

Beyond the Script: A Reflective Case Study of English Public Speaking Anxiety among Third-Year English Majors

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Abstract: Third-year English-major students in practice-oriented public speaking courses often show a distinctive anxiety profile: dependence on scripted delivery, avoidance of audience eye contact, disproportionately poor performance despite lengthy preparation, and near-total loss of content when speaking impromptu. This paper presents a reflective case study of an English Public Speaking Practice course for third-year English majors, in which a group-discussion-plus-representative-speech method was used across a semester. Drawing on foreign language anxiety theory, communication apprehension research, and recent work on English public speaking anxiety among Chinese EFL learners, the paper analyzes why these four symptoms recur together, describes how the group-based method was adapted to target each symptom, and reflects on its perceived effects and limitations. The discussion offers practical implications for practice-oriented public speaking pedagogy and outlines directions for future classroom-based research.

Keywords: English Public Speaking Anxiety; Communication Apprehension; Impromptu Speaking; Group Discussion Method; English Majors; Reflective Practice.

1. Introduction

Public speaking is a compulsory practice-oriented course for many undergraduate English-major programs in China, and it is commonly taught not as a theoretical subject but as a skills course built around repeated, hands-on speaking practice. In this format, students are expected to progress from controlled, prepared speech toward fluent, audience-oriented, and eventually impromptu communication. In practice, however, classroom observation of third-year English majors in such a course reveals a persistent and specific cluster of difficulties: many students cannot deliver a speech without reading from a

script, avoid making eye contact with the audience, spend a disproportionate amount of preparation time without a corresponding improvement in performance, and, when asked to speak impromptu, report having almost nothing to say.

These four symptoms are often discussed separately in the literature on English public speaking anxiety (EPSA), yet in the practice-oriented classroom they appear closely linked: a student who cannot depart from a script is, by definition, also more likely to avoid eye contact in order to read; a student whose lengthy preparation consists mainly of memorization is left with little transferable content or structure to draw on when a topic changes; and both patterns converge in an inability to generate or organize ideas under the time pressure of impromptu speaking. This paper takes these four recurring symptoms as its starting point and asks two questions: (1) why do script-dependence, eye-contact avoidance, preparation-performance mismatch, and impromptu blankness tend to co-occur among third-year English majors in a practice-oriented speaking course, and (2) how can a group-discussion-plus-representative-speech classroom method be adapted to address this cluster of symptoms as an interconnected whole rather than as isolated problems.

The paper adopts a reflective practice approach, treating structured classroom observation and teaching decisions across a semester of an English Public Speaking Practice course as the basis for analysis. This approach does not aim to establish causal effect through controlled measurement; rather, it aims to produce a disciplined, literature-informed account of classroom practice that can inform both the instructor's own subsequent teaching and future, more systematic inquiry.

This focus is significant for practice-oriented public speaking instruction more broadly, because the group-discussion-plus-representative-speech format is widely used in Chinese undergraduate English programs

precisely because it allows large classes to practice speaking within limited class time. If this common format inadvertently reinforces script dependence, by allowing groups to produce a polished script for one representative to read, then the difficulties observed here may not be specific to one classroom, but may instead point to a structural feature of a widely used teaching method that merits closer examination and, where necessary, adaptation.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Communication Apprehension and Script Dependence

Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope (1986) identify communication apprehension, fear of negative evaluation, and test anxiety as the three interrelated components of foreign language classroom anxiety, with public speaking widely regarded as the communicative context in which such apprehension is most acutely experienced. Bensalem (2023) found that public speaking anxiety among EFL learners varied with proficiency level, with lower-proficiency and less confident speakers relying more heavily on memorized or scripted language as a coping strategy. This pattern is consistent with the script-dependence frequently observed among third-year English majors: scripting functions as a way of controlling linguistic risk, even though it simultaneously constrains eye contact and audience engagement, since attention must remain on the written or memorized text rather than on the listener.

2.2 Eye Contact Avoidance as an Anxiety Behavior

Avoidance of audience eye contact is well documented as a behavioral marker of speaking anxiety rather than a purely stylistic habit. Amir et al. (2022) describe fear of oral presentation as manifesting in both trait-like and state-like avoidance behaviors, including reduced audience engagement under evaluative pressure. Tsang (2022) further reports that EFL learners' anxiety in oral presentations is closely tied to self-perceived (rather than only objectively measured) speaking proficiency, suggesting that eye-contact avoidance may reflect a learner's anxious self-assessment as much as their actual linguistic ability. In the practice-oriented classroom, this implies that eye-contact avoidance cannot be addressed through delivery drills alone, since it

is entangled with learners' self-perception and with the script-dependence discussed above.

2.3 The Preparation-Performance Mismatch

A further pattern relevant to this context is the mismatch between preparation time and performance quality. Al-Mukdad (2021) identifies excessive rehearsal focused on word-for-word accuracy, rather than on content organization or delivery flexibility, as a maladaptive coping strategy that can leave speakers more, rather than less, vulnerable to breakdowns in performance. Wei (2022), studying Chinese EFL postgraduates' public speaking anxiety in conference presentations, similarly found that extensive preparation did not reliably reduce apprehension when it was not paired with practice in flexible, audience-responsive delivery. These findings suggest that long preparation time, if invested primarily in memorization, may fail to build the underlying skills that would improve actual performance.

2.4 Impromptu Speaking and the Chinese EFL Context

Impromptu or extemporaneous speaking places particularly heavy demands on real-time idea generation and organization in a second language, and existing research on Chinese EFL learners suggests that this demand interacts with broader patterns of foreign language anxiety. Liu and Yuan's (2021) longitudinal study of Chinese undergraduates found that foreign language classroom anxiety remained a persistent constraint on spoken performance across a semester, even as listening anxiety fluctuated with context. Within the Chinese EFL public speaking literature more specifically, students have been found to experience English public speaking anxiety as a distinct and substantial concern, separate from general classroom anxiety, with impromptu tasks identified as a particularly anxiety-provoking condition (Duan, Jiao, Pu, & Xu, 2021). Taken together, this literature suggests that impromptu blankness among third-year English majors is unlikely to be resolved simply through more practice of prepared speeches, since prepared and impromptu speaking draw on partly distinct underlying skills.

2.5 Summary and Research Gap

Read together, this literature offers separate explanations for script dependence, eye-contact

avoidance, the preparation-performance mismatch, and impromptu blankness, but it rarely considers whether these four patterns might arise from a shared underlying cause within a specific, widely used classroom method such as group-discussion-plus-representative-speech. Nor does it offer much guidance on how such a method, once identified as a possible contributor to script dependence, might be adapted rather than abandoned, given its practical value for managing speaking practice in large undergraduate classes. This paper addresses that gap through a reflective account grounded in one such classroom.

3. Context and Observations

The reflections presented here are drawn from an English Public Speaking Practice course taught to third-year English-major students. The course is practice-oriented rather than lecture-based, and its dominant classroom method is group discussion followed by a representative speech: students are divided into small groups to discuss a topic or prepare speech content collaboratively, after which one representative from each group delivers a speech to the class based on the group's discussion.

3.1 Recurring Student Difficulties

Across the semester, four difficulties recurred consistently among students. First, many students were unable to speak without a script: even when a speech had been planned collaboratively in the group-discussion stage, the representative speaker at the podium tended to rely on a fully written text, reading closely rather than speaking from notes or memory of the discussed content. Second, students commonly avoided eye contact with the audience, a pattern that appeared directly connected to the first: because attention remained fixed on the script, audience engagement was correspondingly minimal. Third, students frequently spent a long time preparing content in their groups, yet the resulting representative speech did not reflect a proportional improvement in fluency or organization, suggesting that preparation time was being absorbed by content drafting and memorization rather than by rehearsal of delivery. Fourth, in the small number of sessions that included an impromptu speaking component, students reported having almost nothing to say, even on topics closely related to material just discussed in their groups, indicating a marked

gap between their ability to discuss a topic collaboratively and their ability to generate spoken content individually and without preparation.

3.2 Relationships Among the Four Difficulties

Read together, these four difficulties appear less like four separate problems than like different surface manifestations of the same underlying pattern: students in this course relied heavily on the group-discussion stage to produce finished content, which was then converted into a written script for the representative speech, rather than being used to build internalized, flexible speaking ability. This reliance on scripted output helps explain why long preparation time did not translate into strong performance, and why the same students who could discuss a topic fluently in a small group often had little to say when asked to speak on their own without preparation.

4. Pedagogical Strategies Implemented

In response to these observations, the existing group-discussion-plus-representative-speech method was modified rather than replaced, on the premise that the group-based structure itself was valuable but needed to be redirected away from producing a finished script and toward building flexible, internalized speaking ability.

4.1 Outline-Only Group Output

Groups were asked to produce a brief bullet-point outline of key ideas and their sequence, rather than a full written speech, as the product of the discussion stage. The representative speaker was required to deliver the speech from this outline alone. This change was intended to directly target script-dependence by removing the availability of a full script at the point of delivery.

4.2 Rotating, Unannounced Representative Selection

Rather than allowing groups to select their strongest or most willing speaker in advance, the representative speaker was selected at random and announced only after the discussion stage had concluded. This was intended to ensure that all group members engaged actively with the discussed content, rather than delegating speaking responsibility to one student while others prepared a script for that student to read, and to narrow the gap between group-discussion fluency and individual speaking ability.

4.3 Short, Structured Eye-Contact Practice

A brief, low-stakes delivery drill was introduced in which students practiced delivering two to three sentences from their outline while maintaining eye contact with a designated peer "audience member," before the full representative speech. This was intended to decouple eye-contact practice from the higher-stakes whole-class speech, addressing eye-contact avoidance as a distinct, trainable behavior rather than expecting it to improve automatically alongside content mastery.

4.4 Brief Impromptu Extensions

At the end of selected group-discussion sessions, a short, ungraded impromptu extension was added: after the representative speech on the group's prepared topic, the same or a different student was asked a brief, closely related follow-up question requiring an immediate, unprepared response. This was intended to build a bridge between the group-discussion stage and independent, unprepared speaking, rather than treating impromptu speaking as an unrelated, standalone skill practiced only in isolated sessions.

5. Reflection and Outcomes

Judged against the instructor's own classroom observations rather than a standardized measure, these adaptations appeared to be associated with some gradual change over the semester. With outline-only output and unannounced representative selection, dependence on a fully written script decreased for many students, and eye contact during the representative speech improved somewhat once separated into its own short drill; however, a subset of students continued to write out and attempt to memorize near-complete scripts in advance despite the outline requirement, suggesting that script-dependence functioned for some students as a deeper anxiety-management strategy rather than simply a matter of habit or instruction.

The brief impromptu extensions appeared to have the most uneven effect. Some students managed short, immediate follow-up responses reasonably well when the question was closely tied to content just discussed in their group, suggesting that impromptu blankness may be reduced when speaking is scaffolded directly from a recent, familiar discussion rather than introduced as an isolated, decontextualized task.

Other students, however, still reported going blank even under these more scaffolded conditions, indicating that a single semester of brief, occasional practice was insufficient to meaningfully build independent, unscripted speaking ability for the most anxious students, and that more sustained or individualized support may be required for this subgroup.

These reflections should be read with appropriate caution. As a single instructor's account, they are impressionistic, are not based on standardized pre- and post-measures of anxiety or performance, and are drawn from a single institutional context; they are not intended as evidence of causal effectiveness but as a structured description of practice intended to inform further teaching and inquiry.

5.1 Why a Subgroup Resisted Change

The persistence of full-script writing among a subgroup of students, despite the outline requirement, is worth dwelling on. One plausible explanation, consistent with the view of scripting as an anxiety-management strategy rather than a mere habit, is that for the most anxious students, an outline alone did not provide sufficient perceived control over language accuracy to make speaking without a script feel tolerable. If so, simply restricting what students are allowed to bring to the podium may be a necessary but not sufficient condition for reducing script dependence in this subgroup; additional, more individualized scaffolding, such as permitting a transitional stage of near-complete notes before moving to outlines, may be needed to avoid provoking excessive anxiety in students for whom scripting is a coping mechanism rather than a simple stylistic default.

6. Conclusion and Pedagogical Implications

This reflective case study has argued that four commonly observed difficulties among third-year English majors in a practice-oriented public speaking course, namely script dependence, eye-contact avoidance, preparation-performance mismatch, and impromptu blankness, are closely interrelated rather than separate problems, and that a group-discussion-plus-representative-speech method can be adapted to address them as a connected cluster. Restricting group output to an outline rather than a full script, randomizing and delaying the announcement of the representative speaker, isolating eye-contact practice as a short structured drill, and extending

group discussions into brief impromptu follow-up questions together represent one attempt to redirect an existing, familiar classroom structure toward these ends without abandoning it.

For instructors of similar practice-oriented courses, this account suggests that reducing script-dependence and building impromptu ability may require deliberately limiting the completeness of the material students are allowed to prepare in advance, and that eye-contact behavior may benefit from being practiced as an explicit, isolated skill rather than assumed to improve as a byproduct of general fluency gains. It also suggests that a meaningful subgroup of highly anxious students may need more sustained or individualized intervention than a semester-long, whole-class adaptation of this kind can provide.

This study is limited by its reliance on instructor reflection rather than systematically collected student data, and by its basis in a single institutional context and a single semester. Future research could build on these observations through classroom-based studies incorporating student self-report measures of public speaking anxiety and communication apprehension before and after such interventions, or through comparative designs examining whether outline-based and impromptu-extension methods produce measurable gains relative to standard script-based practice, in order to test more rigorously the patterns described here.

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