

COMMUNICATION ANXIETY OF ARAB UNIVERSITY EFL STUDENTS: OCCURRENCE, PREVENTION AND REMEDIES

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ABSTRACT: *This paper explores the incidence of communication anxiety as well as evaluative anxiety among university EFL students in four countries in the Arabian Peninsula (Bahrain, Oman, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE), and examines factors associated with anxiety in the classroom. The study discusses the nature, implications, some causes and effects of communication anxiety and suggests possible prevention and coping strategies to this problem.*

KEYWORDS: communication anxiety, apprehension, EFL, Arab students, coping strategies, anxiety prevention.

INTRODUCTION

Students' feeling of anxiety and stress during day-to-day classroom interaction and during periodic evaluation and assessment has been one of the major obstacles that students and educators face in the Arabian Peninsula. The unwillingness to stand up and speak up in the classroom could be due to an increasing nervousness usually caused by feelings a person undergoes when being evaluated and judged by others. This feeling has afflicted most classrooms in all educational levels and has created numerous obstacles against students' learning. The term used by many psychology and communication scholars to refer to this phenomenon is "communication apprehension" (Amiri and Puteh, 2018; Braggs, 2017; McCroskey, 1976, 1977, 1984; Noor, et al, 2015; Opt & Loffredo, 2000; VonWorde, 2003). This kind of anxiety is also known as "evaluative anxiety," "speech fright" or "communication anxiety," and represents the tension that people undergo when they anticipate or participate in oral activities, for fear of being evaluated and/or judged by an audience, in a variety of settings.

Communication anxiety/apprehension (CA) is a type of fear that can profoundly influence anyone's written and oral communication skills, social skills, and self-esteem. Adverse academic repercussions for students who witness high communication anxiety have been well documented and consist of low performance in college placement exams,

negative attitudes towards school, lower grades in classes, and low classroom attainment and aspirations (Bourhis & Noland, 1990; Bourhis & Allen, 1992, 1996; Ericson & Gardner, 1992; Aly & Islam, 2005).

METHODOLOGY

This study builds on an earlier exploratory study (Jendli, 2007) which was conducted with high school students in the UAE. The present study examines the incidence of, and explores some of the factors associated with, communication apprehension and anxiety in English as a foreign language (EFL) university classrooms in the Arabian Peninsula. Some of the factors associated with this type of anxiety can be student's personality, classroom activities, or the instructor's style and rapport with students. The effects of CA could be hesitation or total reticence to communicate in EFL in many settings, apathy towards the language, low academic achievement, and potentially long-lasting communication and academic problems.

Research Questions

1. Do students in Arabian Peninsula universities experience Communication Anxiety when speaking English?
2. What is the level of students' communication anxiety?
3. Which ones of these factors are associated with their anxiety when speaking English?
 - Perception about own language competency
 - Perception about instructor's role in class
 - Students' Personality
 - Perception about instructional materials and time allocated to oral activities.
4. What do students think of the importance of English in their lives?
5. How do we remedy the problems of communication and evaluative anxiety?

Population and Demographics

The participants of this study were 158 university students from four countries in the Arabian Peninsula: Bahrain, Oman, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates. Sampling was one of convenience. Several colleagues from these countries assisted in the collection of data in their respective universities. The students' samples were taken from University ESL/EFL programs and from more advanced English classes. Permission to conduct this study was taken from all participants. Classroom instructors helped administer the survey to their respective students, a total of 170. The students were asked for consent before participation in the study, and 158 was the final sample.

Country	Number	Percent
Bahrain	32	20.25
Oman	35	22.15
Saudi Arabia	38	24.10
UAE	53	33.50
Total	158	100%

Table 1. Country of Participants

Age	Number	Percent
16-18	60	38
19-21	52	32.9
22-24	46	29.1

Table 2. Age of Participants**Research Instrument**

Students who agreed to participate were asked to fill out a questionnaire. The purpose of the survey was to examine the participants' feelings about communication when they spoke English in various settings as well as explore factors that might contribute to, or ease, communication anxiety. The survey consisted of two sections. The first part of the survey consisted of the *Personal Report on Communication Apprehension* discussed in details below, and the second part consisted of several questions about:

- English instructors' teaching styles,
- the English curriculum,
- and students' opinions about the importance of English in their lives.

Personal Report on Communication Apprehension (PRCA-24)

This valid and reliable instrument to measure communication anxiety was designed by McCroskey (1984). The PRCA consists of 24 items that elicit an individual's personal feelings about communication. It includes six items in each of four communication settings:

- (1) Group discussions
- (2) Conversations in meetings
- (3) Interpersonal conversations
- (4) Public Speaking.

The instrument uses a five-step Likert-type scale, and allows researchers to calculate five CA scores for participants, one for each of the four communication settings and one overall score. The reliability of this survey instrument exceeds (0.90). The reliability of the instrument was tested with Arab students in a prior pilot study and a score of (0.87) was obtained (Jendli, 2007). The instrument was given in English with Arabic translation to ensure maximum understanding. Statistical software was utilized to compute frequencies, correlations, and regressions.

The PRCA offers results on how much fear/anxiety a person feels in a range of contexts. Total scores range from 24 to 120. Scores above 72 indicate more anxiety about communication than the average person. Scores above 85 show a very high level of communication anxiety. Scores below 59 indicate a very low level of apprehension. The higher the score, the more anxiety you feel. Scores on the four different contexts can range from a low of 6 to a high of 30. Scores above 18 indicate some degree of apprehension. For example, if one scores above 18 for the public speaking context, one is probably similar to the overwhelming majority of people around the world.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

What is Communication Anxiety?

Communication apprehension is “an individual’s level of fear or anxiety associated with either real or anticipated communication with another person or persons” (McCroskey, 1984, p.13). A person with high levels of CA undergoes a distinct feeling of discomfort when communicating or during any type of evaluation; certain physiological effects could also be present, such as increase in heart beats, shaking, and augmented sweat. At this level, communication apprehension, in its worst form, is a form of sickness that could have more side effects.

Some scholars note that the phenomenon of communication anxiety is more complex than the initial stage fright frequently found in speech classrooms, school assemblies, and theater platforms. It is believed that the pattern of anxiety can be established often in early childhood and can profoundly affect a student's communication activities, social skills, and self-esteem (Holbrook, 1987).

Communication apprehension is therefore a real issue that needs to be researched, studied, detected, and treated as early as possible. Studies found that as many as eighty percent of the U.S. population believe that speaking publicly is the most fearful thing to be asked to do. This anxiety is a more significant problem at the elementary school level. Research reveals that at least 11 percent of the elementary students experience severe

CA, and an additional 20 percent may experience enough anxiety to warrant some sort of intervention (Harris, 1980; Garrison and Garrison, 1979; Wheelless, 1971).

Characteristics of Communication Anxiety

Communication anxiety occurs in a variety of ways and forms. On one side of the span there is *trait communication anxiety* “a relatively enduring personality-type orientation towards a given mode of communication across a wide variety of contexts” (McCroskey, 1984, p.16). When CA exists as a trait, it means that the anxiety about communication is present regardless of any outside factors. It is argued that children are born with certain personality predispositions or tendencies which affects how they will react to environmental stimuli. This type of CA creates a great amount of difficulty for its sufferers because it’s ingrained in their personality. The anxiety that an individual with trait CA experiences is real. It is very real just like any other phobia. Therefore, forcing people with high CA to communicate constitutes the wrong solution for the problem. Trait-like CA could be changed when treated, but shows resistance towards change.

Context-based communication anxiety is an anxiety experienced by people in certain contexts, “a relatively enduring personality-type orientation towards communication in a given context” (McCroskey, 1984, p. 16). Some people are anxious only in certain types of settings. It means that there are general types of communication settings that evoke anxiety in the communicator. The most common context for CA is public speaking or when one is being evaluated through an exam or during an interview. For many students, it is the classroom environment that generates apprehension. In fact, it has been shown that communication apprehension can interfere with cognitive processing and memory. The important thing to remember about Context-based CA is that the person experiences anxiety in contexts specific to them.

The construct of context-based, or situation-specific, anxiety was clearly articulated through the concept of *foreign language anxiety* (Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope, 1986). Placing language anxiety in the framework of related concepts of anxiety, the authors recognized that language anxiety is largely independent of the other types of anxiety. “Language anxiety can be defined as the feeling of tension and apprehension specifically associated with second language contexts, including speaking, listening, and learning. In the past few years, research has shown that language anxiety is the specific type of anxiety most closely associated with second language performance” (Horwitz, Horwitz & Cope, 1986; MacIntyre & Gardner, 1989, 1991, p. 284 in MacIntyre & Gardner, 1994). This kind of anxiety has a detrimental effect on students’ overall academic performance (Horwitz, 2007). Ying (2008) added that language anxiety is caused in part by the

student's beliefs about language learning, the teacher/learner interactions, classroom rules, and language tests and performance evaluation.

In addition to having issues with contexts, there may be certain categories of people that stimulate an anxiety response. This is known as *people-based communication anxiety* which is people-specific and usually is not the same from one person to another. Fear is experienced when communicating with a specific individual or group of individuals across time. Examples might be employee/boss or student/teacher communication. Audience-based communication anxiety is a relatively "enduring orientation towards communication with a given person or group of people" (McCroskey, 1984, p.17).

On the far side of the range a person may experience *state communication anxiety* only with a given individual or group in a single situation, "a transitory orientation towards communication with a given person or group of people" (McCroskey, 1984, p.17). Sometimes, circumstances may cause the person to become uneasy about communication. *State CA* takes place when specific conditions lead the average person to become fearful about communicating in situations where they would otherwise be comfortable.

McCroskey and Richmond (1988) did a survey on small groups and communication apprehension. They found that there was more of a high level of trait-like CA than any other type of CA. They also learned that among the different types of CA: the highest was in public speaking, which was 70 percent. The next was meetings, where 50 percent experienced high CA. The third was group interaction, at 25 percent, and interpersonal communication at 10 percent (Pearson & Nelson, 2000).

Effects of Communication Anxiety

Communication Apprehension could have damaging effects academically. As a result of fear or anxiety, students with high levels of CA usually avoid communication where possible, like choosing a seat in a classroom where they would not be very visible or choosing careers where communication plays a minor role. They would try to withdraw from communication by minimizing speech and limiting communication to the absolute necessary and only when called upon. Disruption of communication in people with high levels of CA could take the form of stuttering when called upon or pretending not to know the answer to a question addressed to them. (Richmond & McCroskey 1989, pp.60-61). Students with high CA tend to have dropout from school more often than students with lower CA (McCroskey, Booth-Butterfield and Payne, 1989, p.100). Academically, students with high levels of CA tend to do worse than those with lower CA (Bourhis & Allen, 1992, p. 68).

Some possible explanations for the lower academic success of the students with higher communication anxiety could be that they have tendencies not to interact and not to ask questions even if they do not understand. Moreover, teachers may develop negative impressions about students with high levels of CA (McCroskey and Daly, 1976, p. 67). Students who are high CA, if not identified as such, are often evaluated as less capable. In addition to lower academic performance, higher CA students may be more absent from schools, may call in sick more often, and may eventually drop out. They tend not to participate in class and may go to great lengths to withdraw and avoid communication.

Socially and professionally, people with high levels of CA generally have lower self-esteem and have smaller friendship networks. This is not surprising given the fact that relationships are a product of communication. High CA people do not occupy managerial posts, are not very assertive and tend to be drawn toward fields that seemingly require less communication (McCroskey, Daly, Richmond and Falcione, 1977, p. 269; Richmond & McCroskey 1989, pp. 52-59).

Students of English as Foreign Language (EFL):

Many studies found that students of English as Foreign Language experience CA and can become withdrawn in the classroom. (Abusin and Zainab, 2010; Noor, et al, 2015; Vitasari, et al, 2011) Because they do not have effective communication skills in the foreign language, EFL students tend to be much less willing to communicate at all for fear of failure and possible negative consequences. For example, one study found that 43 % of Puerto Rican students experienced CA when speaking their second language, English, compared to only 11% when they were speaking their native language, Spanish (McCroskey, Gudykunst & Nishida, 1985).

Research has consistently revealed that anxiety can affect and even hinder foreign language acquisition, production and achievement (Asker, 1995; Bailey, 1983; Crookal and Oxford, 1991; Ely, 1986; Horwitz, 2007; Horwitz, Horwitz, & Cope, 1986; Horwitz & Young, 1991; Ganschow & Sparks, 1996; Gregersen & Horwitz, 2002; Jung & McCroskey, 2004; MacIntyre, 1995; MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991; 1994; Muchnick & Wolfe, 1982; Price, 1988, 1991; Roth, 2008; Schlesinger, 1995; Trylong, 1987; Von Worde, 1998, 2003; Young, 1990, 1991, 1992).

Indeed, Campbell & Ortiz, (1991) reported that perhaps one-half of all language students experience a high level of anxiety. Language anxiety is experienced by foreign language learners and poses potential problems “because it can interfere with the acquisition,

retention and production of the new language” (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991, p. 86, quoted in Von Worde, 2003, p. 2).

SURVEY RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The overall PRCA score shows that 60% of the survey participants do experience a high level of CA (HCA) whereas 40% have low level of CA (LCA). On the two extremes of the scale, 28% of students suffer from a very high level of CA and 12% enjoy a very low CA. Interestingly, students from all four countries displayed comparable PRCA scores. Therefore, distinction by country of origin will not be invoked in all cases as the population under investigation seems to be homogenous in terms of CA.

HCA: 60% (mean score 85)	Very HCA: 28% (score 95)
LCA: 40% (mean score 58)	Very LCA: 12% (score 45)

Table 3. Overall Communication Apprehension Score

Country	HCA	LCA	Very HCA	Very LCA
Bahrain	63%	37%	29%	13%
Oman	59%	41%	27%	12%
Saudi Arabia	58%	42%	29%	11%
UAE	60%	40%	27%	12%

Table 4. Communication Apprehension by Country

Settings	High Communication Apprehension (%)	Average Communication Apprehension (%)
Group Discussions	50 %	50 %
Speaking in Meetings	60 %	40 %
Interpersonal Conversations	63 %	37 %
Public Speaking	67 %	33 %

Table 5. Communication Apprehension by Setting

With the exception of the group discussions context, participants experienced a high level of communication anxiety in the other three settings. Students felt anxious talking in meetings, having a one-on-one conversation with a new acquaintance or someone they did not know well, and giving a presentation or speech in public. Understandably, the anxiety felt during a group discussion is much less overwhelming and might even be comforting as it is less threatening and students would feel less exposed to public attention. This could have very important implications when teachers decide on the type

of activity they want to assign in their classrooms. A group activity, group work, or group presentation could possibly be better than individual assignments.

Correlation Between Communication Apprehension and Students' Perceptions of their English Language Competence

Students were asked to report on their self-perceived language competence in English by circling the language fluency scale which ranged from (1) "least fluent" to (10) "most fluent".

Score on Scale	Percent %
1 to 4	24
5	31
6 -10	45
Total	100

Table 6. Do you speak English fluently? (1 least fluent; 10 most fluent)

As the table above indicates, a slightly higher percentage (45%) of participants in this study rated themselves highly in the scale of English fluency (6 and above), whereas 31 percent believed they were average in English (score of 5), and 24 percent thought they were less fluent in English.

The above results became more important and meaningful when correlations were performed with the overall PRCA scores. The results indicated that the higher the students rated themselves in the English fluency scale (above 5), the lower their PRCA Scores were. In other words, the overall PRCA score was negatively correlated with the English fluency scale indicating that students who thought they had better command of the English language seem to have lower communication anxiety ($r = -.75$; $p = 0.01$).

Students' perception of their English oral skills seemed to affect their communication apprehension on both ends of the scale. Therefore, it is the students' perception of their competence, not necessarily their actual competence, that seemed to be a source of self-confidence and was a significant variable in the students' overall communication apprehension scores.

Correlation Between Communication Anxiety and Students' Perception of Instructor's Role in the Classroom

The survey participants indicated in their responses that the instructor played a very important role in the way they dealt with communication anxiety in English.

The survey included four statements which probed the students' perceptions of their English instructor's role in the classroom.

Statement	Always	Sometimes	Never
The instructor encourages me to interact in English in the classroom.	50%	39%	11%
The instructor helps me to express my thoughts in English	45%	40%	15%
The instructor gives me confidence to speak in English	40%	40%	20%
The instructor stresses the value of speaking in English	80%	14%	6%

Table 7. Students Perceptions of Instructor's Role

Correlation results indicate a strong relationship between teacher's role and students' level of communication anxiety. The correlation appears to be more obvious in the areas of interpersonal relationship. In fact, the instructor's positive reinforcement and reassurance, verbal encouragement, help to express students' thoughts, and emphasis on the value of speaking English were all associated with lower communication anxiety, ($r = .630$; $p = 0.05$).

Correlation Between Communication Anxiety and Students' Perception of the Role of Instructional materials and classroom activities

Survey results indicate that students believed the materials handed to them by instructors did not encourage discussion in English. Students also believed that their English sessions and instructors did not provide ample time for speaking in English, i.e., oral skills activities.

Statement	Always	Sometimes	Never
The textbook or handouts provide topics that encourage discussions in English	10%	44%	46%
The lesson materials provide great opportunity to speak in English	8%	45%	47%
The instructor provides ample time for students to speak in English	15%	40%	45%

Table 8. Students Perception of Role of Textbook and Materials

Correlations with communication apprehension scores proved to be significant also. Students' perception of the English instructional materials and the time they spent speaking in English in the classroom had a significant role in lowering students' CA. Therefore, there seems to be an association between the instructional materials, the oral skills activities and students' levels of CA. ($r = 0.55$; $p = 0.05$). This is of course understandable as students become more comfortable in the classroom context when they have more oral activities and as they become more used to each other and to their instructors.

Correlation Between Communication Anxiety and Students' Personality

Survey results show that 73% of students felt uncomfortable speaking English in front of their classmates, while 78% of these students avoided speaking English always or sometimes because of fear of making mistakes. On the other hand, more than half of the respondents reported that they had confidence in their ability to speak English in general.

Statement	Always	Sometimes	Never
I feel shy of speaking in English in front of my classmates	30%	43%	27%
I have confidence in my ability to speak English	19%	57%	24%
I avoid speaking in English because I am afraid to make mistakes	33%	45%	22%

Table 9. Students' self-perceptions about English

When correlations were conducted, results indicated a strong association between students' personality and their levels of CA. Results show that shyness to speak in front of classmates was strongly correlated with high CA ($r = 0.72$; $p = 0.01$). Similarly, avoidance to speak in English for fear of making mistakes was strongly correlated with high CA ($r = 0.64$; $p = 0.01$). Likewise, students' confidence in English language skills

was strongly correlated with low CA as was indicated in an earlier stage ($r = 0.62$; $p = 0.01$).

Statement	Always	Sometimes	Never
I think that speaking in English is necessary in our society	72	17	11
I need to speak in English in my everyday life	50	37	13
The skill of speaking English is necessary to succeed in University	70	18	12
The skill of speaking in English is necessary to get a job	75	15	10

Table 10. Students' Perception of the Importance of English in their Lives

As the table above indicates, a staggering majority of respondents from the four Arabian Peninsula countries placed a premium on the necessity of speaking English in their respective societies. More than half of the students *always* needed to speak English on an everyday basis. Moreover, a strong majority believed that English was very important to succeed in the university, and a similar majority thought they needed English to get employment.

Despite the very clear-cut results of students' high levels of CA, their fear of speaking in front of their classmates, their views on their English instructional materials and the role of their instructors, it seems that students still put a high value on the English language and its importance in their lives. The fact that students have a very noticeable fear of communicating in English does not indicate that they hate the language or think less of it. The contrary might be the case. Placing such a high value on the importance of the language might actually be a source of anxiety for students to use English in an effective manner and in various contexts.

PREVENTION AND COPING STRATEGIES

The implications of the above research on communication apprehension are of substantial significance to all instructors and academic advisors in the Arabian Peninsula. There needs to be a well-studied balance between the traditional interactive instructional approach and the mass lecture style. However, the solution is probably impossible given the nature of how classes are conducted in the various universities of Arabia.

A lot can be done to help the communication apprehensive student in the regular classroom. Making it a requirement for a student to participate in conversations may aggravate the student's problem. Requiring the student to give formal presentations in front of their classmates could have negative results. The classroom instructors can give a break to the communication anxious students by putting less value on assessing "participation"; they can offer choices for assignments other than oral presentations; they can allow students to sit where they desire so that those who are shy or fearful can be comfortable in the classroom; they can also avoid calling on specific students and forcing participation. Finally, the instructors can attempt to structure the course so that students can obtain all necessary information without having to ask their teachers or peers (McCroskey, 1977).

Instructors and academic advisors as well as experts housed in university academic diagnostic centers should be able to detect apprehensive students early in the academic year. Instructors should be offered the proper training and appropriate workshops and seminars, conducted by communication anxiety professionals, on how to diagnose students who suffer from communication anxiety. Classroom instructors need to be guided through the right steps and measures as well as be equipped with the necessary knowledge and skills, in order to alleviate students' fear of communication. A quiet student is not always a positive attribute. Quietness may be a manifestation of communication anxiety. Instructors need to create a warm and easygoing climate in the classroom where students feel comfortable with their teachers, classmates, and themselves. Instructors should also allow and encourage students to speak to the class within groups or panels rather than as individuals and to work with classmates with whom they feel most comfortable. This should prove to be efficient as students usually feel less apprehensive and more comfortable in a group's buffer as the survey results showed above.

Several methods of treating communication apprehension have been developed and can be implemented in any educational system. Also, instructors need to be familiarized with some of these existing programs and studies that offer treatment. (See Fremouw & Harmatz, 1975; McCroskey, 1972; McCroskev, Ralph, & Barrick, 1970; Tsiplakides & Keramida, 2009).

In order to assist students to alleviate their fear of communication, instructors can also think of oral activities in a developmental sequence, so that students are guided gently through speaking activities in a gradual fashion, from simple to more complex, and from less to more demanding (Jendli, 2005).

Additionally, if students are asked to participate orally in the classroom, they should be allowed to speak from the comfort of their seats rather than from the front of the room. Being in one's seat offers a sense of security which can form a very crucial stage in arming the apprehensive students with the confidence they need to liberate themselves from their constant fear of communication.

Instructors should also give positive reinforcement to their students from the onset. Instructors should avoid negative reinforcement, interruption to correct mistakes, and embarrassing students who make mistakes when they speak English. In fact, instructors' interpersonal relationship with students should be based on trust and respect. This will restore confidence even in those students who suffer from high communication anxiety.

One should also not forget that these students are the product of the Arabian Peninsula, which is a collectivist culture. This often signifies that individuals are perceived as part of a group and the individual's self-worth and self-confidence is often drawn from the group. When the teacher interrupts and corrects students' errors and makes them feel incompetent when they speak, this harms students' confidence in front of their peers and exacerbates their anxiety about communication.

Some positive methods that can be used to treat communication anxiety include systematic desensitization, skills training and cognitive modification (Hopf & Ayres, 1992). These treatments can be combined to help achieve good results in individuals. Systematic desensitization helps individuals deal with activities such as speaking in public by reducing their level of anxiety by replacing feelings of fear with feelings of relaxation and calm. With systematic desensitization, the person participates in a series of deep breathing exercises that help relax all the muscles of the body, while the person imagines himself talking or engaging in any other type of communication activity (Tsiplakides & Keramida, 2009).

Skills training suggests that we tend to feel anxious about speaking in front of people because we lack sufficient training to conduct speeches (Ayres, et al, 1993). This strategy guides and teaches individuals the right skills which they will need to prepare and deliver a good oral presentation in front of people.

Cognitive modification proposes that individuals approach speaking in front of people, such as in the classroom context, with the wrong frame of mind (Khan, 2010). This theory states that individuals will feel more anxious if they approach the oral activity with negative thoughts. The cognitive modification's main purpose is to change undesirable thoughts and to turn them into positive energy. Actually, several studies tend to support

these types of coping strategies, and there are even some that support combining these approaches (Hopf & Ayres, 1992; Khan, 2010).

These strategies, along with the instructors' and academic advisors' increased awareness, appropriate professional development, efficient training, and proper understanding of this important issue in the classrooms should prove very useful, and eventually therapeutic, to students who suffer silently from this human imperfection.

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