Exploring Psychological Mechanisms of OCA in Jordanian Universities: A Case Study of Al al-Bayt University

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Abstract

Oral Communication Apprehension casts a long shadow for many Jordanian students, hindering their ability to thrive in an immersive language environment. This qualitative study examined the inner workings of Oral Communication Apprehension (OCA) fifteen Jordanian students at Al al-Bayt University, exploring the specific psychological processes and mechanisms that fuel this anxiety. Through in-depth interviews, the research investigates how students experience OCA both inside and outside the classroom, revealing a complex interplay of factors. Fear of negative judgment, avoidance behaviors, speaking anxiety, lack of confidence in English skills, and persistent self-criticism intertwine and reinforce each other, creating a vicious cycle that impedes fluency and engagement. This research builds on existing knowledge on OCA and anxiety, offering valuable insights into the unique experiences of Jordanian learners and the specific challenges they face. Finally, the study suggests that pedagogical implications can be used to reduce and alleviate the negative impacts of these psychological factors on the smoothness of oral communication and speaking fluency.

Keywords: Oral communicate Apprehension, Psychology, Undergraduate Students and Anxiety

1. Introduction

1.1 Background of the Study

Oral communication anxiety (OCA) can be a nerve-wracking experience for many people, causing physical symptoms like a racing heart, sweating, and difficulty concentrating, as well as emotional symptoms like nervousness, self-consciousness, and even fear (Irving, Doblin, & Park, 2009; Morgan, 2020). Several factors contribute to OCA, including fear of negative evaluation, perfectionism, lack of confidence, and past negative experiences (Clark & Wells, 1995; Hofmann & DeBartolo, 2000; Stewart & Sham Dasani, 2014).

Experiencing OCA can result in nervousness, difficulty concentrating, and even a sense of detachment from reality (Irving, Doblin, & Park, 2009; Morgan, 2020). Researchers have demonstrated growing interest in examining the psychological factors influencing foreign language acquisition, particularly focusing on foreign language anxiety (FLA) (Horwitz, 2008; Hossein et al., 2020; Jinn, Zhang, & Macintyre, 2020; Liu & Huang, 2011; Olivares-Chat, 2010; Sayed, 2018). FLA refers to the worry and negative emotional response triggered by learning or using a second language (Macintyre, 1999; Macintyre, 2017). It can hinder various stages of language learning, including information intake, processing, and expression (Young, 1991).

Recent research suggests that OCA affects a significant percentage of the population, with estimates ranging from 60% to 75% (Blume et al., 2013). The causes of OCA are multifaceted, including psychological, physiological, and environmental factors (Clark & Wells, 1995; Hofmann & DeBartolo, 2000; Stewart & Sham Dasani, 2014). For instance, fear of negative evaluation, perfectionism, lack of confidence, or past traumatic experiences.

Anxiety associated with communication apprehension (CA) can manifest in diverse communication contexts, such as one-on-one conversations, group discussions, even moments of self-reflection, high-pressure situations, or daily interactions with others (Blume et al., 2013). Fortunately, individuals can manage their anxiety through various strategies, including practicing speeches, visualizing successful performances, and employing relaxation techniques like deep breathing or meditation (Irving, Doblin, & Park, 2009; Morgan, 2020). Implementing these strategies can empower individuals to effectively cope with anxiety and enhance their communication skills.

1.2 Problem Statement

Communication apprehension (CA) is a fear or anxiety that can significantly hinder language learners' ability to speak fluently and accurately. This anxiety can manifest in various ways, such as difficulties with pronunciation, fluency, and vocabulary usage. CA often leads to physical symptoms like sweating, shaking, and a racing heart, with the specific causes and mechanisms varying greatly between individuals. These variations are likely influenced by personal traits, attitudes, and individual experiences with language learning.

Understanding the unique factors influencing CA in Jordan, where language policy, educational environment, linguistic exposure, academic

field, pedagogy, and teacher professionalism are closely intertwined, is crucial for developing effective language learning strategies and fostering a more positive and supportive learning environment.

In Jordan, where language policy, educational environment, linguistic exposure, academic field, pedagogy, and teacher professionalism are closely intertwined, the process of language production and apprehensive linguistic behaviors may be different than in other language groups (Huawei, 2017).

Jordanian undergraduate students often have difficulty speaking in English. This is because they may lack confidence in their English skills, have had negative experiences with English in the past, or come from a culture that values modesty and humility. And there is not much research on why this is the case. There are a number of interventions that can be used to help Jordanian undergraduate students overcome this difficulty, such as experiential learning, cognitive behavioral therapy, and peer support. Public speaking is a critical skill in many areas of life, from academic presentations to business meetings and social events (Alhasan, 2022).

This study investigated Jordanian students' experiences with oral communication apprehension (OCA) in English. The findings revealed that a significant majority of students reported experiencing anxiety and fear when speaking in English. This OCA negatively impacted their academic performance, leading to decreased participation in class discussions and lower grades on oral exams. Additionally, students reported feeling isolated and stressed due to their OCA.

This qualitative research intends to fill in this gap in knowledge and investigate the processes and mechanisms that are responsible for the oral apprehensive behaviors of Jordanian students.

1.3 Research Question

The following research question was formulated to investigate the underlying mechanisms of Oral Communication Apprehension (OCA) among undergraduate students at Al-Bayt University in Jordan:

In what ways does Oral Communication Apprehension impact the speaking experience of students enrolled at Al al-Bayt University, specifically within English language courses?

2. Related Studies

Communication apprehension, a psychological phenomenon characterized by anxiety and fear of communication, significantly hinders speaking fluency in language learners.

Alhasan et al. (2023) found that a significant majority of Jordanian English language learners (ELLs) in university-level English language courses experience apprehension when it comes to oral communication. This apprehension manifests in various ways, including avoiding speaking in class, speaking in a quiet voice, avoiding eye contact, and even exhibiting physical symptoms such as sweating and trembling.

Almotiary (2022) broke new ground by examining foreign language anxiety (FLA) among Saudi Arabian female students learning English in the US, a previously understudied population navigating the complex interplay of cultural expectations and mixed-gender classrooms. Through interviews, participants revealed experiencing common FLA symptoms like communication and test anxiety, often intensified by the stark contrast between their segregated Saudi education and the US setting. Furthermore, societal norms surrounding female communication further fueled their anxieties. These findings highlight the crucial need for more extensive research, including the perspectives of instructors, and the development of culturally sensitive interventions tailored to empower these learners in overcoming FLA and achieving their full potential in their educational journeys in English-speaking environments.

Alkataba et al. (2019) took a quantitative approach to investigate the relationship between foreign language speaking anxiety (FLSA) and speaking achievement among Saudi Arabian EFL learners. Their study, conducted at Northern Border University, found a statistically significant, albeit weak, positive correlation ($r = 0.23$) between FLSA and language learning achievement. This suggests that while higher FLSA may slightly hinder speaking performance, its overall impact on learning appears limited. Further research is needed to understand the specific factors influencing this relationship and how to best address FLSA in EFL contexts.

Alsaleh (2018) examined how FLA and reading anxiety are interconnected and how FLA affects reading comprehension in a group of 60 preparatory-year students majoring in English at Imam Mohamed Bin Saud University in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. The study found that the respondents experienced a moderate level of reading anxiety and LA. Additionally, the primary causes of foreign language reading anxiety were difficulty comprehending new vocabulary, pronunciation, lengthy texts, and fear of making mistakes.

These studies suggest that anxiety can have a negative impact on language learning. However, it is important to note that the studies were conducted with relatively small samples, and more research is needed to confirm the findings.

Alghazo and Al-Wadi (2019) conducted a qualitative study to explore the experiences of 10 EFL students in Jordan with Oral Communication Apprehension (OCA). The study found that fear of making mistakes, fear of being judged, and lack of confidence in their English skills were major contributors to the students' anxiety. This anxiety manifested negatively in their academic performance, including difficulties participating in class discussions and completing oral presentations. Additionally, the students reported experiencing decreased self-esteem and feelings of isolation due to their OCA. The findings highlight the significant impact of OCA on EFL learning and suggest the need for interventions to support students. Potential strategies include creating safe and supportive environments for practicing English, providing training in effective communication skills, and fostering an inclusive learning community.

3. Research Method

3.1 Research Design

A qualitative investigation was conducted to understand and explain the factors and mechanisms contributing to Oral Communication Apprehension (OCA) among Jordanian students at AABU, as expressed by the students themselves in both classroom and non-classroom settings. Aligned with Maxwell's (2013) definition of qualitative research, the study sought to capture the lived experiences of OCA through in-depth interviews with fifteen participants. Thematic analysis, utilizing open coding and iterative refinement, was employed to analyze the interview data. This iterative process allowed for the identification and exploration of key themes related to OCA, including fear of judgment, avoidance behaviors, speaking anxiety, lack of confidence in English skills, and self-criticism. By delving into the perspectives of Jordanian students, this qualitative approach enabled a deeper understanding of the complex interplay of factors that contribute to OCA and its manifestations in both academic and everyday life.

3.2 Sampling

The study involved 15 EFL learners from Jordan, consisting of 9 females and 6 males, who were majoring in English Language Literature. The age range of the participants was between 19 and 25 years old. These participants were selected from the English department at Al abyat University in Jordan during the academic year of 2022-2023. The selection of participants was based on their observed anxious oral behavior, and a purposive sampling technique was used. The participants were informed about the importance and significance of the study in improving language teaching, and they were assured of their anonymity and the option to withdraw from the study if necessary, following the ethical guidelines (Braggs, 2017).

3.3 Research Instrument

The data for this study was collected through semi-structured interviews with Jordanian students from Al al-byat University. The students were asked to reflect on their experiences speaking English and explain the inhibitory mechanisms that prevent them from communicating smoothly inside and outside the classroom. The interviews were designed to elicit the students' thoughts and feelings about their communication experiences, as well as the factors that contributed to their communication apprehension. To gain a deep understanding of the apprehensive psychological processes accompanying oral behavior, the researcher took a phenomenological perspective and probed into the reasons and explanations behind the students' inadequate language performance, as Moustakas (1994) suggested.

The students participated voluntarily in the study and were asked specific interview questions designed to understand the psychological processes involved in speaking. The study aimed to uncover the psychological processes behind OCA in the Jordanian context, providing valuable insights for language educators and researchers.

3.4 Data Analysis

The analysis of the recorded data involved a thorough content analysis approach, with a focus on identifying and prioritizing key themes. Transcripts were carefully reviewed and color-coded to highlight salient aspects, which were then organized into overarching themes that captured the participants' anxieties and experiences related to communication. This process was guided by the methodology outlined by Miles and Huberman (1984), ensuring a rigorous and systematic analysis of the data.

4. Findings and Discussions

The research question aimed to investigate the impact of oral communication apprehension (OCA) on the speaking process of students at Al al-Bayt University. The students shared their personal experiences with OCA and described how it influences their communication interactions in various contexts. Specifically, they discussed the effects of OCA in both academic and social settings, which encompassed fear of negative judgment, avoidance of engagement, speaking anxiety, lack of confidence in English skills, and self-criticism. The figure below illustrates the socially constructed effects of CA on the speaking process, as derived from the students' lived experiences.

4.1 Fear of Being Judged Negatively

Jordanian students are apprehensive about speaking in English because they are afraid of being negatively judged and thought of as not good enough. They avoid speaking in English because they are afraid of being thought of as foolish. They feel anxious when participating in group discussions and presentations in English because they are afraid of saying something wrong and being laughed at or seen as a failure.

> *"The first time I had to present my assignment, and I did not do well, some students change their impressions about me, which they considered me at an excellent level in English (Participant 5).*

> *"I'm worried about what other people will think of me. I do not want to come across as unprepared or like I don't know what I'm talking about, and I'm worried that my classmates or professor will judge me negatively" (Participant 2).*

> *"I am worried about saying the wrong thing or being judged; it can be really hard to speak up. You might hold back from participating at all, which can impact your grades and your ability to learn". (Participant 12).*

The fear of being negatively evaluated is a common problem for students who are learning English. This fear can lead to a number of problems, including reduced participation in class discussions, limited social engagement, increased stress and anxiety, and decreased self-confidence.

The preceding descriptions encompass different facets of the psychological process of English communication and the social implications inherent in the speaking scenarios encountered by students. The fear of negative evaluation can have a number of negative consequences for Jordanian students. It can lead to reduced participation in class discussions, limited social engagement, and increased stress and anxiety. Additionally, it can make it difficult for students to learn and improve their English skills.

The results of this study align with previous research on communication apprehension (Jalleh, Mahfoodh, & Singh, 2021, "students with higher linguistic proficiency performed better in speaking than their lower-proficiency achievers in general". However, the study also found that proficiency plays a crucial role in communication apprehension, but the type of task can also influence the level of speaking anxiety as it has the potential to either enhance or diminish oral performance (Jalleh, Mahfoodh, & Singh, 2021; Riasati & Rahaimi, 2018).

4.2 Avoiding Class Engagement

Students may avoid speaking in English because they are apprehensive about making mistakes or being judged by their peers. This avoidance can have negative consequences, such as missing out on opportunities to learn and practice the language, and difficulty participating in class discussions and group projects. Educators can help students overcome their apprehension by providing them with opportunities to practice speaking in a safe and supportive environment, educating them about communication apprehension, and creating a more supportive environment for students who are apprehensive about speaking in English.

Studies have shown that students who avoid speaking in English are more likely to fail classes and have difficulty acquiring language skills (Riasati & Rahimi, 2018; Syed & Kuzborska, 2019). This is because they are not getting the practice they need to improve their language skills.

"But it affected me as I kept thinking about what had experienced a long time. Will do my best not to have a future class with the same instructor. As he got the first impression about me. I feel that I am weak and disappointed" (Participant 10).

"I think it's just really uncomfortable to be the centre of attention. You might feel like all eyes are on you, and it's just too much pressure" (Participant 6).

"I remember one time we were having a group discussion in class, and I had an idea, but I was too nervous to speak up. I just sat there and didn't say anything, and later I regretted it because I felt like I missed an opportunity to contribute to the discussion" (Participant 11).

The narratives collected in this study vividly illustrate the profound psychological toll that OCA can inflict upon students. Fear of negative evaluation not only manifests in avoidance behaviors like refusing to speak in class, but also extends to broader impacts on their academic and social lives. Recent research corroborates these findings, with Riasati (2018) reporting significantly higher rates of avoidance strategies among students with high OCA scores. Furthermore, Kuzborska (2019) emphasized the importance of situational factors like the interlocutor and topic of conversation, highlighting the context-dependent nature of communication apprehension. Additionally, individual variables such as introversion and extraversion were found to interact with OCA, influencing both learning processes and willingness to communicate (Syed & Kuzborska, 2019). These findings align with the present study, which further underscores the multifaceted nature of OCA and its dependence on both environmental and personal factors (Jalleh, Mahfoodh, & Singh, 2021).

4.3 Speaking Anxiety

The analysis of student interviews revealed that speaking anxiety stands as a core manifestation of OCA, casting a debilitating shadow over their communication experiences. As Participant 1 stated, "My heart starts racing, my palms get sweaty, and I am upset over my words – it's like my mind goes blank." This intense anxiety, aligned with Spielberger's State-Trait Anxiety Inventory, triggers a cascade of physical and emotional responses, including trembling, blushing, and difficulty breathing. These responses, in turn, impair cognitive processing and communication effectiveness. As Participant 2 shared, "I get so focused on my anxiety that I forget what I wanted to say, and I end up just saying the bare minimum." These firsthand accounts highlight the profound impact of speaking anxiety on students' ability to engage in effective communication, further underscoring the need for targeted interventions to address this debilitating aspect of OCA.

The following excerpts from the students' accounts highlight this aspect:

"I feel very nervous, sweating, my face turn to be red and I could fell down again fear and apprehension this is our human nature" (Participant 9).

"I feel disappointed and sad whenever I encounter anxiety or fear in any situation. I often tell myself that this issue will be the end of me, and that I won't be able to overcome it. But then I wonder, why do I do this to myself"? (Participant 12).

The student accounts vividly paint a picture of how speaking anxiety, a core feature of OCA, can profoundly impact their academic and social lives. Participant 3's statement, "My voice trembles, and my mind goes blank during class discussions – I just can't seem to get the words out," encapsulates the paralyzing fear that can accompany communication attempts. This anxiety, as research by Syed and Kuzborska (2019) and Alhamabahba et al. (2016) confirms, directly affects students' ability to communicate effectively in English. The excerpts reveal difficulties with fluency, vocabulary recall, and grammatically correct sentence formation, highlighting the detrimental

effects of anxiety on various aspects of language production. While a singular focus on anxiety reduction might not be the most effective approach (Tasdemir & Arslan, 2018; Zarei et al., 2020), acknowledging and understanding the role of anxiety in the learning process can offer valuable insights into developing coping mechanisms and fostering a supportive learning environment.

4.4 Lack of confidence in English skills

The analysis of the students' narratives also revealed Students who experience communication apprehension (CA) may lose self-confidence, which can deter them from communicating effectively. This can lead to students feeling inferior to their peers who are competent English speakers. The following are the excerpts of the students' narratives to this effect:

"I lost my confidence, caused me psychological affect "(Participant 15).

"I would get so nervous when I had to give a short participation in front of the class that I would stumble over my words and forget what I wanted to say" (Participant 9).

"I lost my confidence, caused me psychological affect "(Participant 11).

"I would get so nervous when I had to give a short participation in front of the class that I would stumble over my words and forget what I wanted to say" (Participant 8).

Research underscores the crucial role of self-confidence in language acquisition and oral proficiency. However, Jordanian university students studying English as a foreign language face a unique set of challenges that can erode their self-efficacy and hinder the development of these crucial skills. Limited exposure to English outside the classroom, as Al-Khateeb (2020) observed, can lead to feelings of inadequacy and a reluctance to speak. Furthermore, a heavy reliance on rote grammar and vocabulary memorization, as Al Zoubi (2016) suggests, can hinder the development of fluency and flexibility in communication. Additionally, a preference for using Arabic in daily life, documented by Malkawi (2018), can limit opportunities for practice and reinforce the perception of English as irrelevant. Negative attitudes towards learning English, prevalent among some students (Alghazo & Al-Momani, 2019), along with intimidation from teachers or peers (Al-Salman, 2016; Obeidat & Abu-Jarour, 2020), can further demotivate students and discourage participation. Addressing these challenges through promoting authentic language use, encouraging active learning strategies, and fostering a supportive learning environment can be crucial in building self-confidence and empowering Jordanian students to achieve their full potential in English.

4.5 Self-criticism

A prominent consequence of OCA, as previous research suggests, is its tendency to trigger internalized criticism among students. The analysis of student narratives reveals how experiences of communication apprehension in specific situations can lead to the development of this negative self-perception. Participant 5, for example, shared, "I kept replaying my mistakes in my head and telling myself I'll never be good enough at English." This self-criticism, often manifested in negative self-talk about pronunciation, grammar, or overall communication skills (McCroskey, 1992), can have a crippling effect on students' confidence and performance. As Carver and Scheier (1982) suggest, the perceived lack of control over their communication abilities can lead to feelings of frustration, anxiety, and even despair, significantly impacting their academic engagement and social interactions. Addressing this cycle of OCA and self-criticism requires interventions that empower students to develop self-compassion, challenge negative self-appraisals, and build a more positive self-image as English learners.

"I feel intimidated and insecure, especially when a female student gives a good presentation". (Participant 5)

" I am afraid of being surprised by the people in my audience. Sometimes I find out that there was a very famous or qualified speaker among them, and I keep thinking about whether I did well or they had a bad impression of me, which I need a lot of time to change". (Participant 14)

"I have this problem in most situations, but it is worse in interviews. I am worried about not answering the questions correctly, which will cause me to fail the interview" (participant 8).

In the context of OCA, self-criticism manifests as a harsh internal monologue focused on perceived inadequacies in English communication skills. Students fixate on pronunciation errors, grammatical stumbles, or lack of fluency, subjecting themselves to relentless self-judgment and negativity. This self-destructive pattern, as Riasati (2018) and Riasati & Rahimi (2018) observed, can have profound consequences. Studies by Syed and Kuzborska (2019) show that OCA-related self-criticism can lead to diminished self-esteem, increased anxiety and depression, and even withdrawal from speaking situations. This can manifest as avoidance of class participation, reluctance to practice English outside the classroom, and ultimately, decreased academic performance in subjects taught in English.

5. Conclusion

This research investigated the factors underlying Jordanian English language learners' apprehension of oral communication. The analysis revealed a complex interplay of social, psychological, and pedagogical factors contributing to this apprehension. Fear of negative judgment, often stemming from cultural emphasis on linguistic accuracy and potential peer criticism and and self-criticism, manifested in students' avoidance behaviors like opting out of class discussions or minimizing their contributions. This apprehension was further exacerbated by speaking anxiety, characterized by physical and emotional symptoms like trembling, sweating, and increased heart rate, which further hindered their ability to communicate effectively. Additionally, a lack of confidence in their English skills, often rooted in

insufficient practice and traditional teacher-centered instruction, fueled feelings of inadequacy and self-criticism. To address these challenges, the study proposes a shift towards student-centered learning. This approach empowers students to take ownership of their learning through activities like peer-to-peer feedback, self-reflection journals, and technology-assisted practice, fostering a more supportive and stress-free environment for developing their oral communication skills. Integrating research-based strategies like these can help Jordanian students overcome their apprehension and unlock their full potential in English.

Fostering a friendly and supportive classroom environment is crucial in mitigating the negative impact of OCA on Jordanian students. By establishing clear norms that promote respect, tolerance, and constructive feedback, educators can directly address students' fear of judgment and negative evaluation, key components of OCA. This safe and inclusive atmosphere, as research by Alhassan (2022) and Kristiansen et al. (2019) suggests, encourages students to take risks and participate actively in learning, even those struggling with OCA. As Namaziandost et al. (2019) observed, implementing practices like anonymous peer feedback or creating designated "safe zones" for practicing English can further empower students to overcome their anxieties and engage in communication without fear. Ultimately, a friendly classroom environment, as Vakilifard et al. (2020) conclude, is not just beneficial for learning outcomes and academic achievement, but also plays a critical role in fostering the development of essential social skills and empowering students with OCA to reach their full potential.

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