has value outside the classroom prepares for future real-life challenges like job interviews, teaching	10
motivating for both presenter and audience more enthusiastic student participation in class; makes lessons more interactive; easier/ more exciting/ more informal way of learning compared to learning from course books; motivates students to work/ prepare at home; collecting information about something is exciting	6
develops self-knowledge/self-expression/self-presentation how do I approach a task like this?; how do I present myself/ my true self/ my thoughts in front of others; how do I express myself in front of others; it's a test/challenge for us	4
improves various skills/abilities you can learn a lot from it	3
closer to oral exams than e.g. practising speaking in pairs good practice opportunity	3
I get feedback	3

As shown, not only did participants consider the oral presentation a task which ...

- improves their language skills (speaking, reading, listening, pronunciation, vocabulary),
- gives them a chance to talk about something they are personally interested in and knowledgeable about,
- is practical/ has value outside the walls of the classroom,
- is beneficial and motivating for both presenter and audience, and
- helps them get to know themselves and each other better,

but, paradoxically, they also looked upon it as a good 'training ground' for

- conquering their fear of speaking in public and learning to manage their anxiety.

The fact that the anxiety related benefit was one of the categories with the highest number of comments (n=14) indicates that anxiety, one way or another, was an important factor in participants' attitudes to classroom presentations. Those who said 'No' for further presentation tasks did so because of their intense anxiety reactions, whereas those who said 'Yes' did so in the hope that these 'practice rounds' or training sessions in the classroom will help them get used to speaking in the TL confidently, without fears.

4. Conclusion and Recommendations

This study examined students' subjective experience of giving a classroom presentation in the context of a university EFL class. The main purpose of the research was to survey the gains and pains of oral presentations from the learners' perspective. The most

important findings in light of the research questions and their pedagogical implications are as follows.

4.1 How anxiety-provoking is it for students to give an L2 classroom presentation?

The results have confirmed that oral presentations in FL classes are indeed anxiety-inducing (King, 2002; Koch & Terrell, 1991; Young, 1990). As for the scope and severity of anxiety, in the examined sample of Hungarian EFL learners 79.5 % of the participants reported experiencing anxiety during their talks, 43.6 % of them a moderate level (5-7 on the 10-point scale) and almost the same percentage of them (35.9 %) a high level (8-10 on the 10-point scale). Given these percentages and participants' fairly high level of English (B2+), this result indicates that anxiety about speaking in public is a relevant issue even in the case of relatively proficient L2 speakers. Therefore, FL and content teachers should not expect anxiety-free learners in their advanced level classes but should rather be aware of the challenges and difficulties oral presentations might pose for them and handle these judiciously.

4.2 What are the specific sources of anxiety over oral presentations?

Participants' reflections have made it possible to reconstruct the experience of anxiety over giving a speech in its complexity, identifying its specific sources. The results point to four inextricably intertwined components in dynamic interaction with each other. These are related to the speaker's perceptions of (1) the communication situation, (2) the audience, (3) themselves, and (4) the speech. Because of the asymmetrical communication situation presenters might experience feelings of being conspicuous/ spotlighted/ different from the audience/ alone/ exposed/ vulnerable. Added to these come concerns related to the audience/peers: fears of not performing well/ not making a good impression/ losing face/ being judged. Awareness of anxiety, especially its external physical manifestations add fuel to the fire, increasing the speaker's anxiety due to worry over being visibly anxious and for fear of being found out. Finally, worries over anticipated and/or real problems with the speech (language as well as delivery related) join in as an unceasing source of anxiety for the L2 speaker.

To ease anxiety triggered by the situation, teachers can generously let presenters decide whether they want to sit or stand during their presentations. Alternatively, they can also experiment with presentations in small groups or pairs to start with before asking learners to present on their own (cf. King, 2002). Individual presentations in front of smaller audiences of 3-4 people, conducted as a group work activity, might also be a good option before having learners present in front of the whole class. To alleviate peer-related concerns, teachers might want to initiate class discussions to sensitize learners to the issue of anxiety over speaking before an audience so that they do not see it as an individual or personal problem but rather one affecting most people, to a different degree though. Promoting a 'we are in the same boat' mentality might also be helpful as it might dissuade students from thinking of each other as 'strict judges' rather than friends as well encourage a more sympathetic and supportive behaviour on

the part of the audience. As for self-related concerns, teachers should advise presenters to focus strictly on their purpose: communicating/ sharing ideas and bringing some important message home to the audience, as this conscious effort might help them avoid distractions by undesirable self-related cognitions. Finally, learners should be made aware that fears and worries concerning the speech can be substantially reduced by careful preparation and rehearsing their presentations. When setting a presentation task, teachers should discuss with learners different preparation strategies and techniques, pointing out which ones are likely to work and why and which ones are to be avoided. For instance, that they should concentrate on key points rather than trying to retain their presentation material verbatim, or that they should practise their speech aloud so that they get used to hearing their own voice and can filter out potential problems with pronunciation, vocabulary, etc., in advance.

4.3 How important is anxiety in shaping learners' subjective experience of giving a talk in the TL?

Based on participants' hot feedback immediately after their talks, this study has found a negative but not significant relationship ($r = -.294$; $p = .069$) between how much anxiety they experienced and how pleasant/unpleasant an experience delivering their presentations appeared to them. Participants' reflections have confirmed and helped the interpretation of this finding. On the one hand, anxiety figured prominently in the reflections, and students described it in so many words how their nerves negatively affected how they felt and performed. At the same time, their reflections have also revealed that despite their anxiety they had also experienced positive feelings and emotions during their talks. Interestingly enough, these partly stemmed from being able to control their anxiety or feeling less anxious than before. This may well explain why even though 79.5 % of the participants reported anxiety, almost the same percentage, 71.7 % of them, perceived delivering their presentations more as a positive than a negative experience, as evidenced by their rating it 7 or above on the 10-point pleasantness/unpleasantness of experience scale. This indicates that although a part and parcel of giving a speech in the L2, anxiety does not necessarily make the whole experience negative altogether.

4.4 What do learners have to say about the gains and pains of oral presentations?

The fact that 84 % of the participants expressed that they would like to have further presentation tasks in their EFL classes suggests that taking stock of their experiences, including positive and negative aspects, most of them arrived at the conclusion that the gains are likely to outweigh the pains. Aware of their fears and anxieties over giving a talk in the TL, this high percentage of students felt that having no oral presentations in their English classes would perhaps save them from difficult or uncomfortable moments in the classroom but would not be a solution to the problem. Their responses have shown that they saw oral presentations not merely as a classroom activity allowing them to practice language skills, but rather one preparing them for real life

situations outside the classroom and helping them gain confidence speaking in front of others. In addition, they found it motivating for both presenter and audience, because it gave them a chance to talk and hear about issues of interest to them. As evidenced by participants' reflections, talking about their 'own topics', i.e. self-selected, personally relevant issues, is likely to evoke positive feelings in students. Therefore, teachers are encouraged to give learners as much freedom as possible in deciding what topic or what aspect of prescribed topics they would like to explore in their presentations. Not only might this give them a chance to get to know each other better through talks personally important or relevant for them, the positive feelings and emotions evoked by communicating ideas they feel strongly or passionate about might also help them shift their focus from themselves and their fears to the speech and thereby reduce their anxiety.

To conclude, participants' perspectives on oral presentations and anxiety in this study suggest that oral presentations are not to be expelled from the language classroom. However, I truly hope that this research has gone some way towards enhancing our understanding of the complex psychological experience giving a presentation in a FL entails and will help us better understand our students' experiences in FL classrooms. I also hope that it has provided useful recommendations that might be of use to language teachers. Given that this investigation was conducted in one particular instructional setting with a relatively small sample size, homogeneous in terms of proficiency level, future studies should explore learners' experiences in other contexts and different instructional levels.

About the author

Zsuzsa Tóth is an EFL instructor and teacher trainer. She holds a PhD in Language Pedagogy (Eötvös Loránd University, Budapest) and an MSc in Applied Linguistics (University of Edinburgh). Her professional interests include individual differences in L2 learning, teacher education issues and EFL teaching methodology. Her main research area is the study of foreign language anxiety. She has authored the book *Foreign Language Anxiety and the Advanced Language Learner* (Cambridge Scholars, 2010).

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