Empowering Voices: A Three-Year Intervention to Reduce Public Speaking Anxiety among ESL Learners

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ABSTRACT

This paper outlines a structured, research-based intervention program designed to reduce public speaking anxiety among ESL learners at Camarines Sur Polytechnic Colleges and its partner, Zeferino Arroyo High School. Spanning three years, the program consists of three progressive phases: "Speak Up!" (2022), "Speak Out!" (2023), and "Speak Your Voice!" (2024). Based on the Popsispeak framework, these intervention activities integrate impromptu speaking exercises, peer collaboration, and ongoing feedback to build public speaking skills, enhance confidence, and decrease anxiety. The program's objectives include enhancing participants' knowledge of public speaking principles, fostering a supportive learning environment that promotes positive attitudes, and developing articulation, fluency, and effective delivery skills, as outlined in public speaking literature. Evaluative data reveal substantial improvements across these domains, with notable reductions in speaking anxiety and gains in confidence and skill. This intervention aligns with Sustainable Development Goal 4, promoting inclusive and quality education, and addresses regional employability concerns by enhancing English proficiency. Recommendations for future implementation emphasize extending session durations, incorporating more real-world communication tasks, and maintaining a non-judgmental environment to support continuous improvement. The success of the Popsispeak framework suggests that similar structured, experiential interventions could enhance communication skills across educational and professional contexts.

Keywords: Communication Skills, ESL Learners, Public Speaking Anxiety, Popsispeak Framework, Research-based Extension Activities

INTRODUCTION

Public speaking is a vital skill that influences academic performance, career success, and personal growth (Lucas, 2020). It is considered fundamental not only in the context of individual development but also in fostering effective communication within communities. However, public speaking anxiety remains a significant barrier among English as a Second Language (ESL) learners, both in the Philippines and globally (Horwitz et al., 1986; MacIntyre, 2017). Recognizing the importance of overcoming this challenge, Camarines Sur Polytechnic Colleges – College of Arts and Sciences (CSPC-CAS) initiated a three-year research-based intervention program consisting of phases titled *"Speak Up!" (2022)*, *"Speak Out!" (2023)*, and *"Speak Your Voice!" (2024)*. These intervention activities aim to empower both students and teachers by enhancing their public speaking skills and contributing to broader educational and community development goals.

This intervention program is based on the author's published research article titled *"Reducing the Public Speaking Anxiety of ESL College Students through Popsispeak"* (Pontillas, 2020). The research emphasizes the effectiveness of the Popsispeak approach, which incorporates impromptu speaking exercises, peer collaboration, and continuous feedback to mitigate anxiety. The program translates the findings of this research into practice, focusing on real-world applications that directly address the needs of ESL learners and educators. Bridging theory and practice aims to provide an evidence-based framework for reducing public speaking anxiety in educational settings.

Beyond its local impact, the program is also aligned with national and global goals. It supports the Philippines' thrust towards improved communication skills and language proficiency among learners, as highlighted in the Department of Education's (DepEd) K-12 Curriculum framework, and aligns with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4, which seeks to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all (UNESCO, 2017). Regionally, the program addresses the Bicol Region's goal of enhancing employability through better communication skills, while locally, it responds to the communication barriers faced by communities in the 5th District–Rinconada, Camarines Sur, where public speaking anxiety is prevalent among both students and educators (Espada et al., 2023; Martiningsih et al., 2024).

A Community Needs Assessment (CNA) and Training Needs Assessment (TNA) were conducted at Zeferino Arroyo High School, a partner school of CSPC, prior to the program's implementation. The CNA results indicated that 70% of students and 65% of teachers experienced moderate to high levels of anxiety when speaking in public. Additionally, the TNA highlighted a lack of structured programs to address public speaking anxiety despite its significant impact on students' academic outcomes and teachers' effectiveness in delivering lessons (Gilkerson et al., 2017).

The gaps identified in the assessments reflect broader national and regional concerns. Studies show that communication apprehension is a major barrier to employability among Filipino graduates, as employers consistently cite communication skills as a critical competency (Labicane, 2021). In the Bicol Region, a significant portion of graduates lack English proficiency, which limits their competitiveness in both national and international job markets. Addressing these gaps is crucial for individual success and regional development, as improved communication skills can lead to greater economic opportunities and community engagement.

The *"Speak Up!"*, *"Speak Out!"*, and *"Speak Your Voice!"* activities were designed to fill these identified gaps by providing structured impromptu speaking exercises that target public speaking anxiety reduction among participants. Grounded in the Popsispeak framework, these workshops emphasize experiential learning, continuous feedback, and collaborative support (Brown & Yule, 1983). By involving peer collaboration and mentoring, the program ensures sustained skill development while addressing the specific needs identified by the CNA and TNA (Ellis, 1991). The partnership with Zeferino Arroyo High School further expands the program's reach, fostering community-based learning and reinforcing the importance of communication within educational institutions (Espada et al., 2023).

The program aims to create a supportive environment for students and educators by reducing public speaking anxiety and enhancing communication skills. Its core objectives are to produce measurable results in four key areas: knowledge, attitude, skills, and practice. Participants will first gain a comprehensive understanding of effective public speaking principles, such as organization, clarity, and audience engagement. This foundational knowledge is then used to foster a more positive mindset, helping to reduce anxiety and build confidence toward public speaking. The program also focuses on developing practical skills such as improved articulation, fluency, and delivery, drawing on established literature from Brown & Yule (1983), Ellis (1991), Gregersen & MacIntyre (2014), and Lucas (2020). Finally, it encourages sustained practice of public speaking activities beyond the scheduled workshops to ensure long-term development.

METHODS OF RESEARCH

This section outlines the methods employed to achieve the objectives of the three-year research-based intervention program titled *"Speak Up!" (2022)*, *"Speak Out!" (2023)*,

and *"Speak Your Voice!" (2024)*, which aimed to reduce public speaking anxiety among ESL learners. It covers the Locale and Population, Training Design, and the Three-Phase Approach comprising the Preparatory Phase, Implementation Phase, and Post-Training Phase.

Locale and Population

The intervention was conducted at Camarines Sur Polytechnic Colleges (CSPC) and Zeferino Arroyo High School (ZAHS), both located in the 5th District, Camarines Sur, Philippines. CSPC, a polytechnic state college, caters to a diverse student population, including ESL learners from various municipalities in the Bicol Region. ZAHS, as a partner school, was selected due to the significant number of high school students identified during the Community Needs Assessment (CNA) and Training Needs Assessment (TNA) as experiencing high levels of public speaking anxiety.

A total of approximately 150 students and 20 faculty members participated in the program across the three-year period. Participants were categorized into beginner, intermediate, and advanced groups based on their self-reported anxiety levels using an adapted version of the Personal Report of Communication Apprehension (PRCA-24). This standardized instrument, widely recognized for measuring communication apprehension, was adapted to the ESL and local educational context while retaining the original 24 items. The PRCA-24 has been validated in prior studies and demonstrated high internal consistency in this study (Cronbach's alpha = 0.88). To supplement and validate the categorization process, brief follow-up interviews were conducted to confirm participants' self-assessed levels and ensure accurate group placement.

Training Design

The training design was anchored in the Popsispeak framework, a research-based approach aimed at reducing public speaking anxiety through experiential learning, impromptu speaking exercises, peer collaboration, and continuous feedback. The program's utilization by ZAHS was formally recognized through a certificate of utilization issued on December 5, 2022. The copyrighted Popsispeak intervention guide, which is legally protected and carries an ISBN, served as a consistent instructional reference for facilitators, ensuring fidelity of implementation.

Three-Phase Approach

Preparatory Phase

The preparatory phase laid the groundwork for effective implementation. Activities included conducting the CNA and TNA, developing instructional materials, and recruiting participants. Baseline anxiety levels were established using the adapted PRCA-24. Instructional resources included participant handbooks, speech templates, and anxiety management guides, all designed in accordance with Popsispeak principles. Recruitment was conducted through announcements, online promotions, and direct invitations, followed by an orientation session explaining program objectives, activities, and expectations.

Implementation Phase

The program was delivered in three progressive phases over three years:

- Year 1: "Speak Up!" – Focused on foundational speaking skills, using low-stakes, impromptu exercises such as self-introductions, describing familiar topics, and sharing personal experiences.
- Year 2: "Speak Out!" – Targeted intermediate skills, including persuasive speaking, debates, and structured role-play to enhance argumentation and audience engagement.

- Year 3: "Speak Your Voice!" – Developed advanced public speaking abilities for real-world contexts, such as panel discussions, community presentations, and advocacy campaigns.

Each phase incorporated immediate feedback from facilitators and peers, guided by the Popsispeak intervention manual.

Post-Training Phase

Post-intervention evaluations assessed reductions in anxiety and improvements in public speaking performance. Anxiety levels were measured using the same adapted PRCA-24 administered in the preparatory phase to ensure pre- and post-intervention comparability. Public speaking performance was evaluated based on articulation, fluency, and delivery, using rubrics developed from established definitions in the literature (Brown & Yule, 1983; Ellis, 1991; Gregersen & MacIntyre, 2014; Lucas, 2020). Evaluation sessions were conducted by trained assessors to ensure inter-rater reliability.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the outcomes of the three-year extension activities titled "Speak up!", "Speak out!", and "Speak your voice!"

Knowledge

The objective of improving participants' understanding of public speaking principles, organization, clarity, and engagement yielded significant positive results. Quantitative data showed that speech organization understanding increased from 40% pre-intervention to 85% post-intervention, reflecting a 45% improvement. Clarity of speech increased from 45% to 82%, a 37% rise, while engagement techniques rose by 40%, from 38% to 78%. Participants' feedback supports these gains, with P1 stating, "Before the workshops, I struggled to organize my ideas. The templates really helped me put my thoughts together in a more logical way." P2 added, "I can deliver my message without getting lost now, which has boosted my confidence."

Table 1 Improvements in Public Speaking Knowledge

Criteria	Pre-Intervention	Post-Intervention	Change	Qualitative Findings
Understanding of Organization	40%	85%	+45%	Participants noted better speech structure due to the use of templates and outlines.
Clarity of Speech	45%	82%	+37%	Many mentioned improved clarity after focusing on speech flow and concise language.
Engagement Techniques	38%	78%	+40%	Improved use of voice modulation, eye contact, and audience interaction was observed.

Based on Table 1, the substantial improvement across all criteria suggests that the structured materials and guided feedback were effective in enhancing participants' understanding of public speaking principles. Participants showed better organization of thoughts, clearer messaging, and more engaging delivery techniques by the end of the program. The increase in scores indicates that the intervention successfully translated theoretical knowledge into practical application.

These improvements have critical implications for both academic and professional communication. Participants, particularly students, are likely to exhibit better performance in

classroom discussions, presentations, and academic assessments. Educators, on the other hand, can deliver lessons more effectively, improving student comprehension and engagement. The enhanced knowledge also prepares participants for professional communication tasks, such as interviews and public presentations, contributing to employability.

These findings align with Brown and Yule's (1983) assertion that structured training materials significantly improve learners' ability to organize and present clear messages. Ellis (1991) also emphasizes that experiential learning fosters a deeper understanding of communication principles, while Lucas (2020) highlights the role of engaging strategies in connecting with audiences. The observed improvements are consistent with these studies, validating the effectiveness of the Popsispeak framework in enhancing knowledge of public speaking.

Attitude

The second objective aimed to foster a more positive attitude toward public speaking by reducing anxiety and increasing confidence. Quantitative results revealed that anxiety levels dropped from 70% pre-intervention to 20% post-intervention, a 50% reduction. Confidence levels increased from 30% to 75%, while the willingness to engage in public speaking rose from 40% to 85%, representing a 45% improvement. P3 noted, "Initially, I was too anxious to speak, but the activities made me realize I could improve." P4 emphasized the program's supportive environment, saying, "I gained more confidence because mistakes were treated as learning opportunities."

Table 2 Improvements in Public Speaking Attitude

Criteria	Pre-Intervention	Post-Intervention	Change	Qualitative Findings
Anxiety Level	70% (high)	20% (moderate)	-50%	"The activities made me realize I could improve." – P3
Confidence Level	30% (low)	75% (high)	+45%	"The supportive environment helped me feel confident." – P4
Willingness to Speak	40%	85%	+45%	"I'm more willing to volunteer for public speaking now." – P5

Based on Table 2, the results indicate that the extension activities successfully created a supportive environment conducive to reducing anxiety and boosting confidence. Participants demonstrated an increased willingness to participate in public speaking tasks, suggesting that the positive reinforcement and peer support provided during the workshops were critical in alleviating fear and hesitation. The significant reduction in anxiety and increase in confidence levels indicate that the intervention effectively addressed participants' apprehensions.

The decrease in anxiety and increase in confidence has meaningful implications for both personal growth and academic engagement. Reduced anxiety levels allow students to participate more actively in classroom discussions, while increased confidence can enhance performance in academic presentations and debates. For educators, improved confidence in delivering lessons can lead to better student engagement and understanding. These attitudinal changes also contribute to a greater willingness to engage in professional speaking opportunities, enhancing career readiness.

The anxiety reduction supports Kho et al.'s (2023) findings on the role of continuous exposure and supportive feedback in alleviating communication apprehension. The observed increase in confidence aligns with Lucas' (2020) emphasis on fostering a communicative culture that encourages risk-taking and active participation. The results further validate the

Popsispeak framework's effectiveness in creating a positive, non-judgmental environment conducive to public speaking improvement.

Skills

The third objective focused on enhancing participants' articulation, fluency, and delivery. Quantitative results, as detailed in Table 3, showed significant improvements. Articulation improved from 35% pre-intervention to 80% post-intervention, a 45% increase. Fluency rose from 40% to 90%, representing a 50% improvement, while delivery metrics, including voice modulation, pacing, and body language, increased from 38% to 93%, reflecting a 55% enhancement. P5 shared, "I can now speak more fluently without pausing too much, even during impromptu speeches." P6 added, "My delivery has improved, especially in terms of making eye contact and controlling my voice."

Table 3 Improvements in Public Speaking Skills

Criteria	Pre-Intervention	Post-Intervention	Change	Qualitative Findings
Articulation	35%	80%	+45%	"Clearer pronunciation and better word choices have helped me communicate more effectively." – P5
Fluency	40%	90%	+50%	"I can now speak more fluently without frequent pauses, even during impromptu speeches." – P5
Delivery	38%	93%	+55%	"My delivery has improved a lot, especially with better eye contact and voice control." – P6

The significant improvements in articulation, fluency, and delivery indicate that regular practice, particularly through impromptu speaking exercises, was crucial to skills development. Participants demonstrated better pronunciation, pacing, and body language by the end of the program, showing that the structured guidance and immediate feedback provided during the activities were effective in enhancing speaking skills.

These skills improvements have important implications for both academic success and professional communication. Improved articulation, fluency, and delivery can enhance performance in oral presentations, group discussions, and debates, leading to better academic outcomes. Professionally, these skills contribute to clearer communication, greater audience engagement, and increased employability, as effective communication is often a critical competency sought by employers.

Lucas's (2020) assertion that consistent practice and feedback are essential for developing communication skills is evident in these findings. The results also align with Ellis (1991), who emphasizes the role of experiential learning in improving language fluency and articulation. The observed improvements validate the effectiveness of the Popsispeak framework in addressing communication skills among ESL learners, supporting its potential for broader application in similar contexts.

The results of the three-year extension activities demonstrate substantial improvements across the three main objectives: knowledge, attitude, and skills. Participants showed a better understanding of public speaking principles, a more positive attitude toward public speaking, and enhanced communication skills. The program's combination of structured materials, supportive feedback, and regular practice proved effective in reducing public speaking anxiety and boosting confidence among ESL learners. The findings validate the

effectiveness of the Popsispeak framework and suggest potential for its broader application in similar educational settings.

Lived Experiences of the Participants

Overcoming Public Speaking Anxiety through Supportive Learning Environments

The participants' lived experiences highlighted that a supportive learning environment was crucial in overcoming public speaking anxiety. Participants consistently reported feeling more at ease due to the program's positive reinforcement, which encouraged them to speak without fear of harsh criticism. For instance, P1 mentioned, "The facilitators were really encouraging, which helped me feel less nervous during the sessions." Similarly, P2 stated, "Knowing that I was in a safe space made a huge difference. It allowed me to focus more on improving rather than worrying about making mistakes."

The presence of a non-judgmental and supportive environment played a pivotal role in reducing participants' anxiety levels. As reflected in the interviews, the positive atmosphere fostered a sense of security, which allowed participants to take risks and engage more actively in public speaking activities. This supportive context minimized the psychological barriers typically associated with speaking anxiety, enabling participants to focus on refining their skills rather than on the fear of failure. The consistent encouragement from both peers and facilitators contributed to creating a community-like atmosphere where participants felt motivated to try new techniques and improve steadily.

The creation of a safe, encouraging space for public speaking has significant implications for the design of communication training programs, particularly for ESL learners. In academic settings, such environments can promote greater student participation, while in professional contexts, they can lead to more effective teamwork and communication. Establishing a supportive culture can also contribute to better learning outcomes, as it reduces stress and enhances participants' willingness to engage, which is essential for building public speaking competence.

These findings align with Essa's (2022) research, which emphasizes that reducing communication apprehension requires a supportive learning environment. The results also echo Lucas's (2020) assertion that positive reinforcement fosters a sense of security among learners, facilitating their willingness to take risks in communication tasks. The impact of a non-judgmental setting in reducing public speaking anxiety underscores the effectiveness of the Popsispeak framework, validating its emphasis on creating a safe space for language acquisition.

Overall, the theme of overcoming anxiety through supportive environments reveals that a positive and non-threatening atmosphere is a fundamental component in reducing communication apprehension. Participants' experiences demonstrate that when learners feel supported, they are more likely to engage in public speaking activities, leading to sustained improvement over time.

Gaining Confidence through Continuous Practice and Feedback

Participants identified continuous practice and feedback as critical factors in building their confidence. The frequent impromptu exercises, combined with timely feedback, allowed participants to develop self-assurance in public speaking. P3 shared, "The more I practiced, the less scared I became. I was able to apply the feedback and see improvements in my next attempt." Similarly, P4 emphasized, "The feedback was very constructive, pointing out both my strengths and areas to improve, which helped me a lot."

The emphasis on regular practice and feedback created a cycle of improvement that significantly boosted participants' confidence. Participants learned to manage their anxiety by facing it repeatedly, gradually becoming more comfortable with impromptu speaking situations. Feedback provided by facilitators and peers allowed participants to identify specific strengths and weaknesses, making the learning process more targeted and effective. As participants experienced tangible improvements through repeated practice, their self-efficacy in public speaking increased, resulting in a more confident approach to speaking tasks.

These results underscore the importance of incorporating continuous practice and feedback into communication training programs. Frequent exposure to speaking tasks, combined with constructive feedback, can significantly enhance participants' confidence, making them better prepared for real-world communication scenarios. In educational settings, this approach can encourage greater student engagement, while in professional contexts, it can enhance employees' confidence in presentations and client interactions.

The results align with Bandura's (1977) concept of self-efficacy, which posits that repeated exposure and feedback lead to increased confidence in task performance. Ellis (1991) also supports the notion that experiential learning, through continuous practice, enhances language acquisition and builds learner confidence. Additionally, Lucas (2020) emphasizes that regular practice is crucial for developing communication skills, supporting the findings of this theme within the Popsispeak framework.

The theme of gaining confidence through continuous practice and feedback highlights the effectiveness of repeated exposure to public speaking tasks. Participants' experiences demonstrate that consistent practice, paired with constructive feedback, not only improves their speaking skills but also builds the confidence needed to excel in public communication.

Transforming Communication Skills for Real-World Application

Participants reported that the program's focus on real-world speaking tasks, such as debates, discussions, and community presentations, helped them translate the skills they had learned into practical communication abilities. P5 noted, "Presenting in front of a real audience made me realize how much I've improved. I can now handle interviews and group discussions more confidently." P6 added, "I was able to use the techniques we learned during a school event, and it really worked."

The inclusion of real-world communication scenarios in the program was instrumental in solidifying participants' skills. By engaging in authentic speaking situations, participants were able to test and refine their articulation, fluency, and delivery techniques. These experiences not only improved their technical skills but also enhanced their ability to adapt to various communication contexts, a critical aspect of effective public speaking.

The focus on real-world application has significant implications for public speaking programs, suggesting that integrating practical communication tasks can enhance the relevance of training. Participants who can apply learned skills in authentic contexts are more likely to retain and utilize those skills effectively in both academic and professional settings. This approach can also enhance employability, as improved communication skills are a critical asset in most career fields.

These findings align with Lucas's (2020) emphasis on the importance of real-world communication tasks in language learning, which facilitates the transfer of skills to practical settings. The results also support Ellis's (1991) assertion that experiential learning, when linked to authentic tasks, leads to better language retention and application. The effectiveness of the Popsispeak framework in enabling participants to apply skills in real-world contexts further validates its utility in communication training.

The theme of transforming communication skills for real-world application underscores the importance of incorporating authentic speaking tasks into training programs. Participants' experiences demonstrate that practical communication activities not only enhance their skills but also prepare them for real-world scenarios, making them more competent and adaptable communicators.

CONCLUSIONS

The three-year research-based intervention program: "Speak Up!" (2022), "Speak Out!" (2023), and "Speak Your Voice!" (2024) proved effective in reducing public speaking anxiety and enhancing communication skills among ESL learners through the Popsispeak framework. Findings revealed measurable improvements in knowledge, including better organization, clarity, and engagement techniques; positive changes in attitude, such as reduced anxiety, increased confidence, and greater willingness to speak; and enhanced skills in articulation, fluency, and delivery. These gains were achieved through a combination of structured materials, a supportive learning environment, and opportunities for real-world application, validating the framework's relevance in both academic and community contexts. To sustain and maximize the program's impact, it is recommended that similar structured interventions be integrated into the regular curriculum of secondary and tertiary institutions, particularly in language and communication courses. Extending the duration of training sessions would allow participants to engage in more in-depth practice and receive comprehensive feedback, thereby enabling them to master advanced public speaking techniques. Facilitators should be trained to maintain a psychologically safe and non-judgmental environment that encourages risk-taking and open participation. Authentic speaking tasks, such as mock interviews, panel discussions, and public forums, should be incorporated to reinforce the real-world application of skills. Furthermore, partnerships with local schools and community organizations should be expanded to ensure the program's broader reach and sustainability. Future research may investigate the long-term retention of public speaking skills acquired through the Popsispeak framework, comparing outcomes across various learner groups and contexts. Studies could also explore the integration of digital and blended learning approaches to enhance accessibility and scalability, as well as examine the adaptability of the framework to other skill domains, such as leadership communication or intercultural dialogue, thereby extending its applicability beyond ESL education.

REFERENCES

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