Mitigating Anxiety in Oral Assessment

Author(s) Name(s) and Affiliations

Wayne Rimmer, University Centre of Academic English, University of Manchester, Manchester, UK. https://orcid.org/0009-0000-6386-1412

Corresponding Author's Email

Wayne Rimmer wayne.rimmer@manchester.ac.uk

Abstract

English for Academic Purposes (EAP) is often characterised as a high-stakes environment, not least because of the role of assessment. While good EAP provision embraces assessment, it would be naïve to claim assessment is always welcomed by students. Particularly if positioned as a gatekeeper and enforcer of standards, assessment can bring anxiety. Since oral assessment often plays a dominant role in EAP, this practice-focused paper examines anxiety within speaking tasks. Its purpose is to highlight anxiety as a reliability risk in oral assessments and present strategies for student anxiety management (SAM). The recommendation is that EAP practitioners incorporate SAM strategies into their provision. To illustrate, three SAM strategies are presented within the context of oral assessment: test-wiseness (negotiating the assessment process via strategies independent of the actual assessment construct), self-regulation (student management of their learning), and emotional regulation (control over the emotions feeding anxiety). The conclusion is that while no panacea, SAM is likely to remain relevant so long as assessment is prominent in the EAP curriculum. Furthermore, the provision of SAM serves as a reminder to practitioners of their ethical obligation to mitigate anxiety in all forms of assessment.

Keywords

1. anxiety
2. assessment
3. EAP

AI Declaration

AI has not been used to prepare this manuscript.

Introduction

Assessment is one signifier that English for Academic Purposes (EAP) operates in a high-stakes environment where performance is measured and valued. There are many benefits which come from the integration of assessment into the curriculum, notably, the positive washback from authentic assessment tasks which endorse meaningful learning activities (Black & Wiliam, 1998). But there are also challenges. From the perspective of the student experience, possibly one of the most significant is anxiety. At an extreme, assessment is one of the university stressors identified by Pillay (2021) in a systematic literature review of student suicide. While a precise definition of anxiety remains elusive, Papi and Khajavy's (2023) literature review shows precise definition still to be problematic, the impact of assessment anxiety is real. The list of symptoms offered by the World Health Organization (2025) include psychological and physical effects, such as lack of concentration and muscular tension. Aside from personal trauma, assessment anxiety is a reliability risk because it compromises performance, which may under-represent a candidate's mastery of the construct (Cassady & Johnson, 2001; Rana & Mahmood, 2010). The fact that the level of anxiety is likely to vary considerably across learners makes it a source of uncontrolled measurement error. Assessment in EAP varies in form and function but oral assessment is prominent because it mirrors the centrality of spoken interaction to academic English (Yin et al., 2024). Traditional methods such as presentations, interviews and seminars are, cautiously, being supplemented by innovations such as podcasts (Perry, 2024) and multimodal assessment, which incorporates different media and technologies (Palmour, 2023). The expansion of oral assessment methods reflects not only the evolving demands of academic discourse, but also the fact that many students find speaking in an assessed environment challenging, in part due to the complex relationship between task type and perceived difficulty (Xi et al., 2021). Oral assessment thus provides a natural focus for anxiety and interventions aimed at minimising its impact. The purpose of this practice-focused paper is to highlight anxiety as a reliability risk in oral assessments and suggest how EAP practitioners can help students to manage their anxiety.

Anxiety in Oral Assessment

As Piniel (2024) notes, the sizeable literature on anxiety is informed by two research directions. The first is the well-established study of anxiety within psychology, reflecting the fact that anxiety is the most common psychiatric disorder (Carlson & Birkett, 2022). The second is more specific to the experience of foreign language learning, probably best represented by the seminal Horwitz et al. (1986) and their *Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale* (FLCAS). FLCAS has been widely used to measure anxiety in multiple contexts, including EAP. To illustrate, Zheng and Cheng (2018) adapted FLCAS to support their hypothesis that anxiety negatively correlated with test performance. While Zheng and Cheng (2018) did not include oral assessment in their test battery, their interviews with students revealed a general anxiety towards speaking. The most prevalent method of assessing EAP speaking is the presentation (Xi et al., 2021) and a number of studies have targeted this as a context for anxiety. Tsang (2022) found a negative correlation between pronunciation and anxiety, with students more confident in pronunciation, both sounds and supra-segmentals, experiencing less anxiety and performing better. Adopting FLCAS for Polish undergraduates, Bielak (2025) contrasted a presentation with a group discussion and found the presentation

to generate more anxiety and restrict fluency. Hewitt and Stephenson (2012) in confirming the toxicity of anxiety add a detail of how a student broke down in tears during an oral exam featuring a presentation. Conversely, Chen's (2022) small-scale study suggests that anxiety may actually enhance performance, since some of her participants experienced anxiety as a motivating factor during presentations. Notwithstanding, there is wide consensus that anxiety is deleterious to the core academic skill of giving a presentation. By extension, it can be argued that anxiety poses a reliability risk for other forms of assessment of academic speaking (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1994; Liu & Li, 2019).Interventions to reduce anxiety are located at several levels, with responsibility apportioned between the individual student, instructors, the institutional setting, personal support networks (family and friends) and the wider society complicit in wide-scale assessment. To give examples, Howard's (2020) comprehensive review of the literature on educational assessment recommends mindfulness, or "awareness of the present moment" (p. 38), psychoeducation, or "the providing of information, education materials, or advice about a particular disorder" (p. 35), sensitivity from parents during exam periods, and global initiatives such as *Strategies for tackling exam pressure and stress* (The British Psychological Society, 2023). On the institutional level, while higher-education institutions have developed extensive systems for student support and wellbeing, admittedly with little research into their effectiveness (Murray et al., 2016), EAP, often sitting aside from the main curriculum, may not take advantage of these resources even in periods of marked student vulnerability such as assessment. Indeed, anxiety is not a consideration in most assessment guides, including the British Association of Lecturers of English for Academic Purposes (BALEAP) Testing Guidelines (Slaght, 2021), which concentrate on test comparability and the uses of scores.

This paper proposes that EAP practitioners are ideally positioned to help students manage their anxiety during oral assessment. In preparing students for the assessment, practitioners can build into the programme what I will refer to as student anxiety management (SAM) strategies, i.e., practical steps that students can take, initially with practitioner guidance, to reduce or even eliminate anxiety. EAP practitioners are obviously not medical health professionals, but they know the nature of the assessment and, hopefully, have established a trust and rapport with their students that should encourage engagement with what may be a sensitive issue. In a best-case scenario, EAP practitioners will probably not be working in isolation as there may be other forms of support available, as briefly mentioned above. Students should also take the initiative as part of a process of increased investment in their learning journey. However, as detailed below, there are a number of avenues for EAP practitioners to introduce SAM strategies, which represent actionable solutions to the reliability risk in oral assessment.

Student Anxiety Management Strategies

The recommendation is that EAP practitioners incorporate SAM strategies into their provision to put students in the best position to perform in oral assessments without undue anxiety. As a preliminary observation, the format of EAP provision varies in scale from lectures, typically an instructor addressing a large body of students, to tutorials, which may be small groups or even one-to-one. Tutorials would seem to offer the best environment for SAM provision as students may feel more comfortable in a smaller group and the tutor can provide more personalised support. For tutorials to be effective, the agenda needs to be

managed carefully (Jakonen & Duran, 2024). So, if this option is available, EAP practitioners need to plan for SAM rather than expect it to occur as emergent learning.

Three SAM strategies are presented within the context of oral assessment: test-wiseness, self-regulation, emotion regulation. These three are more properly meta-strategies in that they are broad in scope and can each be refined into separate strategies. Furthermore, this selection is illustrative rather than exhaustive, but it shows the potential value of SAM.

1. Test-wiseness

Essentially, test-wiseness is assessment know-how (Fernández, 2022). Students who are test-wise are familiar with the assessment process and can lever this advantage to maximise their likelihood of success, regardless of their content knowledge. Sapp (2014) argues that test-wiseness acts on more than a cognitive level as it counteracts anxiety. Test-wiseness is much more than knowing what will be in the assessment, although, as shown in Mason and Nazim (2014), students often go into oral assessment with rather different degrees of familiarity with the task ahead. EAP practitioners can provide students with test-wiseness strategies, as exemplified below in the context of oral assessment.

Anticipate Questions

Practitioners cannot prepare students for every eventuality. But they can suggest to students, parts of the test which are more predictable. This may include questions which are routine or probable given the content. As a concrete context, viva formats that supplement written work are becoming popular as a response to GenAI (Hartman, 2025). Practitioners can work with students to anticipate questions based on their writing, then facilitate practice in giving a structured response which is faithful to the content and linguistically effective.

Establish Rapport with other Participants and the Examiner

May (2011) supplies empirical evidence that establishing a good rapport in collaborative speaking tests impresses assessors. An effective way for the practitioner to introduce this would be to show videos of speaking, not necessarily assessment, where the students have established good rapport. Guiding questions could include *What do you notice about X's body language? Does X use the other students' names? How does X show that Y has made a good point?* In practice assessments, the practitioner could then give focused feedback to their own students on how they have demonstrated rapport.

Ask for Questions to be Repeated

Questions perceived as difficult can cause anxiety in the search for an answer, and the ensuing silence is typically viewed as problematic by an interlocutor (Kasper & Ross, 2007). As an anecdotal example of a solution, in a tutorial I recently conducted as preparation for an interview-type assessment, one student shared a strategy to confront difficult questions: she would ask the assessor to repeat the question. The student claimed that repetition gave

her more thinking time. I pointed out that this also repackaged the information as the assessor would probably reformulate the question, unless following a script.

Utilise other Students

When there are other students present in an assessment, they can be used as a resource. For example, in relation to the previous strategy, a weaker student can pass on a difficult question to a stronger student, using the other student's reply as a model to then formulate their own response. If they have poor content knowledge, students can also rely on more informed students. Echoing and confirming a previous point can give an impression of content mastery. If the assessor is an EAP practitioner rather than subject specialist, it would seem easier to compensate for low content knowledge by reflecting other students' output.

2. Self-Regulation

Xiao and Yang (2019, p.39) define self-regulated learners as "able to define their goals of learning and pursue actions of knowledge construction on their own initiative". Their study found that students successfully leveraged self-regulation strategies in formative oral presentations. In particular, students responded to teacher and peer feedback to redefine the task goals and produce a stronger product. Self-regulation is an established part of academic provision, often as part of what are loosely termed study skills. However, the connection between self-regulation and SAM could be more pronounced, with the practitioner providing more support. For instance, students are routinely expected to set goals and monitor their progress towards them. If applicable, one goal could be directed at SAM with a SMART (Specific–Measurable–Achievable–Relevant–Time-bound) approach applied. A postulated example is supplied in Figure 1 from a student aiming to reduce anxiety on a seminar assessment task. The EAP practitioner would help the student first formulate and then apply this SMART approach leading up to the oral assessment. Goal: To feel less anxious during my seminar assessment

Figure 1

The SMART approach

S	I will practise my seminar presentation five times and use breathing techniques to manage anxiety.
M	I will rate my anxiety out of 10 before and after each practice to track change.
A	I have the time and commitment to work on this.
R	If I reduce my level of anxiety, my seminar presentation will be more effective.
T	I will practise for six weeks until the summative assessment.

There should be two caveats at this juncture. First, as demonstrated in Nie et al.'s (2024) study of goal setting, EAP students may find the S and M difficult to articulate. This is where EAP practitioners can give guidance, moving students from the undefined and vague to concrete actions. Second, there would need to be sensitivity if students' goals are expected

to be shared. In this case, perhaps students might only disclose select goals, reserving the right to privacy.

As Xiao and Yang (2019) point out, feedback plays a major role in self-regulation because it enables students to reflect and refine their strategies. Practitioners can include in their feedback on oral assessment a focus on anxiety, prompting students to self-regulation. For example, if a student incorporates significant markers of dysfluency in collaborative speaking tasks, the practitioner can use tutorial space to ask the student, delicately, whether this can be attributed to anxiety. If this is the case, the teacher can work on a self-regulation strategy with the student. For example, the student could develop what Zimmerman (2002) calls attention-focusing strategies aimed at concentrating on the task on hand and blocking out distractions which may cause anxiety. A concrete way of attention-focusing might be for the student to take notes during a group discussion of what others say, then refer to these notes when it is their turn to speak.

3. Emotion regulation

The capacity to manage emotions so that they do not interfere with oral assessment could be regarded as part of self-regulation (Simón-Grábalos et al., 2025), but emotion regulation is worth treating separately because it is strongly associated with control over anxiety (Cisler & Olatunji, 2012). Howard's (2020) review of the literature on anxiety supplies several interventions aimed at emotion regulation. Specifically, Howard (2020, p.35) presents psychoeducation as the prerogative of institutions and as rather a passive exercise: '[l]eaflets, posters or information presented in lectures or classroom contexts can be effective for reducing symptoms of test anxiety'. However, EAP practitioners could be proponents of emotion regulation in the classroom. Three sets of practical strategies are presented below.

Mindfulness

The relevance of mindfulness, "awareness of the present moment"
(Howard, 2020, p. 38), is that it shuts out negative emotions and enhances concentration. Sutton (2022) provides a number of exercises that should be carried out as a consistent routine. These include several breathing techniques aimed at releasing endorphins and calming. For example, in "square breathing", the student imagines a square, inhaling the breath four times for each side of the square, then holding and exhaling the breath also to correspond to the square. It is claimed that repetition makes this process automatic and breeds a feeling of emotional control. Sutton (2022) also recommends guided meditation, including one script deemed useful before tests. This script encourages the test-taker to take account of their emotional state and feel safe before the coming challenge. Mindfulness is not a one-off SAM as it needs to be practised but advantages are that it is student-initiated, flexible (it can be done in one's own time, individually or with peers) and zero-resource.

Reframing

When reframing, also termed cognitive reappraisal, students "[change]
negative worries to positive thought" (Macklem, 2008, p. 68) or at least minimise the negativity. This is the perceptual difference between threat and challenge. Indeed, as

demonstrated in neurolinguistic programming (NLP), where reframing is a core strategy (Sharma et al., 2023), the language used is important. For example, the anxiety apparent within "The other students will not understand my pronunciation" lessens if the verb is modified: "The other students <u>might</u> not <u>always</u> understand my pronunciation." A further step, as suggested in Sharma et al. (2023), is to make the reframing actionable: "The other students might not always understand my pronunciation, so I will practise the pronunciation of the difficult words on my slides." EAP practitioners can grade their own language so that the positive is accentuated. They can also adopt the NLP strategy of asking students themselves to reframe. This is more than a linguistic exercise as it could change students' mindset and offset anxiety.

Problem-Solving

Defined as "actively modifying the stressors that induce negative affect in order to change the associated emotions" (Volkaert et al., 2020, p. 679), problem-solving gives students control over their anxiety. The EAP practitioner can take students through the steps of identifying the problem, finding a solution, applying the solution, evaluating the impact. For instance, a student may face a vicious circle in an oral assessment: she feels anxious so tends to speak too quickly; this makes her delivery more difficult for the other students to understand; the other students evince non-comprehension or frustration, which increases her anxiety. She could be encouraged initially to speak a little more loudly, as increased volume tends to slow speech rate (Tjaden et al., 2014), reducing the volume when she feels more relaxed. After experimenting with this strategy in formative assessment, she could discuss its effectiveness with her tutor.

<div align="center">

Conclusion

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This paper argues that anxiety represents a reliability risk within oral assessment and proposes SAM strategies as a viable approach for EAP practitioners to address students' anxiety. SAM is illustrated through test-wiseness (negotiating the assessment process via strategies independent of the actual assessment construct), self-regulation (student management of their learning), and emotional regulation (control over the emotions feeding anxiety). While SAM will vary in impact due to context and individual learning differences, it is unlikely SAM will become irrelevant because there is an evident connection between assessment and anxiety. Eliminating assessment would be the surest way of eliminating assessment anxiety, but this is hardly a realistic option in a climate of increasing accountability and competition. Nor would assessment-free EAP be welcomed by all students as some thrive in this environment. There is also an argument that anxiety is an irreducible facet of the world of work which most students will enter, rendering the reduction of anxiety a disservice. However, assessment aside, there is a strong ethical compulsion to minimise any threat to students' mental health. EAP practitioners are not medical professionals, let alone psychiatrists, but addressing anxiety is one avenue to realising their responsibility as guardians of student wellbeing. This places further demands on practitioners, but so long as assessment drives the curriculum, they must engage in the contingent panoply of issues. Hopefully, the SAM strategies presented in this paper indicate a way forward that reduces the anxiety risk and humanises the assessment experience.

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