

IMPROVING PUBLIC SPEAKING SKILLS FOR UNIVERSITY STUDENTS: CHALLENGES AND SOLUTIONS

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Abstract – *This study explores English as a foreign language students' challenges and investigates solutions for students to improve their public speaking skills at a university campus in the South of Vietnam. A descriptive mixed-method approach is used in this investigation allowing data to be quantitatively and qualitatively collected through questionnaires and interviews. The findings showed that English as a foreign language students faced several problems in public speaking as well as a lack of confidence. Many methods to improve public speaking skills were found, including making presentations, creating video blogs, and implementing circumlocution, methods that helped students increase their confidence in speaking and using effective body language. The findings of this study can be applied to help students overcome their challenges with public speaking.*

Keywords: *challenges in English public speaking, English as a foreign language students, public speaking skills, solutions to improve speaking English.*

I. INTRODUCTION

In the globalization era, English has become a crucial means not only for worldwide integration but also for access to knowledge and resources for development. As such, to communicate effectively, language users are expected to be adept at four skills including listening, speaking, reading, and writing. For English as a foreign language (EFL) learners, being proficient in all four skills allows them to exchange and express ideas with listeners directly and indirectly. Among these skills, speaking is seen as the most important although mastering this particular skill has been

argued to be highly challenging [1]. Therefore, public speaking is one of the speaking skills that speakers present in front of audiences with many different topics, especially in an academic context. Raja [2] maintains that most people can not become public speakers, but rather they need to be trained. Without sufficient confidence, learners are anxious and shy to state ideas, as such often avoid speaking in public. The undergraduates are still afraid of public speaking, and they differ to get a good job. Therefore, students need to improve their public speaking skills in many good ways before graduating. If done successfully, public speaking helps learners gain confidence, get rid of fears, and start believing in themselves. This self-confidence, in turn, will support them in creating many diverse conditions and opportunities for future development by using their speeches to persuade listeners.

In addition, people are interested in public speaking skills [3]. Public speaking is one of the speaking formats that help EFL students show their proficiency, knowledge, and experiences in a specific field in front of a crowd of people. Public speaking is a significant skill in career development and a way which show leading abilities to the listeners. Through practising public speaking, EFL learners may advance confidence, research skills, deductive skills, the ability to advocate for causes, and so on. However, many EFL students have encountered a lot of anxieties and fears while speaking in public. They have to overcome these problems to be more professional someday. Therefore, the solutions can help learners deal with these challenges and improve their public speaking skills effectively. Accordingly, the purposes of this study are to identify and investigate two main parts: (1) the EFL students' challenges and (2) their solutions for handling these problems in public speaking.

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Received date: 14th April 2022; Revised date: 27th June 2022; Accepted date: 07th June 2022

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Many investigators [2-4] are concerned about individual skills. Abilities need practising and listening feedbacks from others. Hence, speaking is a way to communicate efficiently and well in order that listeners understand our points and personalities. Prominently, public speaking is defined as speakers present in front of audiences with a wide variety of different topics and aspects. This paper demonstrates EFL students' challenges and methods for helping university students enhance public speaking skills.

In this modern life, speaking was the primary way to improve interaction abilities in the social group(s) [5]. Public speaking is an ability to show our voices for everyone. Various themes of the research consisted of linguistics, psychology, anthropology, and sociology that have been concerned with the speaking process [6]. Moreover, most people are interested in using this skill in communication rather than that of written forms because they are able to show their gestures, attitude and interaction easily. Public speakers used accurate words effectively and communicate flexibly the language. Plus, EFL learners own good speaking skills so that listeners could understand all of the speeches that the speaker impacts [7]. Additionally, students were considered successful in studying a foreign/second language when they could speak, use and write it [8].

A. Public speaking skills

Public speaking is a process, an act, and an art of making a speech with audiences which mean students have to practise, exchange and experience to be expert in this skill [9]. Public speaking is a significant skill for university or college students to learn and practice as they develop through education and their future careers [10]. If they practised frequently, their public speaking skills would improve surely [11]. For instance, speaking in public was counted as in the forms of teaching, giving a speech, being MC, joining a talk show, practising Da'wah (a form of debate), and so on [3]. Public speaking was one of the speaking abilities that help speakers deliver their points that can be understood and trusted by public listeners [12].

Moreover, public speaking skills are necessary for many aspects such as leadership and personal development, business, customer care, group communication, and global communication [13]. It is an opportunity to support learners for career development and easy to fast promotion. Therefore, some studies show that a job applicant who has good communication skills, such as public speaking abilities and presentation skills, is the most important quality, and this can be obtained through the mastery of public speaking skills [14].

B. Challenges in public speaking skills

Public speaking skills are uneasy for EFL learners since they claim to train. Consequently, they have faced numerous challenges such as (1) voice influences [4], (2) lack of confidence [2], lack of speaking experiences, and knowledge [15], and fear of making mistakes and being laughed at, inadequate preparation, and shyness.

Individuals are often to face public speaking since they had lacked the skills to cope with their anxieties when speaking in front of others because they just study about formulas and grammar [10]. Fear of public speaking was a common anxiety category among EFL students [14]. Furthermore, anxieties have been described as a feeling of unease and they brought on by the expectation of something dangerous [2]. Students faced many fears when speaking publicly such as the influence of voice (too high-pitched or too soft), self-perception of voice, and participation in activities [4].

Moreover, students' abilities were affected by some challenges to speaking English in public with many categories consisting of lack of self-confidence, lack of constant speaking experiences and lack of knowledge; fear of making mistakes and being laughed at, inadequate preparation, and shyness [15]. Plus, lack of confidence was the most common reason for fear of public speaking because many students are not natural and are embarrassed while speaking in front of others [2]. Likewise, fears could be found in a bad academic presentation, isolation, and daily life since students often do not practise with partners [16]. Therefore, one of the most anxiety-inducing

kinds of communication was public speaking and also one of humanity’s most universal fears [17]. Many challenges that EFL students faced considerably when public speaking.

C. Solutions in public speaking

Researches have been conducted about solutions to help EFL learners improve their public speaking skills in some journals [3, 18, 19].

Rhetoric abilities often took place after listening skills and Dawah rhetoric is defined as the art of public speaking with a spiritual focus that could be used in the field of education [3]. Rhetoric through learning media helped students advance their speaking skills, interaction, and communication prominently. Besides, giving feedback through videotaped was an important component of a teacher’s attempt to assist students to reach their learning objectives [18]. The students’ perspectives were positively influenced by videotaped comments [14]. The effectiveness of videotaped feedback helped students gain more confidence and accumulate speaking experiences in presentation, they could use gestures, eye contact, facial expression, and smile. Meanwhile, students could obtain confidence in preparing and delivering oral presentations by practising public speaking in the class, either independently or in small groups [20]. The presentation might aid learners to enhance their English presentation skills. Moreover, the presentation could build more students’ speaking confidence in front of listeners, and practice not only listening but also reading [21].

On the other hand, EFL students could improve their communication skills naturally, enhance self-confidence in presentation, perform gestures suitably, and read without the whole script through circumlocution strategies [22]. Moreover, various methods of making video vlogs did play a significant role in overcoming the learners’ public speaking, and they could potentially increase their confidence in public speaking [23]. The uses of EFL students’ video blogs were discovered that they enhanced their oral proficiency and risk-taking during this kind of spoken interaction [19]. The input of the target language for “TED Motivated” English

public speaking was **TED Talks** videos. The effectiveness of TED motivation helped a learner to become a creator and improved more critical listening and thinking abilities [5]. In conclusion, many scholars mentioned the useful methods that assist students to get better their public speaking skills dramatically.

III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

A. Participants, place and time of the study

Participants: The participants of the study were fifty-five students in two classes of English major. The participants were aged 21 and had challenges in public speaking skills during learning in Can Tho University.

Place and time of the study: This study was conducted at Can Tho University, Can Tho City, Vietnam for four months, from August to December 2021.

B. Methods of data collecting and analyzing

A descriptive mixed-method approach was utilized in this investigation with a questionnaire and a structured interview. The research site was a campus in a large university in the South of Vietnam. Both qualitative and quantitative data were collected to answer the following questions:

1. What challenges do EFL students face in public speaking?
2. What are solutions to assist EFL learners to improve their public speaking skills?

The structured interview was carried out by video calling so that the qualitative data was tracked and collected. The questionnaire with 08 research items related to the EFL students’ challenges and their methods in public speaking from 02 classes for quantitative data collection. The research background for a questionnaire and a structured interview was structured from different concepts of challenges [2], fears [4], and effective solutions [14, 22, 23]. People who felt anxious while speaking in public generally tended to avoid situations where they have to perform [2]. Moreover, choosing proper solutions could create items and questions for research. The techniques used to reduce anxieties and public speaking varied widely in terms of the resources used and

the time needed to implement these programs [24].

The piloted versions of the interview and questionnaire were conducted on EFL students in the same context. First, the two participants were invited to be interviewed. After piloting the interview, some modifications were applied to update the questions for the official versions. The modifications included that the interview questions needed to explain clearly about aims. Questions 5, 6, 7 and 8 in the structured interview were adjusted and altered because they did not mention solutions to how to deal with their problems. Second, for the rest questions, the old questionnaire had some problems with collecting and displaying data. Hence, some modifications were applying as deleting redundant data, gathering necessary data, and creating new questionnaires to collect data easier.

The official participants of the study consisted of 06 participants for the interview and 46 responders for the questionnaire. During the pandemic Covid-19, the quantitative data was collected using Google Form. The structured interview data was gathered during video recordings by the Zalo application between the interviewer and each of the 06 participants. The qualitative data were analyzed following Nguyen's [25] technique of unfolding matrix while the quantitative data were not analyzed with SPSS, but with the descriptive percentages. After assembling and analyzing the qualitative data, the codes and extracts would be classified into categories for describing the findings. Besides, the results and synthesis were demonstrated in graphs for quantitative data.

IV. FINDINGS

The findings of this study are presented in two contents: the EFL students' problems and solutions for them through graphs and tables for collecting qualitative and quantitative data. It summarized the students' challenges and how to confront them through effective solutions while public speaking. The findings were discussed in turn.

A. Findings of the challenges of EFL learners while public speaking

Collecting data based on EFL students' challenges often had trouble with their speaking performance in public. The data analysis regarding the problems of EFL learners when speaking in public from the two research instruments with the following students' anxieties and fears. The quantitative data was displayed in the two graphs:

Figure 1 displayed the distributions of learners' anxieties in public speaking. The top three anxieties with 46 participants ($n = 46$) including forgetting contents (78.3%), presenting discontinuously (71.7%), and having an unattractive presentation (65.2%). Besides, some anxieties also existed in high proportion. The findings summarized that many EFL students encountered these anxieties in public speaking.

Figure 2 presented the distributions of students' fears of public speaking. The highest proportion of being insufficient confidence (78.3%, $n = 46$). The percentage of students included having a lack of vocabulary, fearing to interact with listeners, and preparing slobbery content were 73.9%, 41.3%, and 52.2%, respectively. Additionally, the proportion of participants who are afraid to be evaluated by the audience with 15.2%. The findings summarized that many EFL students faced these fears in public speaking.

Lack of confidence is a common EFL learners challenges

One of the findings regarding the challenges of students from the two research instruments was inadequate confidence while speaking in front of people. The collected data indicated that self-confidence in individuals was necessary to decide whether their presentations were successful or not. This finding can be found in the following extracts:

"I think it's lack of confidence that I don't believe in myself 100%." [253T03P5]

"I will lack confidence when I have unexpected problems and I feel confused in a presentation in public." [365T04P5]

"I think part of it is because I am not confident enough to speak in front of such a large crowd." [611T06P5]

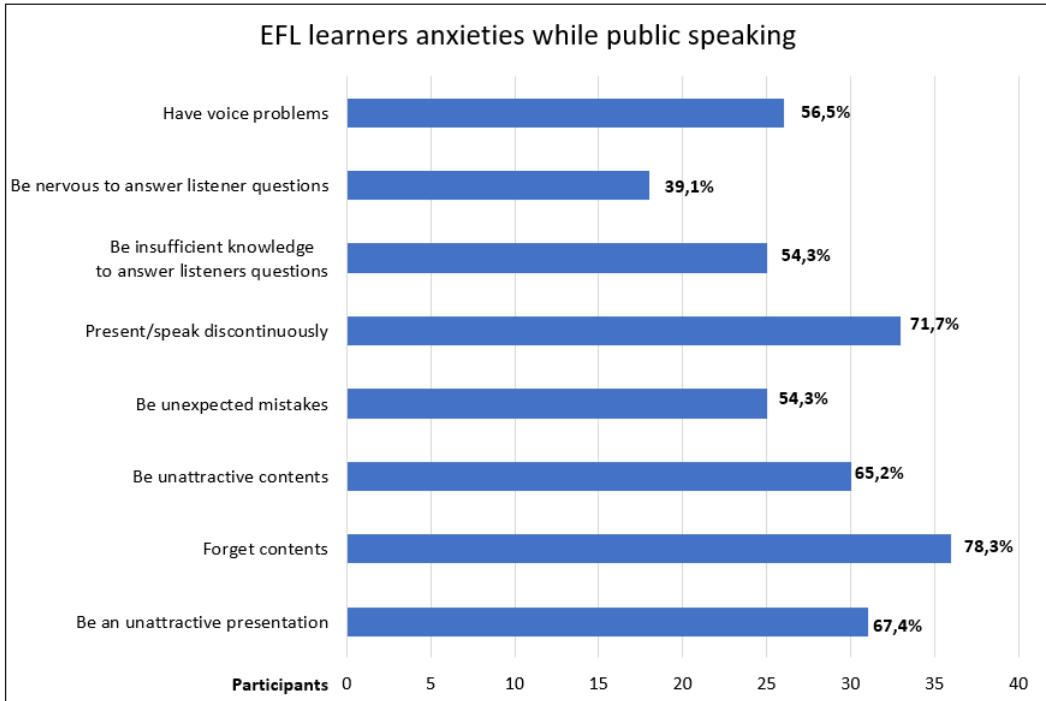


Fig. 1: Student anxieties

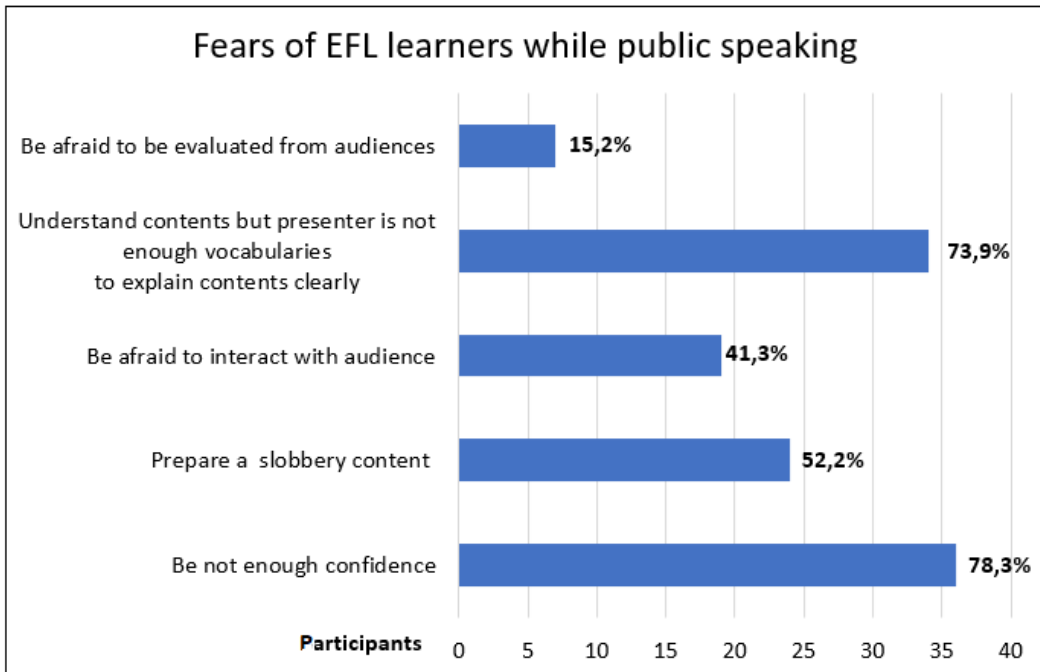


Fig. 2: EFL students' fears

The data from the questionnaire also supported problems from the interview in Figure 2. The top common fear was applied that 36 students faced with lack of confidence in 46 students (occupied 78.3%, n = 46). The participants in this research context were insufficient confidence if they encountered unexpected problems or risks. However, this challenge led to the successful performance of students.

EFL students forget the contents of their presentation while public speaking

The different findings were found by two instruments. The data denoted that impacting the contents was an essential problem. The aims of EFL students were how audiences can understand the speaker's contents and messages. These qualitative findings can be found in the following extracts:

"I am afraid that I will forget the contents of my presentation. I often skip the contents that I have prepared." [136T03P4]

"Every time I stand in front of a crowd to present something, I feel a little nervous and especially afraid of forgetting what I want to say." [866T08P4]

"I also have fear in front of the crowd when I speak, I'm afraid of making mistakes and forgetting the lesson while speaking. Sometimes I get distracted by some outside influence during the presentation." [738T07P4]

Both Figure 1 and Figure 2 displayed not preparing or forgetting the EFL student's content in public speaking. Forgetting the contents of students was top in all of the challenges. In Figure 1, the percentage of disremembering contents in 37 learners was 78.3%, and in Figure 2 with 25 learners was 52.2%. The problems were significant with EFL students, so they needed to advance to ensure a perfect presentation in public.

The voice of the speaker was a problem that EFL students need to improve

The data analysis regarding the issue of EFL students from the two research instruments was about their voice influences. The learner's voice factor determined how they can be confident in their presentation and maybe their voice created attraction with listeners. This finding can be demonstrated in the following extracts:

"My voice is my biggest obstacle because when

I speak I don't have intonation." [272T03P3]

"This is what makes me extremely insecure because I feel like my voice is quite hoarse, sometimes I'm shy, and I think it will be difficult to overcome." [899T08P3]

"The voice is small, the pronunciation is not standard and the intonation is not good." [637T06P3]

In Figure 1, 27 in 46 students (n = 46) carried out the questionnaire. The proportion of having voice influences was 56.5%. However, the voice of participants was one of the top challenges for students, they did not influence considerably. Moreover, it will be a weapon for EFL students to attract audiences when speaking in public.

B. Findings of effective methods for EFL learners while public speaking

The data collection indicated the efficient solutions that help EFL students improve their public speaking. Based on two instruments: an interview and a questionnaire, the analysis of the findings was made obvious. The solutions assisted students how to advance their skills to have a good presentation in public. The quantitative data was demonstrated in the following graph:

Figure 3 presented efficient methods to help EFL students improve their public speaking skills. The percentage of students (n = 46) in doing the presentation and implementing circumlocution was 91.3% and 73.9%. In addition, other methods were useful, but they were not popular with students. The proportion of students making video blogs and using Rhetoric was 23.9%. Moreover, the student percentage in receiving videotaped feedback and watching ted videos were 32.6% and 6.5%. These methods are effective, so students should choose the suitable one.

Improving public speaking skills through presentation method by some applications

One of the findings regarding the effective solution from the two research instruments was speaking performance by Microsoft Powerpoint. The collected data described that students can control their presentation by own skills and how to advance more skills to create a good presentation in public by their speaking skills. These

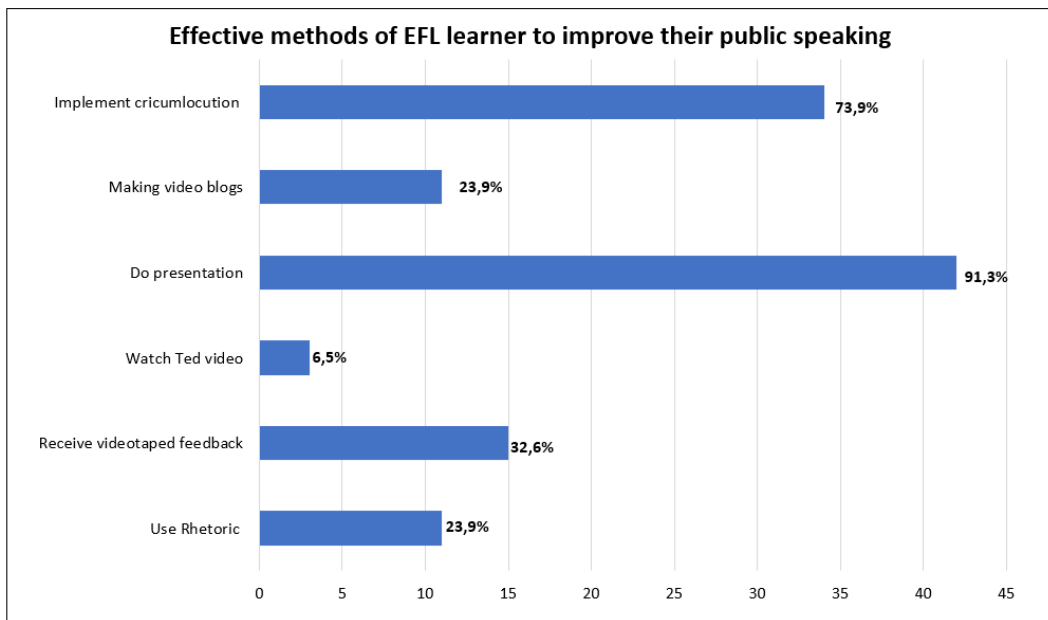


Fig. 3: Effective solutions for EFL learners

qualitative findings can be found in the following extracts:

“I find the presentation via PPT also quite good because I can talk while using pictures and videos to illustrate, which will make me more flexible in presenting.” [935T08S3]

“I think it can convey the idea of the presentation more vividly and visually, which increases the effectiveness of engaging the audience.” [683T06S3]

“I’ve been using this method a lot since my freshman year and I’ve noticed that my speaking has improved a lot too.” [545T05S3]

Figure 3 provided data from the questionnaire tool about doing presentation method. The graph displayed the highest percentage of presentation solutions. It occupied 91.3% with 42 students ($n = 46$). The research participants recognized that this method was suitable for them dramatically, but they should experience different methods to help them advance their public speaking skills.

Enhancing public speaking skills through TED motivation

This finding concerning the method for EFL students from the two research instruments was about practising their speaking in public which was similar to TED. The collected data signified

that the students can imitate the presenters by watching TED videos. This finding can be found in the following extracts:

“Then this is also one of the methods for me to improve my public speaking. The effectiveness comes from being able to imitate the model, style, and professionalism of those speakers, especially acquiring more knowledge about vocabulary, knowledge about society.” [716T06S6]

“I can learn how they do their body language and how they make my presentation funny and lively to draw the audience’s attention to the talk. I can observe and learn from them so that I can be more confident when presenting.” [850T07S6]

“I find it very good and useful for improving my speaking skills, the ability to use body language to express the content of my presentation effectively.” [964T08S6]

The data from the questionnaire also are against this finding from the interview in Figure 3. The EFL students rarely utilized the method to help them overcome their problems. The lowest proportion of students was only 6.5% of 2 in total 46 learners ($n = 46$), but this method would be effective if they were hard-working to practice every day.

In conclusion, students have faced fears and

anxiousnesses that have arisen in public speaking: forgetting content, presenting discontinuously, having an unattractive presentation, and so on. Students had to confront a lot of problems. For instance, the lack of confidence had the highest percentage among many research participants ($n = 36$). Besides, the findings indicated effective methods to improve EFL students while public speaking: doing the presentation, implementing circumlocution, making video blogs, and using Rhetoric. Therefore, students had the authority to choose suitable methods for themselves.

V. DISCUSSION

A great number of EFL students reported problems with public speaking. Public speaking was said to be an anxiety-inducing factor that causes fear and has a detrimental impact on personal and academic success. Overall, the EFL students had a lot of challenges while public speaking, namely, their voice influence, their confidence, and their knowledge. Three factors had the top problems for learners. One finding of voice influence while public speaking in this study was different from *Marinho et al.* [4]. The voice influences indicated that it could attract audiences. In the study by *Marinho et al.* [4], when compared to students without those characteristics, the female students were speaking in groups infrequently and thought their voices as high-pitched or overly soft that increased the likelihood of expressing the fear of public speaking. This study also shared the results from both data of the two research tools. Whereas, this research demonstrated both males and females had problems. Learners recognized such as hoarse voices, high-pitched voices, and soft voices. The voice was necessary to attract the listeners. The next finding on students' confidence was compatible with *Dansieh et al*, *Raja*, and *Kalra & Siribud* [2, 15, 26]. The research by *Dansieh et al.* [15], lack of confidence was the most common explanation for fear of public speaking and students often felt uncomfortable while speaking in front of others. Additionally, the students had nervous felling and students said that they were not educated to stand and state in front of audiences as in *Raja* [2]. The study by *Kalra & Siribud* [26] further reported that many

students lacked the confidence to say in front of a crowd. The Thai students in the study felt uneasy to give their speeches. This research analyzed that low self-confidence was one of the big fears of students while public speaking. The last problem about insufficient knowledge impacted the content to audiences similar to *Kalra & Siribud* [26]. Students believed that their lack of knowledge in English on a specific speech topic was partly responsible for their English-speaking nervousness as in *Kalra & Siribud* [26]. This study also shared this result from both data of the two research tools. EFL students did not have enough knowledge to answer listeners' questions and explain issues properly in performance.

Therefore, many effective solutions appeared to help EFL students improve their public speaking skills. Some methods were receiving videotaped feedback, making video blogs, and implementing circumlocution. One finding of the receiving videotaped feedback solutions for EFL students in this study is different from *Zulhermindra & Hadiarni* [14]. The research by *Zulhermindra & Hadiarni* [14] confirmed the use of videotaped feedback could help students improve their public speaking skills overall and review all aspects. This study also shared this result from both data of the two research tools. Students listened to videotaped feedback to get better emotions and pronunciation, intonations, etc. The continuous finding of making video blogs in this research was similar to *Madzlan et al.* [23]. The use of video blogs had a considerable positive effect on EFL students' public speaking fear as in *Madzlan et al.* [23]. Besides, this study indicated that making video blogs improved speaking skills such as pronunciation and vocabulary mistakes. The last one about implementing the circumlocution of learners in this investigation is dissimilar to *Santoso & Taufiq* [22]. In *Santoso & Taufiq* [22], EFL students could advance their communication skills and confidence, impact the good content, and present with gestures and without looking at the script. This study also presented the result that implementing circumlocution made listeners understand the contents of what speakers impacted.

VI. CONCLUSIONS

This study included a questionnaire and an interview as part of a descriptive mixed-method approach. While a structured interview had 06 participants, a questionnaire had 46 samples. This study focused on answering EFL students' problems in public speaking and solutions to improve them. They indicated two main conclusions: EFL students' challenges and solutions for learners in public speaking. The first research question asked about the EFL learners' challenges that they face when speaking publicly. The participants in this context shared various challenges of students of this tool as fears and anxieties such as voice problems, lack of confidence, vocabulary and knowledge, unexpected mistakes, evaluations from audiences, and so on. Additionally, the second research question asked about the solutions to help students enhance their public speaking skills. EFL learners in this context indicated the efficient methods included implementing circumlocution, doing the presentation, making videos, watching Ted videos, practising speaking in front of the mirror, practising in a space alone, practising speaking before presenting, and so on.

Some limitations appeared in this research. The value of the investigation would be noticeable if the size of the population and the sample methods were different. First, only forty-six participants for quantitative findings would not be sufficient for the researcher to generalize the conclusion with a large effect size. The six participants in 02 classes for qualitative analysis did not have participants from different majors. Second, connecting to the Internet was a common problem of researchers and differing to utilize the Zalo application collected qualitative data.

In addition, the researcher suggests that universities or colleges should organize many presentations in public such as TED talks, Rhetoric, talk shows, and so on that create good conditions to help students advance their public speaking skills. Moreover, lecturers equalize all students who speak in front of the class and conduct them to perform perfectly. Besides, EFL students should be dynamic to state and contribute their ideas in public. Students should share some challenges and problems and teachers' advice to overcome

them. Moreover, students could share their methods to advance their public speaking skills.

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