



## Exploring factors affecting students' oral presentation skills in Tanzania higher education: The case of the Tanzania Institute of Accountancy

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### ABSTRACT

Oral presentation skills are among critical competencies in higher education and in the labour market. Despite the importance of these skills, students in many higher education institutions struggle with effective oral presentations. Social cognitive theory anchored this study. This study used a qualitative approach to explore factors that affect students' oral presentation skills at the Tanzania Institute of Accountancy (TIA). The Institute has a total of 11,365 undergraduate students. The study used an interpretivist paradigm and a case study design to achieve the research objective. In-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 23 undergraduate students who were selected purposively. Data were analysed using thematic analysis. The findings revealed five major themes that influence students' oral presentation skills. They include English language proficiency; psychological barriers, including anxiety and low self-confidence; pedagogical and assessment methods; limited exposure to structural presentation; as well as environmental and peer-related factors. The study highlights how important the interplay between linguistic competence, emotional readiness, and institutional support is. The findings inform curricular reform, pedagogical redesign, and institutional interventions aimed at strengthening communication competency of students in Tanzanian higher education.

**Keywords:** Communication Anxiety, English Proficiency, Higher Education, Oral Presentation Skills, Qualitative Research, Tanzania

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### I. INTRODUCTION

Globally, higher learning institutions have been striving to ensure that students perform beyond grades in their certificates. Ability to do oral presentation has been a major concern from multiple stakeholders. Students who are capable of doing their presentations effectively have been considered employable and admired in the business sector and the wider society at large. However, the literature shows that students have been facing challenges to deliver presentations in structured environments (Mwita et al., 2023).

It has been established that challenges that students face and affect their ability to present are contextual and individual. One of the issues that have been reported in the literature more often is presentation anxiety of communication apprehension. This problem tends to reduce their level of confidence and their ability to delivery presentation. Many students tend to experience fear of public speaking especially when a second language is used for presentation which may lead to avoidance behaviors, and reduced participation (McCroskey, 1977; Horwitz et al., 1986). This is a psychological barrier that is often related to limited exposure to structured presentation opportunities withing the curriculum (De Grez et al., 2009).

Additionally, inadequate support especially from learning institutions has been identified as another reason to the problem. In some cases, teaching approaches that are used tend to engage more theoretical than practical aspect of learning. This affect students as they fail to become capable of handling structured presentation audiences (Van Ginkel et al., 2019). An aspect of feedback is also a contributing factor when instructors do not take time to provide constructive feedback to students. This gap shows that there is a need for deliberate instructional strategies that link oral communication training in curricular used in higher education (Hattie & Timperley, 2007).

Technological and environmental factors is another reason for students' abilities to do structured presentations. Limited access to presentation tools, insufficient knowledge of digital platforms and even learning in overcrowded classrooms can lead failure of students to do well in their presentations. Moreover, peer pressure and other related dynamics such as fear of negative evaluation or being in less supportive classroom environments may discourage students from participating actively in presentation activities (Topping, 1998).

It should also be noted that individual differences like personality traits, prior education background and exposure to English language can affect the ability of students to do presentations. Students who come from high schools whose interactions do not involve the use of English more often may face greater challenges in expressing themselves



and their ideas fluently. This tends to affect students' overall confidence and performance (Cummins, 2000; Crystal, 2003).

Given these multiple challenges, it is important for higher education institutions to use holistic approaches that addresses issues that are related to language use. While there is a need to come up with best ways to deal with these challenges, it is also important to understand students' lived experiences to help understand relevant insights that can be used to design appropriate interventions to foster communication competence and overall academic success.

### **1.1 Statement of the Problem**

Oral presentation skills form one of fundamental components of academic success and professional competence in higher education. Students who have sufficient oral communication skills have higher chance of having better academic performance and increase the chances of them being employable (Van Ginkel et al., 2019). As the result, higher education institutions increasingly emphasize communication skills as important graduate attributes. Further, oral presentation skills are considered as predictors for success in leadership, teamwork and professional engagement (Grieve et al., 2021). In institutions that are business oriented such as Tanzania Institute of Accountancy (TIA), students are expected to be able to articulate ideas clearly, defend their arguments and present different analyses with confidence.

While oral presentations are considered key in different aspects, observations and academic discourse suggest that many students in Tanzanian higher education struggle with oral presentations. Having poor or unsatisfactory presentation skills poses a great challenge in learning and in careers of the students (Andrews & Higson, 2008). The labour market demands people who possess sufficient communication skills including presentation skills (Jackson, 2015). The literature informs that failure to master effective presentation skills is attributed to by language barrier as so many students are not fluent in speaking English which is the medium of instruction in higher education (Waluyo & Rofiah, 2021). Presence of quantitative studies that examined communication competence among higher education students broadly, however, qualitative exploration of students' lived experiences with specific focus on oral presentation is limited. In order to understand these experiences and challenges, a contextually appropriate pedagogical interventions are important. This study therefore explores factors affecting students' oral presentations using Tanzania Institute of Accountancy as a case study.

### **1.2 Research Objective**

The study aimed at exploring the factors affecting students' oral presentation skills in Tanzania higher education

## **II. LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **2.1 Theoretical Review**

#### **2.1.1 Social Cognitive Theory**

Social cognitive theory was initially proposed and developed by Albert Bandura. The theory explains that human behavior is the result of the dynamic interaction between personal, environmental and behavior patterns. At the center of the theory there is a concept of self-efficacy which refers the belief that an individual has with regard to his ability to perform certain tasks successfully (Bandura, 1986). With regard to this study's context, students with high self-efficacy are more likely to demonstrate confidence, engage in presentations actively, as well as persist in despite challenges such as anxiety of public speaking. The theory also emphasizes the role of observational learning, where individuals acquire skills by observing others as well as the role of feedback in shaping behavior (Schunk & DiBenedetto, 2020). In higher learning institutions, factors like classroom environment, instructor's support, peer interaction and opportunities for practice influence students' confidence and competence in oral presentations. This proves that social cognitive theory is useful in understanding how individual beliefs and environmental conditions jointly affect ability of students to do oral presentations effectively.

### **2.2 Empirical Review**

Oral presentation skills refer to the ability a person has to effectively communicate information verbally to an audience by using structured content, clear articulation, appropriate non-verbal cues and audience engagement strategies. For a person to effectively present he/she is required to integrate cognitive, linguistic and interpersonal competencies (Ireland, 2016). In higher education, oral presentations serve multiple pedagogical purposes. Some have been explained below. Instructors in higher education use oral presentation to assess the level of understanding of students in higher education (Grieve et al., 2021). This entails that insufficient oral presentation skills may show that students do not have actual level of understanding of what they present. While there are others ways of assessing students' understanding, oral presentation is considered more evident as students are assessed in real time. In the world full of technology where students use artificial intelligence particularly generative artificial intelligence, this has made oral presentation one of



important and relevant skills to assess among student in higher education (Dewaele et al., 2019). Oral presentation is key to development of critical thinking, during presentations students are trained to make arguments and respond to issues. It is key to improve cognitive abilities of students. Generally, people who have better presentations skills they tend to better critical thinkers as well. Universities are increasingly integrating oral presentation as one of critical aspects curricular development and implementations (van Ginkel et al., 2019). Students have different levels of confidence especially when it comes to standing in front of people and present. Some have in-born traits that make them more confident than others. Regardless of levels of confidence that people have, developing presentation skills though learning and practices is key to help them more confident (Waluyo & Rofiah, 2021). As a result, higher learning institutions enhance confidence through oral presentation which is key to effective communication (Jackson, 2015). The world of work in increasingly changing so it demands. One of the most demanding workplace skills are oral presentations skills (Succi & Canovi, 2020).

During interviews, employers are keen to assess whether job candidates possess sufficient oral presentation skills. Moreover, employees with sufficient presentation skills are more like to be successful in their careers (Husin & Khasim, 2025). In countries like Tanzania where English is used as medium of instructions, students whose proficiency is considerably high tend to be better in making oral presentations. Students with limited vocabulary, challenges in pronunciation and uncertainties in grammar tend to be less fluent and less confident (Dewaele et al., 2019). Empirical research in sub-Saharan Africa shows that language proficiency is strongly associated with participation and effectiveness in oral presentation. Public speaking anxiety is known as one of the factors causing academic fears (Grieve et al., 2021). Students or people with anxiety can experience trembling voice, memory lapse, avoidable behavior and reduced eye contact. Self-efficacy theory postulates that students who believe they have better communication abilities tend to perform better due to their increased effort and persistence. Teaching methods used in by lecturers and instructors in higher education is capable of affecting competence development. Lecturers that use dominating pedagogies that limit students' engagements instead of using interactive approaches limit students' oral presentation skills (Prince, 2004). Feedback quality and assessment designs play a significant role in determining how seriously students approach presentations (Hattie & Timperley, 2007). Although several studies have quantitatively examined communication competence, there is limited qualitative exploration in the Tanzanian higher education context focusing specifically on oral presentation skills and students' lived experiences. This study addresses that gap.

### III. METHODOLOGY

This study adopted interpretivist paradigm since the study aimed at assessing students' experiences of oral presentation challenges which are generally socially constructed and contextually embedded. The study used a qualitative case study design focusing on one institution which is the Tanzania Institute of Accountancy. The approach enabled in-depth exploration of factors that affect presentation skills. The choice of TIA is based on the fact that it is a public higher education institution that offer business related courses where presentation tasks form part of coursework assessment across different programs. The target population for this study included undergraduate degree programme who were 11,365 in total. A total of 23 undergraduate students were selected purposively across different academic programs and years of study. Participants were chosen based on their experience with oral presentation assignments. Data saturation principle was used to determine the sample size. Saturation principle requires a researcher to keep on collecting data from one participant to another until no more relevant information is collected due to repetition. In this case data saturation was reached at the 23<sup>rd</sup> respondent where no new themes emerged.

Data collection was done through semi-structured in-depth interviews which lasted between 30 and 45 minutes. The interviews focused on assessing students' experiences with presentations, perceived challenges in making presentations, emotional responses, institutional support and suggestions for improvement. Data analysis was done using seven step frameworks originally presented by Bran and Clarke and improved by Mwita and Mwilongo (2025). The study adhered to all ethical consideration including obtaining ethical clearance and providing informed consent to participants and anonymity was maintained using pseudonyms.

### IV. FINDINGS & DISCUSSION

#### 4.1 English Language Proficiency as a Structural Barrier

Level of English language proficiency was found to be one of foundational structural containing that affect students' oral presentation performance. It was found that students had relatively sufficient content knowledge, however, many were found to struggle with linguistic expression during delivery. One participant commented that,

*“sometimes I know and understand the content, but I struggle to express myself in English”* (13<sup>th</sup> January, 2026).



This statement shows the difference that the students experience between comprehension and articulation of language. Participants cited a number of issues that affect them during presentation that are related to English language proficiency. These issues include fear of making grammatical errors, limited vocabulary and difficulties in pronouncing some words. These challenges reduce students' ability to make presentations and increased reliance on written notes and lecture slides. One of the participants explained that,

*"when I want to talk, I think in Kiswahili, then I try to translate in English while speaking"* (13<sup>th</sup> January, 2026).

Mental translation that participants undergo seems to be the results of disrupted proficiency which results in hesitation and fragmented delivery. These findings show that challenges that students face in oral presentations are not just individual deficits but are related to the issue of language translation from Kiswahili language which is used in lower education level in in data to day students' conversations to English language which is the medium of instruction in higher education. This challenge adds another cognitive demand on students during high pressure presentation situations. As the result, limited English proficiency not only affect clarity but also negatively affect confidence and increases anxiety to students.

#### 4.2 Presentation Anxiety and Fear of Negative Evaluation

The participants reported presentation anxiety. Nearly all participants mentioned anxiety as one of the challenges that affect oral presentation performance. during interviews students identified a number of psychological and cognitive systems including shaking, rapid speech, trembling voice and forgetting key points. One of the participants stated that,

*"When I stand in front of the class, my points disappear".* (12<sup>th</sup> January, 2026).

This description shows how anxiety interferes with cognitive processing and working memory during presentation. Another issue identified by the participants is fear of negative evaluation by lecturers and fellow students. Several participants insisted that their anxiety increase more from reactions of their classmates than from assessments of their lecturers. One student expressed that,

*"I am not afraid of my lecturer, but I am afraid of classmates judging me when I make mistakes".* (13<sup>th</sup> January, 2026).

Anticipation of ridicule, criticism or embarrassment intensified nervousness before and during presentations. Based on these findings' presentation anxiety is multidimensional which combine pressure, social comparison and concerns for self-perception. Anxiety tends to reduce the ability to organize thoughts coherently and maintain composure. As the result, even students with adequate content knowledge were found to experience diminished performance due to emotional factors.

#### 4.3 Limited Prior Exposure and Practice

Prior experience and exposure to structured oral presentations during early stages of higher education is another theme that emerged. Some of students particularly first year reported that secondary education exposed them to teacher-centered pedagogies which limited them to engage themselves in oral presentations. One participant commented that

*"we were not used to make oral presentation in secondary schools. Teachers were the ones used to present to us."* (14<sup>th</sup> January, 2026).

Another student added,

*"most of the time teachers were talking, our role was just to provide answers."* (15<sup>th</sup> January, 2026).

*It was noted that absence of systematic training in presentation skills pre-university education created a significant gap. It was found that students in higher education have limited experiences in doing oral presentations. As the result, university presentations often did their first formal experience with academic public speaking.* (14<sup>th</sup> January, 2026).

This lack of a strong foundation base was found to affect confidence and technical competence. Participants also reported that they struggle with structuring presentations logically, transiting between points as well as maintaining eye contact. These findings suggest that oral presentation skills cumulatively and support. Generally, this shows early exposure and practice students face multiple challenges at university level.

#### 4.4 Teaching Methods and Feedback Gaps

During data collection participants agreed that oral presentations are frequently used assessment methods, however, many participants indicated that explicit instruction on how to make oral presentations effectively is limited. One participant observed that,

*"lecturers tell us to present but they do not tell us how to improve"*. (13<sup>th</sup> January, 2026)

Another participant stated that,



*“sometimes we get low marks but we are not told what exactly was wrong with our presentations”*. (13<sup>th</sup> January, 2026).

Students involved in the interview, explained presentations were often assigned without adequate demonstrations, or formative feedback. Feedback was seemed to be summative (focusing primarily on grades rather than developing students’ abilities). This made difficult to students to identify specific areas that require improvement such as voice projection, slide design, organization or audience engagement. Based on the above observations, it can be seen that pedagogical gap between assessment expectations and instructional support. It was noted that while oral competence is evaluated by lecturers, structured guidance on developing that competence is not sufficient. Participants expressed the need to have workshops, demonstrations sessions and constructive feedback mechanisms to enhance oral presentation skills.

#### 4.5 Classroom Climate and Peer Dynamics

The participants shared their experiences with regard to classroom environment and peer dynamics. Participants were of the view that these affect their willingness and ability to participate in oral presentations. It was observed that, when students experience support classroom culture their level of confidence increase. On the other hand, mocking behaviors decrease students’ self-assurance. One participant shared that “if my classmates laugh, I lose confidence.” Another student argued that

*“when classmates provide support, I feel strong even when I make mistakes,”* (15<sup>th</sup> January, 2026).

Anxiety and discouragement to participate in oral presentations were found to be affected by negative peer reactions including laughter, whispering and visible disengagement. On the other hand, respectful listening and constructive feedback were identified as factors that foster psychological safety and encouraged risk-taking in communication. These findings show that oral presentation skills are mediated by social constructs. Students’ confidence and performance in oral presentations are shaped not only by students’ individual abilities but also interpersonal climate within classrooms. A positive and supportive learning environment foster participation and skill development. On the other hand, a hostile climate foster anxiety and avoidance behaviors

##### 4.5.1 Synthesis of Findings

Overall, the findings show that students’ oral presentations skills are influence by interconnected structural, psychological, developmental, pedagogical and social factors. English language proficiency limits articulation, anxiety negatively affects students’ cognitive functioning, limited exposure to oral presentations affects foundational confidence, instructional gaps limit skills refinement and classroom climate plays a key role in shaping confidence of students. The interaction of these factors shows that oral presentation competence in Tanzania higher education institutions not solely an individual determinant rather a multidimensional outcome which are shaped by educational systems, institutional practices and social environments. This implies that, if higher education institution manages to address these factors holistically may enhance students’ oral communication and academic performance as well.

#### 4.6 Discussion

The finding that English language proficiency functions as one of structural barriers that align with literature relating to language of instruction challenges in Sub-Saharan Africa. In the context of this study where English is used as the medium of instruction but it is not students’ primary language it is always linked with academic performance. The fact that students have to translate from Kiswahili to English during presentations increase cognitive load. As per the Cognitive Load Theory (1988), students’ working memory is affected by recall of content and language processing simultaneously. This dual demand tends to reduce fluency and spontaneity which make study rely on notes and scripted delivery. These findings suggest that oral presentation performance in Tanzania higher education cannot be fully understood without considering the broader language policy issue and issues pertaining transition from Kiswahili in lower education to English in tertiary education.

Anxiety during presentation that students experience is in line with research on communication apprehension (McCroskey, 1977), which identifies public speaking as one of the factors that induce anxiety in academic tasks. The psychological symptoms which were described by participants such as shaking, rapid speech and memory loss, is are consistent with classical manifestation of performance anxiety which have been highlighted by educational psychological literature (Horwitz et al., 1986). Importantly, the strong emphasis identified by participants on fear judgement support social evaluation theory. As per the theory, anxiety increases when people anticipate negative appraisal by others. The findings suggest that oral presentation anxiety is not something that is related to individual personality only but is also socially constructed within classroom dynamics. This entails that, interventions should target both individual coping mechanisms and collective classroom norms.

The participants reported that one of the reasons for poor or inadequate oral presentations during secondary education supports theories related to skill acquisition and support. As per Vygotsky’s Zone of Proximity Development



(ZPD), skills develop progressively through guided support. The absence of early exposure to oral presentation negatively affects foundation of students which is necessary for higher education. The findings therefore reinforce the notion that presentation competence is progressive, cumulative and therefore require deliberate developmental pathways rather than spontaneous emergence at higher education level. The concerns by participants about limited instructional guidance confirm constructivist theories of learning which emphasize modeling, feedback and active engagement (Biggs & Tang, 2011). When presentations are used primarily as summative assessments without formative feedback, students are denied an opportunity for reflective improvement. The theoretical work by Black and Wiliam (1998) on formative assessment insists the importance of constructive feedback in enhancing learning outcomes. The findings therefore reveal a pedagogical disconnect between expectation and structural support, highlighting the need for structured the need for having structured communication training within curricula. The influence of peer reactions on presentation confidence within classes aligns with social learning theory (Bandura, 1977). The theory, emphasizes that learning occurs within social contexts through observations, modeling and reinforcement. Support by peer within classes enhances participation while laughter, ridicule and mockery discourage engagement of students. The findings therefore reinforce the argument that oral presentations skills are mediated by social constructs rather than purely influenced by competencies of individual students.

## V. CONCLUSION & RECOMMENDATIONS

### 5.1 Conclusion

This study examined factors affecting students' oral presentation skills at the Tanzania Institute of Accountancy. The findings reveal that presentation competence is shaped by interconnected structural, psychological, developmental, pedagogical, and social influences. The study explored factors affecting students' oral presentations skills in Tanzania higher education using Tanzania Institute of Accountancy as a case. It was found that presentation skills are shaped by interconnected structural, psychological, developmental and pedagogical and social contexts.

Limited ability of students to master English Proficiency increased cognitive demands and reduced fluency during presentations. Further, presentation anxiety especially fears of peer evaluation limited students' performance. The study revealed that lack of prior exposure to structured presentations especially during secondary school education created foundational gaps that contributed in insufficiency of presentation skills to students in higher education. Additionally, lack of sufficient instructional guidance and insufficient formative feedback attributed to constrained skill development. Moreover, classroom environment and peer dynamics influenced students' confidence and participation in presentations.

### 5.2 Recommendations

The study recommends the following; Higher education institutions, including TIA should consider to establish special structured support programs to help students learn about speaking and presentations skills. This will help students to gain confidence and have ability to do oral presentations. Providing psychological support to students in higher education can also help them to deal with presentation anxiety and emotional regulation. Supporting students psychologically may help them to reduce fear of peer evaluation and strengthening their self-efficacy in presentations.

The ministry of education should consider promoting early and continuous exposure to structure presentation activities across different levels. Secondary education should incorporate sufficient oral presentations to build foundational competencies. Higher education institutions should strengthen feedback mechanisms so that students receive timely and constructive feedback on their presentation abilities. Having effective feedback systems in place will help students to identify their weaknesses and progressively refine their presentation abilities. Lecturers in higher education should ensure presence of supportive and inclusive learning environment in order to encourage students' participation and interactions. Lecturers should promote respective interactions and discourage negative criticisms. A positive learning environment will motivate students to engage more actively and reduce fear that is related public speaking.

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