

The Perceptions of Saudi EFL Students Toward the Effect of Anxiety on Their Oral Communication

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Abstract

Oral communication is one of the most important skills of communication among individuals with each other. It refers to communication between the students and their teachers through the spoken language, which includes a group of distinctive words, phrases, and sentences which are associated with specific meanings. However, there are many barriers that affect this communication. Therefore, this study addresses some of the barriers of anxiety when communicating using the English language in which it constitutes a major problem for EFL students and hinders their goals in learning the English language. This study aims to investigate the EFL students' perceptions towards the effect of anxiety on their oral communication in various Saudi universities. Moreover, it explores some strategies that may help EFL students to overcome this problem. The research instrument used in this study was a questionnaire that was modified for the purposes of the study. The questionnaire consisted of 20 items divided into two parts. Furthermore, 102 EFL students participated in this study. The results showed that EFL students suffer from anxiety while speaking English, whether in a discussion class with the teacher or when presenting a presentation. The participants also agreed with most of the strategies stated in the survey. Based on the findings, recommendations and suggestions for further research are provided.

Keywords: oral communication, anxiety, communication barriers, speaking strategy, perceptions

1. Introduction

1.1 Overview

English is an international language as it is the most widely spoken language in all nations. It is recognized as an official language in 53 countries, and the number of people who can speak English is approximately 400 million around the world (Ilyosovna, 2020). Moreover, this dominant position of the English language enables individuals to interact with new people and build social relationships due to its significance around the world. Oral communication is a verbal form of communication where one conveys his/her thinking and share knowledge with other people. Recently, the prominence of communicative skills in speaking has grown, not only as a productive skill but also as an interactive skill. Oral communication assists in building confidence and reliability as well. The process of oral communication is more effective than a text message; an individual can depend on oral communication to get the targeted point and avoid misunderstandings (Harappa, 2020).

The process of communication has multiple barriers that face EFL learners when they want to learn English. The barriers that affect communication could include many types such as linguistic, psychological, emotional, physical, and cultural barriers. Linguistic barriers encompass the use of different languages, accents, colloquial or jargon that may discourage communication and negotiation efforts. Physical and psychological barriers include geographical distances, background noise, subpar or malfunctioning equipment, and visual, auditory, or speech impairments. Emotional barriers involve emotions such as anger, fear, sadness, and anxiety which are related to speaking a language and pronouncing words incorrectly. Cultural barriers, such as certain attitudes, the feeling of being always right, or the belief of superiority or inferiority, affect objectivity and form some stereotypical assumptions about people depending on their cultural heritage and about how those people perceive and communicate with each other (Toppr, n.d.).

Anxiety is one of the most important barriers that can block oral communication. An anxiety barrier refers to a state of being nervous, worried, or uneasy about uncertainty about something. It can cause individuals to lose

confidence (Huang, 2018). They may feel so alone, frightened, frozen, and unable to take an action. Furthermore, anxiety problems restrict the chances of speaking English and hence pose a serious threat to oral communication. Moreover, it presents a miscellaneous language barrier for EFL students. When individuals feel anxious, they try to avoid talking to others in different ways such as avoiding eye contact and speaking in a low voice. In addition, anxiety about making some mistakes when pronouncing some words is another problem that prevents people from communicating effectively. When learners feel anxious, they may not attend their classes, disregard submitting their assignments, avoid discussing and participating in classes, speak in a subtly muted voice, or sit at the back of the class to reduce embarrassment when they are called to participate. Moreover, some EFL learners become very anxious when enrolling in a language course or are emotionally affected by unsuccessful performance and a low level of achievement. Accordingly, they may dislike learning the language and choose not to study at all (Azagra, 2017). However, there is a dearth of studies conducted on this topic in Saudi Arabia. Therefore, this study investigates the perceptions of Saudi EFL students regarding the impact of anxiety on their oral communication to fill this gap in the literature. In addition, this study attempts to address the following questions:

- 1) What are the anxiety barriers that Saudi EFL students face when communicating orally?
- 2) What are the strategies used by Saudi EFL students to overcome anxiety when communicating orally?

By shedding light on the barriers related to anxiety in oral communication, this study addresses a significant challenging issue encountered by EFL students when orally communicating and offers several practical strategies to overcome anxiety-related barriers. Furthermore, for teachers, this study can increase their awareness regarding such barriers and provide them with some implications that can help them to succeed in facing EFL learners' language anxiety. It aims to create a supportive learning environment where EFL students can confidently speak and achieve their language learning goals. Additionally, this research contributes to the existing body of knowledge as a stepping-stone for conducting future investigations in the aspect, as it paves the way for further exploration of anxiety's influence on oral communication and opens avenues for enhancing targeted outcomes.

1.2 Literature Review

English language is dominant in the world of economics, media, academia, and entertainment. English as a foreign language has become an important component of the curricula in the educational systems of developing societies (Guilherme, 2009). Moreover, it is one of the most significant languages in the world, and because it is an international language and is recognized worldwide, its role is being strengthened in the current globalized world. That being the case, recently English language teaching, as a rising field, has been called into question (Karakas, 2012). English is universally recognized as a necessary language and Saudi Arabia is not an exception in this regard. English is taught in Saudi schools and universities with primary interest, as it is the language of all fields, such as science, technology, and in political or diplomatic dialogues. However, similar to non-native learners in other non-native countries, Saudi learners also encounter many challenges in their attempts to acquire proficiency in English (Al-Nasser, 2015).

1.2.1 Oral Communication

Oral communication skills can be defined as person-to-person or group-to-person communication, face-to-face communication, marital or group discussions, telephone conversations, interviews and meetings, speaking at seminars, and negotiation (Rahman, 2010). They are essential to an EFL student's academic achievement and future employment success. Nowadays, in challenging and competitive environments, students must master the oral skills necessary to increase their future learning and employment opportunities because academic experience alone is not enough. In addition, oral communication refers to the process of conveying thoughts, opinions, and beliefs through the spoken language, and accordingly, this holds an emphasized significance in EFL learners' lives. The principle of oral communication has begun with the home environment, while the school settings further improve this skill through teaching EFL students how to sufficiently communicate with their colleagues and teachers as well as to instill professionalism in speaking style and self-expression. These traits will put students in a good position in their careers (Lucanus, 2017). There are many circumstances in which oral communication is better than written communication. For example, it is effective in clearing up misunderstandings that could not be apparent in written messages. Moreover, when time becomes shorter and work requires quick decisions, oral communication may be the best option to use. These decisions can be made through an urgent meeting, a face-to-face conversation, or by phone call (Daniels, 2021).

1.2.2 Anxiety and Oral Communication

Anxiety is a state of nervousness, hesitation, or fear resulting from anticipating something frightening (Scovel, 1991). Verbal anxiety is defined as a fear associated with oral communication (McCroskey & Daly, 1970). The

distinctive elements of context, which are physical, psychological, social, and temporal, play an important role in speech. The state of the listeners also makes the speaker anxious and stressed to speak with confidence. It can be generally signaled to as the apprehension experienced by a person when asked to speak in L1 or L2. According to Horwitz (2001), speech anxiety is one of the negative phenomena that most EFL learners suffer from, and it has an impact on their linguistic and educational acquisition. In addition, anxiety is intuitively recognized by many language learners negatively regarding their language learning. According to Zheng (2008), anxiety may impact the speed and accuracy of speaking, hindering effective communication. This is potentially because anxiety can disrupt the process of recalling information, creating anxious and uneasy moments for EFL students and, accordingly, affecting their abilities to effectively communicate. McCroskey and Daly (1976) demonstrate that high speech anxiety negatively affects the academic success of learners who are highly anxious more than learners with a low level of speech anxiety. Moreover, teachers may ignore learners with high speech anxiety and do not expect much from them considering them underachieved students.

1.2.3 Strategies to Overcome Anxiety while Orally Communicating

Nelson and Wilson (2008) argue that the efficacy of a particular teaching method may not be both sufficient and necessary. Ultimately, each teacher can decide whether or not to adopt a new teaching method. Students have to accept the nature of misunderstanding from others and anxiety during conversation and the best speakers can fall into this barrier. They must also work to solve this problem, which has a negative impact on them. Moreover, one of the things that make one good in a dialogue is that there is a goal for this dialogue and that the topic is in line with the interlocutors' goals so that they can respond and understand each other easily. Furthermore, when an individual talks with people of the same level of education, the communication is successful, and the goals of both parties can likely be achieved. In addition, communication skills improve as it is known that the first step of successful communication is speaking (Erven, 2022). An important strategy for overcoming anxiety while speaking is to use simple language. Using easy, simple, and clear words contributes to pronouncing these words easily and other people can understand them clearly. It is best to avoid long words with difficult pronunciations as they can put a student in a confusing situation when pronouncing them. Moreover, it is better to choose calm places rather than noisy or distributing places because it is one of the obstacles to successful communication since it prevents a learner from clearly understanding the other party (Kapur, 2018).

1.2 Previous Studies

Ibrahim and Amin (2020) conducted a study to investigate the important factors that contribute to increasing foreign language speaking anxiety among EFL Kurdish students as well as students' perspectives on speaking anxiety. The results were that the students had a moderate level of anxiety while speaking. The main reason that led to EFL students' anxiety while speaking was being afraid of making mistakes, receiving negative feedback and quick immediate questions, and speaking in front of the audience. Moreover, Said and Weda (2018) investigated the impact of the English language anxiety on EFL students' oral communication at English Education Study Program. The results of the study showed that the higher the anxiety is, the lower the students' performance happens and vice versa. In addition, Tanveer (2007) examined the factors contributing to language anxiety, including both external and internal effects inside and outside the classroom. The results emphasized that language anxiety can arise from learners' self-concept, self-perception, disparities in learners' and target language cultures, language learning difficulties, and differences in speakers' social conditions. Furthermore, Aydoğan et al. (2013) researched on the anxiety experienced by Turkish and Bosnian students in language classes. The results were that the anxiety the participants felt was caused by personal reasons, high personal expectations, self-comparison with other students, and negative self-assessment of ability. Additionally, Khan (2015) implemented a study to assess the anxiety levels experienced by ESL/EFL learners at HITEC University, Taxila, Pakistan. The findings showed that language anxiety stems from several sources, including pedagogical, psychological, socio-economic, linguistic, and cultural factors. To address this issue, he suggested a variety of strategies to overcome anxiety within academic settings. It was found that adopting a communicative approach in classrooms could be beneficial in reducing the negative impact of anxiety among language learners. In addition, Mayangta (2013) examined students' anxiety about speaking in an English language class. The results showed that anxiety affected students' performance in learning English, mostly in speaking.

Moreover, Mulyani (2018) scrutinized the factors leading to language anxiety among EFL learners and how to alleviate this problem. The outcome of the research highlighted some reasons why EFL students are worried about speaking English. These reasons were categorized into three main groups: psychological and linguistic category, relevant individual category, and social and cultural category. This research also found some strategies for alleviating with anxiety in speaking English such as creating friendly and less formal classes. Furthermore, Sunarya and Pitaloka (2018) investigated the students' perceptions of linguistic anxiety in speaking skills. The

result was that the students were afraid of being laughed at when they were practicing the language and felt nervous when they spoke of different fears when they were talking with native speakers. Also, Pakpahan and Gultom (2022) investigated how Indonesian students rated their anxiety levels when speaking English. The outcome was that language exchange websites play a role in reducing students' language anxiety. Additionally, Waluyo and Rofiah (2021) examined the effect of the relationship between self-confidence, teacher feedback, and English proficiency on improving EFL students' oral presentation skills. The outcome revealed that self-confidence is affected by some factors, which are situational and potential confidence and confidence in communication. Furthermore, Tian and Mahmud (2018) investigated the elements that have an impact on academic oral presentation anxiety. The findings revealed that the presentation content, oral proficiency, and delivery skills could be sources of anxiety.

In addition, Raja (2017) investigated the causes that lead to students' anxiety. The results showed that students who suffered from speech anxiety could overcome this anxiety when using certain strategies such as receiving proper counselling, training, and instructions. Also, this study confirmed that having EFL learners engaged in virtual environments may increase their self-confidence and help them to present irrespective of the size of the audience. Furthermore, Ariska (2019) examined students' strategies to resolve the problems associated with anxiety when speaking English. This study proved that students could overcome their fears, build their self-confidence, and improve speaking skills by implementing some strategies such as thorough preparation, positive thinking, presenting oneself well, maintaining good health, smiling, and seeking feedback from supervisors and colleagues, including several aspects such as grammar, pronunciation, and overall performance corrections. Additionally, incorporating relaxation techniques before and during the presentation can contribute to a more composed and confident delivery. Moreover, Budiman (2018) attempted to search for the factors and causes of anxiety among students and the strategies. The outcome showed that most students suffered from severe anxiety about exams and communication with others. In addition, the most commonly used strategies for overcoming anxiety are the cognitive strategy and the memory strategy. In their study, Kayaoglu and Saglamel (2013) revealed that there are many reasons that contribute to language anxiety in speaking classes such as linguistics difficulties (related to vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation), cognitive challenges (associated with being afraid of failing when speaking in front of others or even when communicating with others, of having exams, or of making mistakes, or lack of self-esteem), the teacher's role, competitiveness, and lack of information.

2. Methodology

2.1 Participants

This study was conducted in the second semester of the academic year 2022 and involved 102 EFL students. The percentages of participants consisted of 19.6% males and 80.4% females, representing different educational levels and various universities in Saudi Arabia.

2.2 Instrument

To answer the research questions about the Saudi EFL students' perceptions towards the effect of anxiety on their oral communication, a quantitative questionnaire was used. The questionnaire used a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 "strongly disagree" to 5 "strongly agree". It consisted of 10 statements regarding the anxiety barriers, which were taken from Ibrahim and Amin's (2020) study, and 10 statements about the strategies that may be used to overcome these barriers, which were developed by the researchers specifically to suit the purpose of the study.

2.2.1 Reliability of the instrument

According to Artstein and Poesio (2008), a research instrument is considered reliable if the total value of Cronbach's Alpha is 80% or higher. In this study, Cronbach's Alpha was 0.90, asserting the reliability of the instrument used (see Table 1).

Table 1. The reliability of the instrument

Cronbach's Alpha	No. of Items
.90	20

2.2.2 Validity of the instrument

The questionnaire items were given to a panel of EFL instructors to validate them. Based on their comments and suggestions, the researchers fixed whatever needed to be fixed. Therefore, the validity was accomplished. Moreover, in quantitative research, validity is measured to examine to what extent the tool can measure what the

study was set out to measure. To ensure the validity of the questionnaire, the Pearson test was used to measure the correlation coefficient between each item and the whole field. According to Table 2, the importance values were less than 0.05. Hence, the measurement of the fields was valid to achieve the main objective of the study.

Table 2. The correlation coefficient of items

No.	Items	Pearson Correlation	P-Value
A1	I become anxious when my English teacher asks questions for which I have not got any opportunity to prepare in advance.	.787**	<.001
A2	I become anxious when I want to say something in English, but I cannot find the right word.	.605**	<.001
A3	I become embarrassed when my English teacher tells me something and I cannot understand it.	.643**	<.001
A4	I get stressed when I speak in my English class.	.725**	<.001
A5	I feel nervous when I speak English with English native speakers.	.550**	.001
A6	I feel pessimistic that my English presentation will not satisfy the audience.	.670**	<.001
A7	I am afraid of forgetting what I am going to say in the English discussion class.	.696**	<.001
A8	I get anxious when I am unable to understand the meaning of every word my English teacher utters.	.641**	<.001
A9	I keep thinking that the other students can speak English better than me.	.702**	<.001
A10	I become anxious and concerned about the potential for my classmates to laugh at me when I speak English.	.600**	<.001
A11	I plan, prepare, and practice my English presentation a week in advance.	.720**	<.001
A12	I take a minimum of three deep breaths before starting my English presentation.	.482**	.006
A13	I ask my teacher for suggestions to avoid my anxiety in the English discussion.	.494**	.005
A14	I join online conversation classes to improve my speaking skill.	.390*	.030
A15	I prefer one-to-one conversations to overcome my anxiety when speaking English.	.489**	.005
A16	When people speak English slowly with me, this makes it easier for me to understand and reply.	.545**	.002
A17	When people speak English slowly with me, this makes me less anxious.	.410*	.022
A18	I focus on my presentation, not on the audience when I speak English.	.455*	.010
A19	I prefer to join different phone applications that provide the opportunities to speak English with the native speakers.	.670**	<.001
A20	I like to get feedback after presenting my English presentation.	.476**	.007

Note. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2tailed).**

3. Results and Discussion

The table below summarizes the key findings and provides an overview of the participants' challenges and the strategies they use to overcome anxiety.

Table 3. The result of mean scores, standard deviations, and ranks

No.	Items	Mean	Std.Dev	Rank
A1	I become anxious when my English teacher asks questions for which I have not got any opportunity to prepare in advance.	3.24	1.05	10
A2	I become anxious when I want to say something in English, but I cannot find the right word.	3.25	1.07	9
A3	I become embarrassed when my English teacher tells me something and I cannot understand it.	3.18	1.26	12
A4	I get stressed when I speak in my English class.	2.96	1.21	19
A5	I feel nervous while speaking English with native speakers.	3.18	1.29	13
A6	I feel pessimistic that my English presentation will not satisfy the audience.	3.10	1.27	17
A7	I am afraid of forgetting what I am going to say in the English discussion class.	3.13	1.12	15
A8	I get anxious when I am unable to understand the meaning of every word my English teacher utters.	3.14	1.17	14
A9	I keep thinking that the other students can speak English better than me.	3.31	1.18	7
A10	I become anxious and concerned about the potential for my classmates to laugh at me when I speak English.	2.62	1.27	20
A11	I plan, prepare, and practice my English presentation a week in advance.	3.08	1.25	18
A12	I take a minimum of three deep breaths before starting my English presentation.	3.30	1.19	8
A13	I ask my teacher for suggestions to avoid my anxiety in the English discussion.	3.10	1.23	16
A14	I join online conversation classes to improve my speaking skill.	3.21	1.16	11

A15	I prefer one-to-one conversations to overcome my anxiety when speaking English.	3.38	1.10	6
A16	When people speak English slowly with me, this makes it easier for me to understand and reply.	3.51	1.18	4
A17	When people speak English slowly with me, this makes me less anxious.	3.55	1.11	2
A18	I focus on my presentation, not on the audience when I speak English.	3.51	1.08	3
A19	I prefer to join different phone applications that provide the opportunities to speak English with the native speakers.	3.46	1.09	5
A20	I like to get feedback after presenting my English presentation.	3.75	1.07	1

Regarding the first question of the research which is “What are the anxiety barriers that Saudi EFL students face when communicating orally?”, the findings showed that the participants agreed that they feel anxious when the teacher asks a question that is not prepared in advance. Moreover, they admitted that they become nervous when trying to communicate in English but struggling to find the right words or when speaking in English classes. These results are in line with the findings reported by Ibrahim and Amin (2020), who asserted that the participants agreed that they become anxious about speaking because of their fear of making mistakes or speaking in front of others. Moreover, the participants acknowledged the feeling of being nervous about talking with English native speakers or being unsatisfied about how they present in front of the audience, which confirms the findings taken from Sunarya and Pitaloka’s (2018) study. In addition, the participants ensured that they feel pessimistic when they present a presentation in English, and it will not satisfy the audience the students. This is consistent with the findings of the study conducted by Tian and Mahmud (2018), stating that one of the most important causes of anxiety is stress and anxiety during the presentation. In addition, the participants agreed that they think that other students can speak English better than them, which is consistent with the findings of the study conducted by Aydoğan et al. (2013). Also, the participants acknowledged that they are afraid of forgetting what they are going to say in English discussion classes, which is in line with the result of the study implemented by Mayangta (2013) that claimed that anxiety affects students’ performance, especially in speaking. Moreover, the respondents expressed that the inability to understand what their teacher says is one of the essential reasons for being embarrassed. This result supports what Kayaoglu and Saglamel (2013) stated.

Regarding the second question of the research which is “What are the strategies used by Saudi EFL students to overcome anxiety when communicating orally?”, the participants confirmed that they tend to use some strategies to avoid anxiety while speaking. They indicated that the processes of planning, preparing, and practicing before attending any English class help them overcome the anxiety barrier. Also, they asserted that when they practice speaking using different means of communication with native speakers, assisting them in reducing their anxiety. This corroborates the findings of Pakpahan and Gultom (2022) study. In addition, the participants showed that they tend to seek advice from their teachers to avoid anxiety when performing English-related tasks. This is in line with the findings reported by Waluyo and Rofiah (2021). Moreover, according to the students’ responses, they agreed that joining online classes helps them overcome anxiety and develop their English-speaking skills. They also prefer one-to-one conversations to overcome their fear associated with speaking. These two results are in line with the findings of the study conducted by Raja (2017). Additionally, the participants agreed that they overcome anxiety during the presentation when they apply the strategy of breathing three times before starting. Moreover, some of the participants confirmed that they focus on their performance in the show rather than the audience. These are in line with the study conducted by Ariska (2019). In addition, the participants showed that they agreed that speaking slowly enables them to understand and respond to others, which is consistent with the study conducted by Budiman (2018).

Based on the results mentioned above, it is evident that combining pre-class preparation, practice, seeking guidance, and employing relaxation techniques can enable EFL learners to cope with language anxiety when speaking in English. Educators and language instructors can engage these strategies in their teaching methodologies to create a supportive and anxiety-free learning environment. Additionally, providing opportunities for students to integrate in one-to-one conversations, online classes, and practice with native speakers can further enhance their self-confidence and proficiency in English speaking.

4. Conclusion

This research sheds light on the factors that contribute to language anxiety when speaking in English, as well as the strategies that students utilize to overcome this anxiety. The findings reveal that EFL students often experience anxiety when they encounter unprepared questions, difficulties in finding the right words, speaking in front of others, and the fear of making mistakes. These factors align with previous studies and emphasize the negative impact of anxiety on students’ English-speaking performance. To alleviate language anxiety, there are many crucial

strategies suggested such as pre-class planning, preparation, and practice, engaging in conversations with native speakers, seeking guidance from instructors, participating in online classes, engaging in one-to-one conversations, using relaxation techniques, and focusing on personal performance rather than the audience. These strategies have been found to be sufficient in reducing anxiety and boosting English-speaking skills.

The implications of this study emphasize the significance of creating a supportive and anxiety-free learning environment in English language education. Educators and language instructors can incorporate these strategies into their teaching methodologies to help students overcome language anxiety and enhance their proficiency in speaking. Additionally, allowing EFL students to be engaged in authentic conversations and interact with native speakers can further enhance their self-confidence and communication skills. Future research could explore additional strategies and interventions to address language anxiety, as well as investigate the long-term effects of these strategies on students' overall language proficiency and their ability to communicate effectively in real-life contexts. By continuing to explore and implement effective approaches, educators and language instructors can support students in beating language anxiety and fostering their language development.

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