



PRESENTATION FORMAT AND LEARNER ANXIETY IN THE UNIVERSITY EFL CLASSROOM: INDIVIDUAL, PAIR, AND SELF-SELECTED FORMATS

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Abstract:

Given their real-world usefulness and anxiety-provoking potential, oral presentations warrant examination from the perspective of learner anxiety in language pedagogy. This study investigates English Studies students' (N = 105) anxiety levels in response to in-class presentations in a tertiary EFL context in relation to a learner-external variable: presentation format. It examines whether individual, pair, and self-selected formats differ in their impact on anxiety, and whether any format is more favourable in this respect. Data were collected using a post-task self-report measure of state anxiety and analysed using descriptive statistics and one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA). The results indicated no statistically significant differences in anxiety levels across the three presentation conditions. However, the proportion of students reporting very high anxiety was lowest in the self-selected format. These findings suggest that while presentation format alone may not substantially reduce anxiety, allowing learners to choose their preferred format may help mitigate its more extreme manifestations.

Keywords: oral presentation, public speaking, public speaking anxiety, foreign language anxiety, tertiary EFL, presentation format

1. Introduction

1.1 Oral presentation and second language learning

Oral presentations are standard practice in tertiary-level English as a Foreign Language (EFL) and English-medium content courses. Their widespread use, both as an instructional tool and as a form of assessment, reflects the practical value of this activity beyond the classroom, particularly in academic and professional contexts. In addition to general educational benefits – such as learner-centeredness, deeper engagement with

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course material, development of communication skills, and increased classroom interaction (Girard *et al.*, 2011; King, 2002) – oral presentations in the context of instructed second language (L2/FL) learning are also assumed to offer pedagogical benefits for language development.

In the language-pedagogical literature, oral presentations are discussed as *communicative learning activities* (Brooks & Wilson, 2014) that “bridge the gap between language learning and language use” (King, 2002, p. 402). As such, they are considered highly effective in enhancing L2 learners’ speaking abilities and communicative competence (Veng & Loeung, 2024; Brooks & Wilson, 2014). Because they are *student-led activities* (King, 2002), they provide learners with a unique opportunity to speak for an extended period (Koch & Terrell, 1991), thereby enabling them to gain substantial speaking experience and improve their clarity, articulation, fluency, and ability to convey complex ideas effectively.

Another benefit of using oral presentations in the L2 classroom highlighted in the literature is the opportunity they provide for learners to use the target language (TL) to communicate with fellow students in a natural and meaningful way (Brooks & Wilson, 2014; Girard *et al.*, 2011; Salem, 2019). This represents a welcome addition to the usual teacher – learner interaction pattern in the classroom (Koch & Terrell, 1991). Learners do not merely practise language skills or display forms; rather, they use the L2 purposefully to convey content, “to teach something to their peers” (Brooks & Wilson, 2014, p. 513). Moreover, during Q&A sessions, students can interact meaningfully with one another and engage in genuine exchanges of ideas with little or no teacher intervention.

Finally, another oft-cited advantage of implementing oral presentations in the L2 classroom is that they constitute a task that is ideal from the point of view of skills integration. In preparing for and delivering presentations, students are required to use all four language skills – reading, writing, speaking, and listening – in a naturally integrated way (King, 2002; Živković, 2014). Collecting materials, analysing content, structuring arguments, and presenting topics allows learners to practise language skills in a way that closely resembles real-world experiences (Brooks & Wilson, 2014).

In summary, oral presentations provide learners with intensive and purposeful opportunities to use the TL, promoting L2 skill development and real-world communicative competence.

1.2 The other side of the coin

While oral presentations in the L2 classroom may have clear benefits, a balanced assessment must also consider learners’ affective experiences. As emotional reactions can facilitate or hinder language learning (Arnold, 2011; Dewaele, 2015; MacIntyre & Gregersen, 2012; Oatley & Jenkins, 1996; Simons & Smits, 2021; Williams *et al.*, 2015), the question arises: how do oral presentations fare in this respect?

Most language teachers will recognise that not all learners welcome presentation tasks. Some students underperform in front of the class, failing to show their full potential, while others appear uncomfortable or self-conscious, exhibiting clear signs of anxiety –

blushing, holding shaky notes, avoiding eye contact, muttering, losing their train of thought, mispronouncing words, or making mistakes. In short, practising teachers know from experience that oral presentations can be anxiety-provoking for learners.

Classroom experience is clearly substantiated by the literature on L2-related anxiety. Studies in a variety of language learning contexts have found that while listening, reading and writing in a foreign language can all be a source of anxiety, it is speaking that is most typically associated with anxiety (Hilleson, 1996; Kim, 2009; MacIntyre, 2017; Price, 1991; Young, 1990). In the language classroom, anxiety about speaking can manifest itself in learners finding it difficult to speak up and volunteer answers, in short, in reticence. Because of the discomfort created by anxiety, those who are affected typically avoid or minimise speaking; consequently, anxious learners communicate less in their foreign language classes or feel uncomfortable when doing so (Ely, 1986; Ewald, 2007; Horwitz *et al.*, 1986; Liu, 2005; Liu & Jackson, 2008; Tóth, 2011).

Research surveying students' comfort levels with various classroom activities has also shown that speaking-oriented tasks receive higher anxiety ratings from learners than any other in-class activity (Koch & Terrell, 1991). It has been revealed that even within speaking-focused activities, learners report differing levels of anxiety depending on classroom organisation. Although there are students who experience anxiety even during pair-work (Tóth, 2011), most learners typically feel more comfortable when speaking in pairs or small groups. However, large-group or whole-class activities are generally perceived as producing more tension and discomfort (Hamouda, 2013; Koch & Terrell, 1991; Young, 1990). Consequently, oral presentations – typically requiring one student to speak in front of the entire class – are often particularly stressful relative to other speaking tasks (Hamouda, 2013; King, 2002; Koch & Terrell, 1991; Liu, 2006; Young, 1990, 1994).

In sum, even though oral presentations in the L2 classroom might be an ideal task from the point of view of maximising communicative opportunities with the target language, they might be less ideal from the point of view of learners' affective needs. Research has long recognised that the less anxious and more relaxed learners are, the more efficiently they can take in, process and produce the L2 (Horwitz, 2017; Horwitz *et al.*, 1986; Krashen, 1982; MacIntyre, 1999, 2017). Therefore, FL teachers – advised to “*make the learning context less stressful*” (Horwitz, 2017; Horwitz *et al.*, 1986) and “*create a low-anxiety classroom atmosphere*” (Young, 1991, 1999) – may reasonably wonder whether asking students to give oral presentations in front of the class is really a good way to improve speaking and oral communication skills.

1.3 What anxiety and why it matters?

While learners with anxiety can avoid or minimise speaking during whole-class discussions and pair or small-group activities, they cannot employ this subconscious strategy when required to give classroom presentations. The lack of choice, combined with the complexity and demands of oral presentations, can precipitate anxiety arising from multiple sources.

First, it is common knowledge that delivering a speech before an audience is a situation that most individuals find anxiety-provoking even in their native language (L1) (Dewaele & Furnham, 2026; McCrosky, 1984). Survey data also consistently rank public speaking among people's top fears (Dwyer & Davidson, 2012). Given that oral presentations are a special form of public speaking in the context of L2 learning, learners may experience *anxiety arising from speaking to an audience*, referred to as public speaking anxiety (PSA) – defined as the anxiety associated with anticipating or presenting a speech (Daly *et al.*, 2009).

Second, if making a speech can feel like a daunting experience in one's L1, it is logical to posit that presenting in an L2 is likely to feel even more so. This is because in addition to PSA, the L2 speaker may also experience *anxiety related to speaking in a foreign language*. The anxiety specific to language learning – termed foreign language anxiety (FLA) (Horwitz *et al.*, 1986) – has been described as “*the feeling of tension and apprehension specifically associated with second language contexts*” (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1994a, p. 284) and explained by the unique experience of using a language other than one's mother tongue (Gardner, 1985; Horwitz *et al.*, 1986). However, FLA is not simply a matter of linguistic difficulties resulting from an incomplete command of the L2, but rather of learners' difficulties in presenting themselves authentically in the new language, which can be explained by the intimate relationship between language and self-expression, and between language and identity (Horwitz *et al.*, 1986; Horwitz, 2000, 2017).

Third, the classroom environment itself can contribute to anxiety about oral presentations. Because of the public and evaluative nature of the language classroom, in addition to PSA and FLA, learners may also experience two additional performance anxieties: *test anxiety* (Sarason, 1978) and *fear of negative evaluation* (Watson & Friend, 1969). Test anxiety may arise when learners receive grades for their presentations, as they may worry about the teacher's evaluation and the consequences of inadequate performance. Even when presentations are not graded, students may still feel evaluated and fear negative evaluation in a broader sense. Sensitive to peers' evaluations and opinions, they may be afraid of being negatively evaluated as a person and comparing negatively with classmates (Luo, 2012).

In sum, oral presentations in the L2 classroom can provoke anxieties of different kinds, including public speaking anxiety, foreign language anxiety, test anxiety and fear of negative evaluation. The next question is how these negative emotions influence L2 presentation performance.

Whatever the source, the moment-to-moment experience of anxiety, called *state anxiety* (Spielberger, 1983), is bound to affect the presenter's delivery and confidence, impede their language performance, and impact the overall effectiveness of the presentation. The reason for this, as proposed by cognitive psychologists, is that anxiety interferes with attentional and cognitive processes through what is called *cognitive interference* or a *divided attention scenario* (Eysenck, 1979, 1992; Sarason, 1986, 1991). Manifesting itself in the form of task-irrelevant, self-related cognitions (e.g., worry about how one is doing and how one is seen by others, or feelings of inadequacy or self-blame)

anxiety prevents learners from directing full attention to the task at hand, consuming their processing resources and some of the limited capacity of working memory (Eysenck, 1979, 1992; Sarason, 1986; Schwarzer, 1986).

Anxiety's negative effects on attentional and cognitive processes can be particularly detrimental in the context of L2 learning in general (MacIntyre, 1995, 1999; MacIntyre & Gardner, 1994a, b), and oral presentations in particular, as unlike speech production in the L1, speech production in the L2 is not fully automatic, therefore it requires conscious attention on the part of the speaker (Kormos, 2006; Levelt, 1995; Temple, 1997). The resulting performance deficits – like forgetting or mispronouncing words, making mistakes, getting confused or stuck – contribute to further anxiety in a recursive or cyclical manner (Levitt, 1980; MacIntyre, 1995), affecting both the effectiveness of the presentation and the presenter's emotional state of mind.

Given the multiple sources and potential consequences of anxiety during oral presentations, identifying classroom practices that may help alleviate learners' anxiety becomes an important pedagogical concern.

2. Background and Aims

Against this backdrop, examining oral presentations from the perspective of learner anxiety is of particular importance from a language-pedagogical perspective. Although anxiety has been one of the most well-researched psychological variables in L2 learning, examined across diverse settings and language situations (Dörnyei & Ryan, 2015; Gkonou *et al.*, 2017), most studies have examined either speaking anxiety in general or the anxiety-inducing potential of different activities relative to one another. Research focusing explicitly on oral presentations, however, remains relatively scant (Almagsodi, 2025; Kelsen, 2019; Tsang, 2020, 2022).

Previous studies on anxiety related to oral presentations in the L2 classroom have most typically examined *learner-internal* variables as potential predictors of L2 presentation anxiety. These include learners' self-perceptions of pronunciation competence (Coskun, 2017; Tsang, 2022), self-perceptions of delivery skills (Tsang, 2020), personality traits (Kelsen, 2019), motivation (Wu, 2024), and speaking proficiency (Coskun, 2017). This line of research has contributed to a better understanding of which learner characteristics might influence propensity for presentation anxiety.

By contrast, the present study examines a learner-external variable under teacher control: presentation format. Specifically, it investigates whether different presentation formats – such as *individual presentation*, *pair presentation*, or *allowing students to choose the format* – affect learners' anxiety levels. The ultimate aim is to determine if any of the investigated formats is more favourable from the perspective of learner anxiety.

The investigation is part of a series of classroom-based studies in a Hungarian tertiary EFL setting, where oral presentations are widely used both as a speech task and as a form of assessment. The overarching aim of this research project has been to explore students' emotional experiences of oral presentations in regular EFL classes, with each

study focusing on a different aspect. The first study examined the sources and manifestations of anxiety through learners' retrospections after a traditional in-class oral presentation (Tóth, 2019). The second study explored students' perceptions of and attitudes to pair presentations, based on post-task reflections on preparing for and delivering a speech with a partner (Tóth, 2021). Finally, the third study investigated learners' emotional experiences at the pre-presentation stage, studying affective responses longitudinally at three key junctures: upon receiving the presentation task, after deciding whether to present individually or with a partner, and in the run-up to the talk (Tóth, 2024b).

Besides their differing foci, these studies also varied in presentation format. In the first study, students were assigned to present individually in the traditional format; in the second, they presented in pairs; while in the third, they could choose to present on their own or with a partner. In all conditions, participants self-rated their anxiety levels.

The present study focuses on a previously unexamined aspect of this line of research by providing a comparative analysis of the scope and severity of self-reported anxiety across the individual, pair, and self-selected conditions. By integrating comparable classroom data within a unified analytical framework, the study examines whether presentation format plays a role in the amount of anxiety tertiary EFL learners experience during in-class oral presentations and, if so, how.

The study addresses the following research questions:

- 1) Do learners report different levels of anxiety across individual, pair, and self-selected presentation formats?
- 2) Which presentation format is most favourable with regard to learner anxiety?

3. Method

3.1 Participants and setting

Data for each condition were collected at the English Department of the same Hungarian university. To make the results comparable across the targeted presentation formats, the participants were purposefully selected. All 105 participants were in the second year of their *English Studies BA* programme, enrolled in fourth-semester Language Development classes. Table 1 provides further demographic information about the participants. As shown, participants were of typical university age. Their gender distribution reflected the typical gender ratio of students enrolled in English Studies programmes in Hungary, with females outnumbering males. Proficiency levels ranged between B2⁺ and C1, as evidenced by participants' successful completion of the first-year Complex Language Exam, which assessed candidates' written and spoken proficiency at the B2⁺-C1 level, according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). Apart from two international students in Study 3, all participants were Hungarian.

Table 1: Demographic information about the participants

	Presentation format	N (105)	Female/male ratio	Intact groups	Age	Years of English	Proficiency level
Study 1	individual	39	31:8	3	20-24	11.2	B2 ⁺ -C1
Study 2	pair	33	26:7	2	20-24	11.8	B2 ⁺ -C1
Study 3	self-selected	33	25:8	2	19-24	11.6	B2 ⁺ -C1

3.2 Procedure

As part of the course requirements, all participants had to deliver one oral presentation during the semester. The presentation had to be related to one of the two prescribed topics of the fourth-semester Language Development course: *Arts & Entertainment* or *Health & Lifestyles*. Students were free to choose between the two topics and decide which aspect of the selected topic to explore in their presentation.

Participants in Study 1 were assigned to give a traditional individual presentation; those in Study 2 to present in pairs, whilst participants in Study 3 were given the option of presenting individually or in pairs. Individual presentations were required to last 5-10 minutes, while pair presentations lasted 10-20 minutes. In both cases, they were followed by a 5-minute Q&A session. Pair presenters were free to choose their presentation partner. To encourage peer collaboration, they were instructed to work together on the presentation, sharing all the tasks involved, such as choosing the topic, collecting materials, structuring the talk, designing slides, and deciding who would cover which parts. Participants were advised, but not required, to use visual support. With few exceptions, most participants used PowerPoint or Prezi slides.

Immediately after the presentation, participants completed a single-item self-report measure of state anxiety, indicating on a ten-point scale how anxious they were during the presentation (1 = *not at all / totally calm*; 10 = *very anxious*).

The study adhered to the ethical guidelines of the British Association for Applied Linguistics (BAAL). Participants were informed about the purpose of the research, participation was voluntary, and all responses were treated confidentially and analysed anonymously.

To assess self-reported anxiety under the three conditions (individual, pair, self-selected), descriptive statistics and frequency distributions were used. To compare anxiety levels across the individual, pair, and choice conditions, a one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was conducted, with presentation format as the independent variable and anxiety level as the dependent variable.

4. Results

4.1 The scope and severity of anxiety in the individual, pair, and self-selected conditions

First, participants' self-assessments of anxiety during the presentation were examined across the three conditions. Table 2 presents descriptive statistics for anxiety scores across the individual, pair, and self-selected format conditions.

Table 2: Descriptive statistics for self-rated anxiety across presentation formats

Presentation format	Mean anxiety	SD	Actual range (possible range)
Individual	6.51	2.28	2-10 (1-10)
Pair	6.81	2.78	1-10 (1-10)
Self-selected	6.33	1.74	2-9 (1-10)

As shown, anxiety scores covered a wide range across all three conditions. Mean anxiety levels were highest in the pair condition, followed by the individual condition, while the lowest mean score was observed in the self-selected format. Variability in anxiety scores also differed across conditions, with the pair format showing the greatest dispersion and the self-selected format the lowest variability.

To examine the distribution of anxiety scores in greater detail, Figure 1 presents the percentage distribution of students' self-reported anxiety on the 10-point scale across the three presentation conditions. Across all conditions, the distributions were skewed toward the higher end of the scale, with relatively few responses in the low-anxiety range (scores 1-4). This pattern indicates that the majority of participants across all three conditions reported anxiety levels above the midpoint of the scale, with many students selecting scores of 7 or above. Specifically, in the individual presentation condition, 56.4% of students rated their anxiety 7 or above, while the corresponding proportion was 63.7% for students presenting in pairs. When students were allowed to choose whether to present individually or with a partner, the proportion was somewhat lower, at 51.6%.

A comparison of students selecting the highest values of the scale (scores 8-10), indicative of high anxiety, revealed a noticeable reduction in the self-selected format condition (see Figure 1). When students were given the opportunity to choose the presentation format, no participant selected the maximum score of 10, and the proportion of students scoring 9 was considerably lower than in the other two conditions. Specifically, only 9.1% of students in the self-selected format reported an anxiety level of 9, compared with 20.5% of those presenting individually and 24.2% of those presenting in pairs.

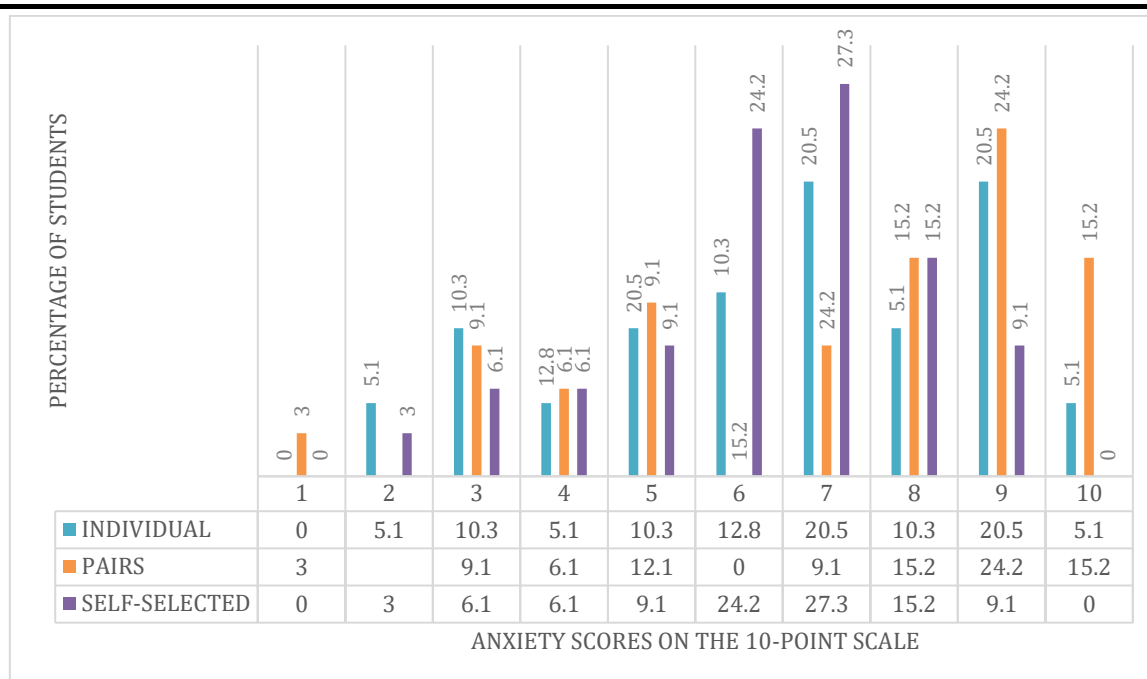


Figure 1: Distribution of self-reported anxiety across presentation formats

To provide a more structured overview of anxiety levels, scores on the 10-point scale were grouped into three categories: low (1-4), moderate (5-7), and high (8-10). Figure 2 presents the percentage of learners experiencing low, moderate, and high levels of anxiety across the three conditions.

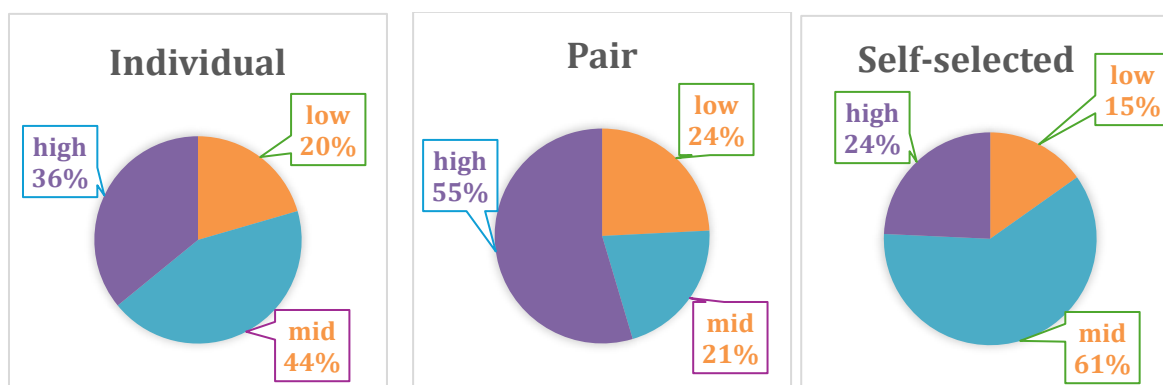


Figure 2: Distribution of participants by self-reported anxiety level during individual, pair, and self-selected presentation formats

As shown, when learners were allowed to decide whether to present individually or with a partner, the proportion of students reporting high anxiety was lower than in the other two conditions. Specifically, the proportion of students experiencing high anxiety was 12 percentage points lower than in the individual condition (24% vs. 36%) and 31 percentage points lower than in the pair presentation condition (24% vs. 55%).

4.2 Comparison of anxiety levels across the three presentation formats

Although descriptive statistics suggested some differences in mean anxiety levels across conditions (Individual: $M = 6.51$, $SD = 2.28$; Pair: $M = 6.81$, $SD = 2.78$; Self-selected: $M = 6.33$, $SD = 1.74$), inferential analysis was conducted to determine whether these differences were statistically significant. A one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was performed to compare anxiety scores across the three presentation formats. The analysis revealed no statistically significant differences in mean anxiety scores across the conditions, $F(2, 102) = 0.37$, $p = .690$, $\eta^2 = .007$. Levene's test indicated a violation of the assumption of homogeneity of variances, $F = 6.17$, $p = .003$; however, the ANOVA results remained non-significant.

These results indicate that, despite the descriptive differences observed across the three formats (with anxiety highest in the pair condition and lowest in the self-selected condition), learners' self-reported anxiety levels did not differ significantly as a function of presentation format.

5. Discussion

With regard to the scope and severity of anxiety during in-class presentations in tertiary-level EFL classes, the first important finding of the study is that English Studies students ($N = 105$) reported generally high anxiety levels across all three presentation conditions, regardless of whether they presented individually, in pairs, or in a self-selected format. On a 10-point scale with a midpoint of 5, the mean anxiety scores in all conditions (6.33-6.81) were clearly above the scale midpoint. Moreover, the distributions were skewed toward the higher end of the scale, and a substantial proportion of participants reported high anxiety (scores of 8-10) in each condition. Specifically, more than a third of the students presenting individually (36%), more than half of those presenting in pairs (55%), and nearly a quarter of those in the self-selected format condition (24%) experienced high anxiety when giving their presentations. Taken together, these findings suggest that elevated anxiety was not confined to a small subgroup of particularly apprehensive learners but characterised a substantial proportion of participants in all three conditions. The absence of statistically significant differences in mean anxiety levels may further suggest that oral presentations in the context of instructed foreign language learning constitute a broadly anxiety-provoking task, regardless of presentation format.

Given the participants' relatively high level of English proficiency (B2⁺-C1), these results indicate that anxiety about speaking the L2 in public remains an issue even for advanced learners, including the English Studies students in this study – many of whom are training to become English teachers or other EFL professionals. This finding aligns with previous research suggesting that anxiety related to speaking is not confined to lower proficiency levels but can persist at more advanced stages of language development and may also affect otherwise successful language learners (Ewald, 2007; Horwitz, 1996, 2000; Tóth, 2011, 2017).

The persistence of presentation anxiety even among advanced learners may be explained, at least in part, by the complexity and nature of the task itself. Speaking in a foreign language in front of peers requires simultaneous attention to content organisation, language formulation, linguistic accuracy, pronunciation, audience monitoring, timing, and the use of visual aids; in short, it is a cognitively demanding task. Moreover, when presentations are formally assessed, the evaluative framing may heighten stress levels. In this way, oral presentations in the L2 classroom combine linguistic vulnerability (operating in a non-native language), identity vulnerability (as learners publicly display competence, intelligence, and academic identity through the L2), public performance pressure (observable to peers and the teacher), and evaluative consequences (grading stakes and social comparison). Together, these features may help explain why oral presentations constitute a particularly potent anxiety trigger. While higher proficiency may reduce linguistic breakdowns, it does not necessarily eliminate identity threat, social evaluation, or performance pressure. Although advanced learners may be relatively proficient, they may feel greater pressure to perform well, and their expectations of themselves as L2 speakers are often higher (Ewald, 2007; Marcos-Llinas & Garau, 2009; Tóth, 2017, 2019). Such heightened self-expectations may sustain or even intensify self-evaluative concerns, particularly in high-visibility performance contexts such as oral presentations.

With regard to the effect of presentation format, the one-way ANOVA revealed no statistically significant differences in mean anxiety levels across the individual, pair, and self-selected conditions. This suggests that presentation format, in itself, did not substantially influence overall anxiety levels, indicating that oral presentations are a broadly anxiety-provoking task regardless of how they are organised.

At the same time, the distributional pattern warrants closer consideration. Although mean differences were non-significant, the proportion of students reporting very high anxiety (scores of 8-10) varied noticeably across conditions, being lowest in the self-selected format (24%), higher in the individual condition (36%), and highest in the pair condition (55%). While these descriptive differences should be interpreted cautiously, they may indicate that, although presentation format alone does not consistently differentiate anxiety levels, allowing learners to select their preferred format can reduce the proportion of students experiencing very high anxiety. One possible explanation is that having a choice may increase perceived control, which can function as an anxiety-reducing factor. Furthermore, learners can align the task with their comfort zone; that is, they can select the format that matches their confidence, proficiency, or personality.

This interpretation is supported by the pre-presentation reflections of students in the self-selected format condition, which indicate that participants consistently welcomed the opportunity to choose the presentation format (Tóth, 2024b). Respondents' comments further suggest that when the presentation format is self-selected rather than imposed, students are able to choose the option that best suits their working style, time management preferences, self-confidence, and anxiety level. In this context, the paired

format was frequently identified as an ideal option for students who tend to become self-conscious and feel apprehensive about speaking before an audience.

Interestingly, however, the distribution of highly anxious students across conditions reveals a more complex picture. In particular, the highest proportion of highly anxious students (55%) was observed in the pair condition rather than in the individual condition (36%), a finding that appears counterintuitive. From a theoretical perspective, one might expect that presenting in pairs would reduce anxiety, as the workload and responsibility are shared and partners can provide emotional support during both preparation and delivery. However, the opposite result indicates that presenting with a partner did not automatically result in lower anxiety for all participants. Assigning the pair format on a compulsory basis produced the highest percentage of highly anxious students. This finding may suggest that, rather than functioning as a protective factor, pair presentations – when imposed – may introduce additional interpersonal or performance-related pressures.

One possible explanation for this pattern emerges from participants' post-presentation reflections in the pair condition (Tóth, 2021). These reflections revealed that doing a presentation with a partner elicited different emotional responses among learners rather than affecting them uniformly. While it helped many participants feel more comfortable, as sharing the stage with another student made them feel less exposed and less in the spotlight, it did not help others, for whom the presence of a partner was insufficient to alleviate anxiety when it was their turn to speak. Moreover, a third category of students found working with a partner not less but more anxiety-provoking. Their concerns included differences in work style and work ethic, coordination problems, uneven workload, and differences in proficiency. Some also worried that a partner might diminish the quality of the joint performance or, conversely, that they themselves might be the weaker partner and let the other student down.

Furthermore, the post-presentation reflections indicate that, rather than collaborating throughout the preparation process as instructed, most pairs worked individually on different parts of the talk, as if preparing for a traditional individual presentation. Citing reasons such as lack of time, individual differences, and practical difficulties, most pairs did not even rehearse their talk together once. Consequently, rather than benefiting from having a partner and the advantages of true collaboration (such as joint preparation, rehearsal, and mutual feedback) – which could have made them more confident in both content and delivery and thereby less vulnerable to anxiety – worries about the partner's contribution and performance may have increased rather than decreased anxiety.

6. Conclusion

This study examined English Studies students' anxiety levels in response to a relatively neglected yet widely used and pedagogically important task type in tertiary-level EFL education: the oral presentation. It aimed to determine whether different presentation

formats (individual, pair, or self-selected) affect students' anxiety levels during in-class presentations, and whether any format is more favourable with regard to learner anxiety. While previous research has suggested that oral presentations are among the most anxiety-provoking activities in L2 classrooms, relatively few studies have assessed the scope and severity of presentation-related anxiety in specific contexts, and none, to my knowledge, across different presentation formats.

The finding that participants reported generally high anxiety levels in all three conditions, and that anxiety was not confined to a subgroup of particularly apprehensive students but affected a considerable proportion, suggests that the presence of anxiety-free presenters cannot be assumed even in advanced tertiary-level classes. Oral presentations in the L2 classroom are high-visibility performance events that position the learner as the sole speaker for an extended period, operating in a non-native language and often under evaluative pressure. The combination of these factors can make even relatively proficient L2 learners vulnerable to anxiety.

Therefore, instructors in tertiary-level L2 settings, including both language and content teachers, need to remain attentive to the emotional demands of oral presentations and address them in pedagogically sensitive ways. Greater reliance on formative assessment (feedback that supports learning and improvement), rather than primarily on summative evaluation (grades), may help mitigate anxiety when evaluating learners' performance. Providing opportunities for learners to discuss their feelings about oral presentations can also be beneficial, helping them realise they are not alone and making them more sympathetic and supportive toward each other. Discussing strategies for preparation, delivery, and anxiety management is likewise recommended, as these can enhance learners' confidence and performance (for further ideas, see Tóth, 2024a).

The finding that there were no statistically significant differences in overall anxiety across the three presentation conditions suggests that presentation format alone did not meaningfully influence learners' self-reported anxiety. However, the proportion of learners experiencing high anxiety was lowest in the self-selected format condition, indicating that allowing students to choose their preferred format is the best option from a pedagogical point of view. While presentation format alone cannot eliminate anxiety, offering learners choice appears to reduce its extreme manifestations.

Therefore, rather than assigning a specific presentation format on a compulsory basis, instructors may wish to consider flexible formats that incorporate learner choice. This is particularly relevant because the collaborative pair format, theoretically ideal for reducing anxiety, did not automatically function as a protective factor when it was assigned rather than self-selected. Preparing and delivering a presentation with a partner did not suit all learners and, in fact, introduced additional sources of anxiety, producing the highest proportion of highly anxious students.

As this study focused on a single learner-external variable – presentation format – as a potential predictor of anxiety about oral presentations in the L2 classroom, future research could examine additional contributing factors, such as prior experience, classroom climate, learners' familiarity with each other, assigned vs. self-chosen topics,

self-perceived vs. actual proficiency, and other learner characteristics. Furthermore, as the present study was conducted in a single instructional setting with a relatively homogeneous learner sample, future studies should explore the extent to which these findings generalise to different contexts and instructional levels.

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Conflict of Interest Statement

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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