

A Qualitative Exploration of Oral Communication Apprehension among Libyan EFL Learners

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Abstract: Previous studies have identified Oral Communication Apprehension (OCA) or anxiety of communicating as a major issue which impedes an individual's willingness to communicate and his/her capacity to improve effective communication skills. While numerous studies have measured the OCA of learners, very few qualitative studies have investigated this phenomenon. The purpose of this study was to establish the effects of socio-cultural settings on OCA among EFL learners at the Alzytouna University. This research was conducted by interviewing first-year EFL students and their lecturers from the English Department of Alzytouna University in Libya. It was considered most appropriate to focus on first-year students as it is important to understand the origins of OCA at the starting point of higher education. The results of this study uncovered the root causes of OCA how it is manifested in students and its effect on their interactions with their colleagues and lecturers of both genders.

Key words: OCA, qualitative, study approach, EFL university, learners

INTRODUCTION

English is currently a major tool of communication in many parts of the world. This language has been embraced in many countries and is being taught in classrooms as a discipline (Pathan *et al.*, 2014). It is gaining popularity throughout the world as a language for effective communication and for the building of international relations. Libya has been at the forefront of the integration of the language into their education system (Pathan *et al.*, 2014) and has made English into a major discipline in their curriculum. However, the learning of English has not been an easy undertaking for most Arab EFL students in Libya, who find it difficult to communicate effectively in the language, particularly since it is not their mother tongue (Mahdi, 2015; Mohammed, 2014).

OCA which is related to fear, unpleasantness and anxiety is commonly acknowledged as one of the most important psychological phenomena to be experienced in many social or learning contexts. According to McCroskey, OCA is the level of anxiety or fear felt by a person facing an actual or expected communication with another person or group of persons. CA is accompanied by a variety of symptoms during the process of communication, including perspiration, stammering,

trembling and a general feeling of anxiety (Neuliep and Croskey, 1997). CA can have an adverse impact on an individual's oral communication skills, social skills and ultimately, the self-esteem of the learner. It is defined as a model of anxiety that is repeatedly created in simple grades. Learners who believe they are incapable of participating in the communication process tend to seat themselves at the rear of the classroom in the hope that they will escape notice and will not be called upon to join in the discourse. In addition, it is common for learners to avoid participating in activities on campus and connecting with their peers, advisors or tutors, even though these are the people who can assist them with their coursework or offer friendly advice (Allen *et al.*, 2004).

The problems caused by OCA can bring about adverse behavioural and physiological issues such as heavy perspiration, a dry mouth, trembling or an increased heart rate during the communication process itself, thereby generally causing intense discomfort to the learner (Drinkwater *et al.*, 1997).

Literature review: In early 1940's, fear and anxiety in students were reportedly linked to communication. Croskey (1970), in referring to it as "communication apprehension", defined it as the degree of nervousness or

fear in a person arising from actual or expected communication with another person or other individuals (Croskey, 1977). The level of communication apprehension differs from one person to another, hence the difference in the degree of wished for effectiveness in communication (Croskey, 1970). Currently, various communication apprehension studies are being carried out. It is true that very little knowledge is available about every feature of the CA phenomenon. According to Wrench and colleagues the CA concept was only primarily examined in the field of communication studies from 1977-1997. The main objective of CA studies is to examine the fear in a person that is associated with communication with others in different contexts, for instance, communication in public, meetings, groups or face-to-face communication. Research has shown that high OCA levels have several unpleasant effects such as worry, pressure, increased heart rate and sweating. As a result, individuals suffering from OCA tend to conceal what they are going through and it is not known how many such people are out there (Daly, 1997).

According to Horwitz (1988), fear is a concealed disorder in communication, given that it is rarely talked about, recognized or acknowledged. It has been discovered that students with OCA in colleges or universities normally perform dismally since some skip classes or even avoid asking any questions. In most cases, these students are not comfortable and prefer modules that require less participation from them, hence eliminating their apprehension of communication (Scott and Timmerman, 2005). Richmond and McCroskey argued that in rare cases, students with high OCA communicate excessively so as to hide their fear but in most cases they keep quiet. OCA is driven by a high level of anxiety in a person. Previous studies on learners with OCA in second language classrooms for the past two decades have managed to record observable manifestations in the classroom (Ernst, 1997). Anxious language students are reported to be very quiet in class and they hardly use the FL. Arnold indicated that students who are apprehensive during classes hardly or never volunteer in class. They appear to be unable to answer even simple questions and can be observed to be engaged in physical actions such as squirming in their seats or fidgeting more than the other students and they tend to play with their pen or hair. These students can also be seen nervously touching objects. When called to answer, they are so nervous in front of the teacher and other learners that they avoid answering questions or their answers will be short and unclear or they dare not even open their mouths (Annisa, 2006).

Rosn did a study of first-year undergraduates at Universiti Utara Malaysia. She observed that learners with

communication apprehension are also passive in the classroom and that apprehension occurs regardless of whether one communicates in the native language or second language. She also stated that CA can be detrimental to the learning of vocabulary in a second language. According to her, CA learners will have problems enriching their repertoire of vocabularies. The lack of vocabulary will in turn impede their communication, resulting in passivity in the language classroom. She also reported that with the subjects of her research, CA cut across gender as both males and females were equally affected. Another interesting finding in her study was that both advanced and beginner speakers of L2 suffered from CA. This finding affirmed Croskey *et al.* (1985)'s claim that CA is not attributed to intelligence.

Apart from that Byrne *et al.* (2012) also interviewed first-year business and accounting students at a higher education institution in Ireland who had been identified with varying levels of OCA. She found that communicating with strangers compared to interacting with friends in any of the four contexts leads to heightened anxiety (Byrne *et al.*, 2012). Similarly, Thaher conducted a study among EFL undergraduate students. She indicated that CA in a foreign language is related to a lack of practice in teaching the language and also to inappropriate pedagogical instructions used by teachers. She also pointed out that the classroom context may be one of the factors contributing to the development of OCA among students.

The problem occurs among EFL/ESL students from middle and high school levels (Chesebro and Croskey, 2001; Horwitz, 1988). Even highly advanced EFL/ESL students at university level are not comfortable speaking the language, particularly in the classroom and when answering the teacher (Aida, 1994; Chesebro and Croskey, 2001; Horwitz, 1988). At this point, it is not too much to say that oral communication skills are important in all fields of education and OCA has an impact on classroom participation. According to a study conducted in Libya among EFL students, the fear of making mistakes, nervousness, feelings of inferiority and the fear of being judged are some of the factors that hinder learners from speaking English proficiently (Mohammed, 2014).

EFL students in Libya are no exception and have also been recognised as experiencing OCA whenever they attend English classes (Elmabruk, 2009; Mohammed, 2014; Mohamad *et al.*, 2009; Pathan *et al.*, 2014). It can be stressful when they are expected to communicate in English, since it is not a language that they use to communicate with their peers who do not comprehend the language (Adebanji, 2014). As a result, they do not adequately exercise their oral English skills. Most English

learners tend to believe that they must never say anything in the language until they can do it correctly and they are sometimes even influenced by their instructors (Diab, 2009; Norton and Tang, 1997).

Though females are more anxious when expressing themselves in English, some studies have shown that they are faster at mastering the language than males (Mohamad *et al.*, 2009). Females are well-motivated and are more positive in their attitude compared to their male counterparts (MacIntyre *et al.*, 2002). Statistical analyses have shown that there is a great difference in the level of communication hesitation experienced by both genders (Frantz *et al.*, 2015). Other factors that affect proficiency in speaking English include the economic status of an individual, academic performance and excellence (Aly and Islam, 2003; Kaur *et al.*, 2010). Individuals who are anxious while speaking their own language experience even more anxiety when speaking a foreign language. A research conducted among Japanese students showed a high level of CA both while using their native language and a foreign language to communicate (Croskey *et al.*, 1985; Singh *et al.*, 2011).

Based on the above issues, this paper arose from the need to have a better understanding of the phenomenon of OCA among EFL learners at Alzytouna University. This paper will also attempt to develop a clearer representation of the overall causes and effects of OCA from both the student's and lecturer's perspective. Moreover, this study is also aimed at establishing the effects of the socio-cultural setting on OCA among EFL learners at Alzytouna University. To achieve these objectives, the study attempts to answer the following research questions. How is OCA among EFL learners in universities affected by the socio-cultural setting in the language classroom?

- What are the social factors within the classroom that influence OCA
- How does the classroom atmosphere affect OCA
- How do interactional features affect oral skills and CA

What are the perceptions of lecturers concerning OCA among EFL learners at Alzytouna University?

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Research approach and data collection: This research establishes the effect of the socio-cultural setting on OCA among EFL learners at Alzytouna University. In achieving this goal, we conducted interviews to EFL students and their lecturers in order to develop an understanding of

“the world from the subjects' point of view, to unfold the meaning of peoples' experiences” as in the research of Byrne *et al.* (2012). The participants for this study were chosen based on the purposeful sampling method (Robinson *et al.*, 2011) whereby only those candidates who would be able to provide rich information with regard to the purpose of the study were selected (Boer *et al.*, 2010). The target population for this study is 30 first-year EFL students and 5 lecturers from the English Department of Alzytouna University in Libya. A digital voice recorder was used to make an audio recording of the interviews, thereby offering the researcher an opportunity to probe the teachers about OCA. The audio recordings were then transcribed using the Transana software which was originally created by Chris Fassnach and developed by David K. Woods at the Wisconsin Centre for Education Research, University of Wisconsin-Madison and includes the Jeffersonian Transcription Notation. Concisely, the participating students and lecturers were interviewed to obtain information that could help explain the nature of OCA experienced by the participants and, in particular, how the socio-cultural setting affects OCA among university EFL learners in the language classroom.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Socio-cultural setting and OCA among EFL learners at alzytouna university: This study discusses the findings of this study based on the research question; how is OCA among EFL learners in universities affected by the socio-cultural setting in the language classroom? Three sub-questions were set to adequately address this question, thus what are the social factors within the classroom that influence OCA? How does the classroom atmosphere affect OCA? How do interactional features affect oral skills and CA? The first question under the socio-cultural effect on OCA was “Who do you want to sit and speak with in the class and why?” Out of 30 students, 27 said they preferred to sit and speak with their classmates or friends. Interview questions for students:

- Who do you want to sit and speak with in the class and why
- Do you feel more anxious if you sat with a male/female and why
- Do you feel anxious if you sat with an extrovert/introvert and why
- Do you support your peers and why
- Do you compete or cooperate with your group members and why
- Do you laugh at your classmate's mistakes and why

- What arrangement makes you more anxious-structured plan (rows and columns) or conference style seating and why
- Do you feel more anxious when you sit with your friend and why
- Do you feel anxious sitting with an unfamiliar classmate and why
- What type of classroom atmosphere makes you more anxious and why

However, 2 students revealed that they preferred to do so with their lecturers while 1 student said it was not a problem to sit and speak with either classmates or lecturers. This finding is in conformity with the study by Parks which stressed that students are less likely to be anxious when speaking with classmates and friends. Moreover, Byrne *et al.* (2012) reported that students feel more comfortable interacting with their classmates as they are at the same level in terms of language and content knowledge. In answering the interview question; “Do you feel more anxious when sitting with a male/female and why?” although 8 out of 30 students said they did not feel anxious, however, 14 female students said they were anxious when they sat next to and spoke to their male classmates. This finding conforms to the finding of Effiong (2013) that anxiety is higher among female students than among male students (Ezzi, 2012; Gaibani and Elmenfi, 2014; Qaddomi, 2013).

When asked if the students feel anxious sitting with an extrovert/introvert, 25 students said they feel anxious sitting with an extrovert, 2 said they became anxious when sitting with an introvert while another 2 said they became anxious when sitting next to either an introvert or extrovert and one student said he feels no anxious when sitting with both. One student feel uncomfortable and anxious with both types of students and only one student said that he had no idea how he feel. Therefore, the case of Libyan students at Alzytouna University, sitting and speaking with extroverts causes them more anxiety than sitting with introverts. This contrasts the findings by Effiong (2013) where the majority of Japanese students feel comfortable conversing with extroverts.

In answering question four of the interview: “Do you support your peers and why?” all the students answered in the affirmative. Among the reasons given were that they were learning mates, they provided them with information and they helped them correct their mistakes. With regard to whether the students competed or cooperated among themselves, 27 out of the 30 students said they competed with their classmates. Whether they competed or cooperated depended on what style the lecturer preferred to use to improve English language

communication among the students because as reflected in their answer to question three above, the students aspired to always support their peers.

Question six, under the socio-cultural effect on OCA, read: “Do you laugh at your classmates’ mistakes and why? Here, 4 students out of 30 revealed that they sometimes laughed at their classmates when they made mistakes, thereby confirming the findings by Alshahrani and Alandal (2015), Phillips (1992) and Tom *et al.* (2013) that students are afraid to speak in front of their classmates because they believe they will be laughed at. Meanwhile, the remaining 26 students said that they did not laugh at their classmates when they made mistakes because they were supposed to motivate each other and besides, the time may come when they might find themselves in the same position. The findings also corresponded with the findings of Horwitz (1996) that some students become anxious because they believe their colleagues will think they are stupid.

According to the responses of the students on the classroom arrangement that make them more anxious, 29 out of the 30 students admitted that the conference style of seating arrangement increased their anxiety, while only one student feared the column style of seating arrangement. This fear of the conference style of seating arrangement among students at Alzytouna University was confirmed by the finding of Effiong (2013) where 50% of his respondents admitted that this seating arrangement raised their anxiety level. Out of 30 students, 26 said that their anxiety level was raised when they had to sit with an unfamiliar person or classmate. This finding was in conformity with the finding by Effiong (2013) where >50% of the respondents expressed a similar opinion. However, three students said they did not feel anxious when sitting next to an unfamiliar classmate. In commenting on the type of classroom atmosphere that made them anxious, 5 students mentioned that the lecturers made them anxious in class, especially when they used complex techniques and did not give them enough opportunities to speak. Meanwhile, 14 students said that a noisy class tended to make them anxious. Nevertheless, the lecturers are responsible for creating a classroom atmosphere that is conducive to learning (Effiong, 2013).

Lecturers’ perceptions on OCA: All the lecturers revealed in their answers to the interview questions that the students were restless and reluctant to express their views, particularly in English, from the podium. This supported the findings of Price and Dawit Tesfaye Abebe. Interview questions for lectures:

- What kinds of situations and language classroom activities have you found to be anxiety provoking for the students why
- What do you think are the causes of students' apprehension while speaking English
- Have you noticed any particular kinds of beliefs or perceptions about learning and speaking English in your students and do you think they play a role in causing oral communication apprehension for the learners? Please explain
- What signs of apprehension have you noticed in anxious learners during your experience of teaching English to EFL learners
- How do you think oral communication apprehension can be successfully controlled in the learners
- What do you think are the socio-cultural factors that cause oral communication apprehension for EFL learners (social status, gender etc.)

According to the lecturers, the students were mainly apprehensive when it came to activities which required them to speak in English. In addition, those who persistently struggled with both listening and reading comprehension displayed a lack of interest in the subject as mentioned by He in some of his findings. The lecturers noticed that the students perceived the foreign language classroom to be the most apprehension-provoking and stressful place to be in because the learning of a foreign language involves a lot of personal interactions. Moreover, students who were apprehensive about communicating would avoid opportunities to use or practice the FL to improve their communication skills. In fact, they were often left far behind as confirmed by Horwitz (1996). All the lecturers noticed that the students developed symptoms of apprehension during communication sessions for language teaching because such sessions required them to interact with each other verbally and since they were not familiar with this type of learning experience, they felt stressful when called upon to answer a question. This finding was supported by McCroskey.

The following are the possible ways, suggested by the lecturers who were interviewed, to reduce oral CA: Lecturers should consider the norms, practices and previous language learning experiences undergone by the learners during their secondary or high school education in an attempt to reduce language anxiety among students. Lecturers and the curriculum designers must put more effort into applying modern methods of teaching that can enhance or improve learning opportunities so as to create an atmosphere that is conducive to learning. In foreign

language classes, non-Libyan university lecturers expect students to speak fluently and freely because they think the students have learnt English during their secondary school years. Lecturers should take note that this is not the case in secondary schools and universities in Libya and they are advised to take this into consideration during their teaching sessions.

Of the five lecturers interviewed, two were locals and three were foreigners. All the lecturers agreed that OCA negatively affects the student's learning of a foreign language, causing them to perhaps stammer while speaking English or to avoid using the language. They also agreed that the level of anxiety among female and male students differed as was discovered from the recorded interviews with the students. The findings from the lecturers were supported by previous studies, for example by He and Saleh.

CONCLUSION

Briefly, this was a qualitative investigation of the phenomenon of OCA among first-year students enrolled in the English Department of Alzytouna University in Libya. From the results of the study, it was obvious that although the individual students experienced different levels of anxiety, these levels generally rose when they were expected to communicate in public. It was also pointed out through the detailed examination that the opinions of peers, previous communication encounters with unfamiliar people and preparatory measures have an effect on OCA. The importance of recording and sharing the information concerning the diverse experiences of students with OCA cannot be stressed enough when it comes to determining the contribution of this research. Most of the previous researches on OCA have been primarily quantitative in nature and left out the actual experiences of the students with regard to CA. The true extent of the anxiety can only be understood in the light of the personal sharing by the students themselves. On the whole, the students revealed that they preferred to sit and speak with their classmates and friends and that sitting with an extrovert student raised their level of anxiety. They also said that they usually competed, rather than cooperated, with their classmates as instructed by their lecturers. Their OCA also arose out of the fear of making a mistake and getting laughed at by their classmates.

These are the social factors within the classroom that influence OCA. On the impact of the classroom atmosphere on OCA, the students believed that their lecturers influenced the atmosphere in the classroom. Lastly, the students revealed that the interactional feature

that affected their CA was the conference style of seating arrangement. In addition, it is recommended that lecturers review their teaching methods, how they relate with their students and how they motivate the students to communicate with each other. In this way, OCA can perhaps be reduced in the classroom when students sense that it is a safe and reassuring place for learning.

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