

AN EXPLORATORY STUDY OF AFFECTIVE BARRIERS TO ESL LEARNERS' PUBLIC SPEAKING SKILLS

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Abstract

This study investigates the perceived impact of affective barriers on public speaking skills of ESL learners at graduate level, with particular focus on communication apprehension, speech anxiety, fear of negative evaluation and low self-confidence. Guided by McCroskey's Theory of Communication Apprehension (1977) the research examines how emotional and psychological factors hinder learners' ability to speak confidently in public and explores the underlying reasons that contribute to these difficulties. A survey questionnaire consisting of 5 open-ended questions was administered to a convenience sample of 30 graduate students from diverse academic backgrounds. The qualitative data was interpreted using Braun and Clarke's (2006) Thematic Analysis Framework to identify recurring affective patterns shaping learner's public speaking behaviours. The study concluded that affective barriers play an important role in shaping the ESL learners public speaking skills. The findings contribute to a deeper understanding of emotional dimensions of second language communication and offer valuable insights for educators and curriculum designers for working to strengthen ESL oral proficiency at graduate level.

INTRODUCTION

Background of the Study

Public speaking is an essential aspect of communicative competence in the learning of English as a Second Language. Delivering an impromptu speech in public is one of the most difficult speaking tasks as learners have to structure their thoughts, access the correct words and communicate ideas clearly within a public setting. Even though many ESL learners have a good command of the language, they still face problems with public speaking because of affective barriers, not the language constraint. The learners' abilities to engage in spontaneous oral communication are impeded by various factors

including speaking anxiety, fear of making errors, low self-confidence, fear of negative evaluation and communication apprehension. These emotional and psychological causes and processes are detrimental to the learners' performance in speaking and to their involvement in the class and to their overall language development.

While a great deal of research has been conducted in the field of speaking anxiety and affective factors concerning ESL contexts, there has been relatively little research that has focused on the affective factors that come into the picture as a result of public speaking from the learners' point of view. Hence, the aim of this exploratory study is to gain insights into the affective barriers that ESL

learners have in the public speaking situation in order to inform teachers of classroom practices and pedagogical approaches that can foster the learners' confidence and oral language proficiency.

Introduction to the Study

Affective barriers are the psychological and emotional states that reduce a learners' ability to communicate and learn a language. Affective barriers can decrease the communication ability of ESL learners. MacIntyre and Gardner (1991) highlighted that these emotional barriers might have a crippling influence on public speech performance and second language learning. Mahmoodzadeh (2012) claims that emotional barriers in ESL environments in Pakistan not only limits learners' engagement but also have a detrimental effect on their impression of their own competence as speakers.

This study tries to investigate the reasons behind the affective barriers, language learners' feelings of stress or anxiety in language learning environments, as well as the impact of these barriers on public communication abilities. It also makes recommendations for practical methods that students may take to get over these barriers in ESL classes. To fill this gap, this study investigate how emotional barriers specifically communication apprehension, low self-confidence and fear of negative evaluation affect ESL graduate students' public speaking skills. For ESL learners, it emphasizes how crucial it is to identify and manage these emotional barriers to create more encouraging learning settings for students. The goal of the study is to provide guidance for instructional tactics that will help students to become more self-assured, less anxious about receiving negative evaluation, and improve their English public speaking abilities.

Developing the skill to speak well is a significant objective in and of itself as it gives students a set of lifelong abilities. The sharing of ideas, whether verbally or in writing, is called communication. According to Halliday (1978) communication is more than just a verbal exchange between people, it is a sociolinguistic encounter and social reality is created, maintained, and modified through the interchange of meanings throughout the communication process. The ability to

communicate publicly is a special and acquired rhetorical talent that necessitates knowing what to say and how to express it.

Delimitations of the Study

This study is confined to investigate only three affective barriers which affect the public speaking skills of ESL learners, namely speaking anxiety, low self-confidence, fear of negative evaluation. The present study does not take into account other factors that can be related to public speaking like linguistic competence, motivation, classroom environment, personality traits and teaching strategies. Moreover, the study only concentrates on the ESL learners' perspectives obtained from the open-ended questionnaire.

Literature Review

The term affective barriers describes the emotional elements that impede language learning. These include stage fright, nervousness, poor self-confidence, self-consciousness, and fear of being judged negatively. Although these feelings can appear to be typical, they can have a very restrictive effect on language learning, especially when it comes to speaking abilities. According to Brown (2001), affective factors influence the acquisition process of the second language (SLA), and often facilitate or inhibit the development of language proficiency.

Oral presentation is not just another academic task, it is a very important skill which demonstrates how well a learner is able to express ideas, intertwine information and engage in critical debates. Emotional barriers may distort this process occurring in ESL settings. A student can fail to give a presentation with confidence even when he/she understands the subjects because of fear, anxiety, or the lack of self-esteem. This is often common in graduate settings, where attendance of seminars, research defenses, and oral presentations are critical components to academic success. Unlike grammatical errors or vocabulary deficiencies, emotional barriers are often ignored even by the teachers, but their effect on the performance of students is often significant.

There are multidimensional affective barriers to communication which arise from the interaction of linguistic, cognitive, cultural, and social factors. These barriers influence ESL learners' willingness, confidence, and effectiveness in oral

communication. Figure 1 presents a conceptual overview of the major affective barriers that commonly hinder communication among ESL learners.



Figure 1. Affective Barriers to Communication.
Adapted from Krashen (1982) and Hofstede (1980)

Numerous studies have examined the origins, prevalence, and consequences of affective barriers, particularly with regard to ESL learners. For example, in one of the first thorough investigations of language anxiety Horwitz et al. (1986) distinguished three distinct elements: test anxiety, communication apprehension, and fear of poor assessment. They discovered that different types of anxiety frequently interact, resulting in avoidance behaviours, a decline in classroom engagement, and poor academic achievement. Oral communication in the target language in front of public causes discomfort for learners who exhibit public communication anxiety or communication apprehension. Instead of viewing oral output as an opportunity to improve communication skills, students who suffer from test anxiety view it as a test scenario (Tesioplakides & Keramida, 2009).

Students who are afraid of receiving negative judgments view mistakes as a threat to their reputation rather than as a necessary component

of learning. They refrain from speaking in public and engage in little or no activity in the ESL classroom (Ely, 1986). According to Gardner and MacIntyre (1993) language anxiety is not only a transient feeling but rather a persistent occurrence that can intensify over time, making language learning even more difficult. In a different study, Oya et al. (2004) found that extrovert individuals formed stronger global impressions during public performance, while those with greater degrees of state anxiety made more mistakes while using clauses in speech.

Affective barriers cause language learners to become fearful and lose confidence, which leads to avoidance and withdrawal from speaking exercises in ESL lessons. McCroskey (2009) discovered that if students with high levels of performance anxiety were allowed to select their own courses, they would likely favour ones that did not emphasize speaking abilities. Language learners who are very anxious are reluctant and timid because they are unable to organize their

thoughts and speak comfortably and effectively. Instead of choosing words and structuring thoughts, they consider the threat that is expected.

Methodology

The study was designed on the principles of qualitative exploratory research to deeply understand the affective barriers to the public speaking skills of ESL students. The exploratory design was used because this type of design allows exploring participants' experiences and perceptions in situations where there is little evidence (Creswell, 2014). The sample of the study included 30 ESL learners of graduate level from The Islamia University of Bahawalpur and the information rich responses were selected for the study to ensure consistency with recommendations for qualitative inquiry in Creswell (2013). The data was gathered by the researcher made open-ended questionnaire of seven questions. To ensure that the instrument was concise enough to elicit detailed responses from respondents, while at the same time minimizing their respondent fatigue, as is common in qualitative questionnaire studies (e.g., Bango et al., 2023). The questionnaire was validated with the subject experts before the data were collected to test its relevance and clarity.

Data analysis was done using *Thematic Analysis* as described by Braun and Clarke (2006) which consists of familiarization and coding, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and final report. Thematic analysis, both deductive and inductive, was carried out on the qualitative data according to the six-phase method suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006). First, a deductive approach was adopted, in which the analysis was based on three identified barriers from literature: speaking anxiety, low self-confidence, and fear of negative evaluation. At the same time, an inductive approach was used to be

open to new patterns and meanings that arose from participants' responses. This combined method allowed the researcher to analyse the pre-established themes and also to discover other codes and subthemes that emerged from the participants' experiences. The informed consent of all participants, voluntary participation, anonymity and confidentiality were observed throughout the study, as was their right to withdrawal without any consequences.

Theoretical Framework

This study is based on the *Communication Apprehension (CA) Theory* by McCroskey (1977) that is based on the fear or anxiety people experience when engaging in real or imagined communication with others. As per the theory, personal-group communication apprehension, which involves communication in specific contexts that are relevant to specific groups, such as meeting with friends or in the workplace; and trait-like communication apprehension, which is a personality trait, which occurs with certain people or groups and state-like communication apprehension which is the result of a situation or external stimuli. The theory offers a complete picture of how emotional and situational issues affect the willing and able of a person to communicate effectively. For the present study, McCroskey's theory provides a suitable framework for examining affective factors affecting ESL students in public speaking. Communication apprehension has been identified as an underlying factor that affects the learners' performance negatively and these feelings can be interpreted as being components of communication apprehension and public speaking performance. So, this theoretical context led to the interpretation of the participants experience and to analysis of the affective barriers that were found in this study.

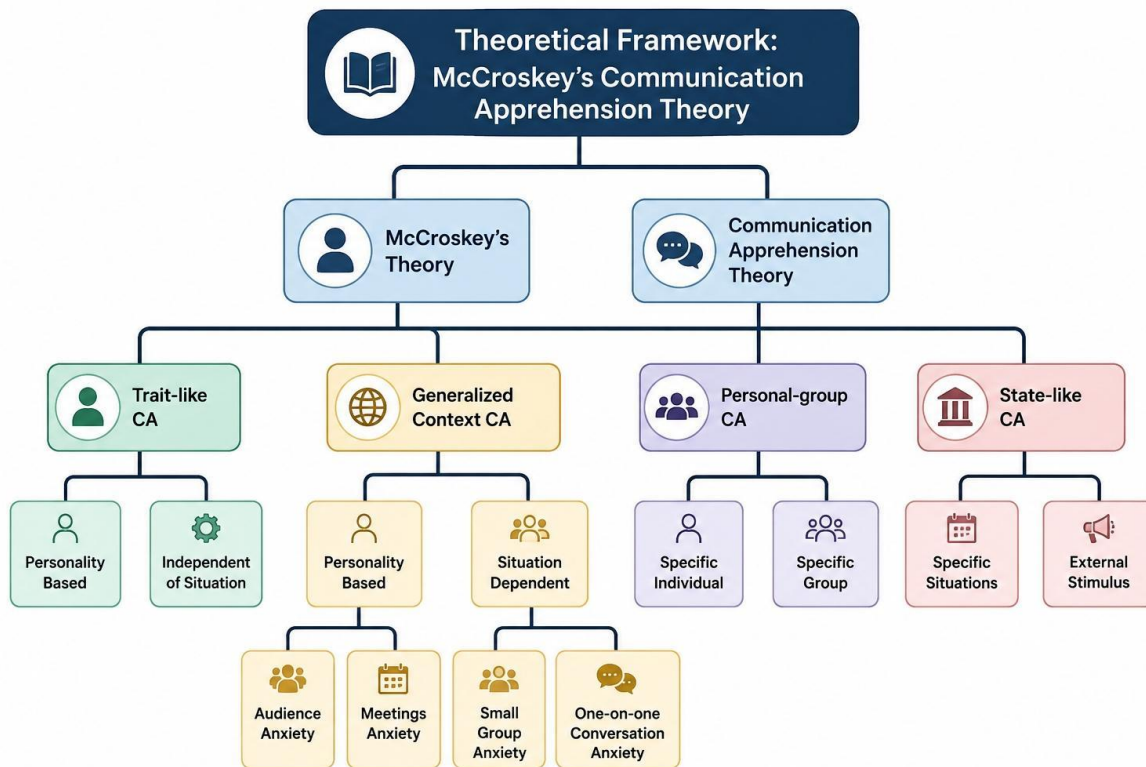


Figure 2. Communication Apprehension Theory (McCroskey, 1977)

Findings and Discussion

The qualitative data emerged from the open-ended questionnaire were analysed using a hybrid thematic analysis approach as suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006). Two main themes emerged from the analysis, with each theme having several codes that identified the participants' experiences and perceptions of the affective barriers that affect their public speaking skills in English.

(i) Psychological and Contextual Barriers to Public Speaking

This theme explores the psychological and contextual factors which hinders the public speaking skills of ESL learners at graduate level.

a) Low Self-Confidence

Low confidence was a significant theme. Several participants made direct statements like,

My low level of confidence affect my ability to speak in public.

My shyness lowers my confidence.

These claims show that language insecurity has a significant impact on self confidence which in turn cause a barrier in public speaking.

b) Fear of Grammatical Mistakes

One of the biggest obstacles to performing well in front of an audience. According to a significant number of respondents, their fear of making grammatical errors and receiving public correction is major obstacle to public speaking skills. Linguistic errors are seen as threats to the speaker's self worth rather than just technical problems, as evidenced by the statements of participants

My poor grammar affects my ability to speak English confidently.

I often worry if my grammar is correct or if others will understand and judge my accent.

c) Fear of Wrong Pronunciation

Anxiety about mispronouncing words also surfaced as a major obstacle. Students frequently expressed worry that mispronouncing words may

result in embarrassment or mockery. Pronunciation anxiety is closely linked to negative self-image, as evidenced by statements like,

Fear of pronunciation affects my speaking ability and I think they will laugh at my accent.

This supports findings by Sato (2019) that pronunciation is still one of the most anxiety inducing aspects of second language performance.

d) Fear to Perform in Front of Large Audience

Fear of speaking in front of large audience is another code identified. In response, participants stated,

I am afraid of speaking before a large audience.

When students expect to be assessed by several individuals at once, their anxiety increases, leading to tension resulting in shaky hands and racing heartbeat that impairs confidence and fluency.

e) Fear of Being Judged

The audience response is another important sub-theme identified. Participants frequently stated that their performance is significantly impacted by audience responses.

The way people look at me, what if someone makes fun of me or talks about me in private.

This response show how their communication is influenced by outsider' comments. Because of increased self consciousness, even impartial audiences might be perceived as judgemental.

f) Negative Past Experiences

Learners who have had unpleasant experiences in the past such as being made fun of, given harsh corrections, or misinterpreted have enduring consequences. Every time when there is a chance to talk, these memories come up again, adding to the anticipatory anxiousness. As a respondent claimed,

Previous negative experiences, stage fright and my past affects me.

Learners' confidence in their own capacity to perform in public is undermined by a history of depressing incidents.

g) Lack of Communication Opportunities

A few respondents mentioned more general sociocultural obstacles, such as the predominance of regional languages in their immediate environment. Some participants reported that they find it challenging to practise and improve their fluency because English is rarely used in their everyday lives. One participant said,

We do not speak English because nobody can understand around us

Such reaction illustrates the effect of contextual variables on the hindrance of language exposure and confidence building.

(ii) Cognitive Responses to Public Speaking Anxiety

This theme emphasizes the key ideas of the participants about speech anxiety.

a) Fear of Forgetting Words

The codes identified reveals that before speaking, students engage in a lot of mental activity. Thoughts like below flash through their minds.

What if I forget the word?

This statement show that excessive self-monitoring impedes speech output.

b) Self-Doubt

Anxious learners experience more pressure while speaking in front of native or fluent speakers. Some participants stated,

They are all more fluent than me even though I know the same vocabulary.

They become more fearful because they believe that skilled listeners would see their shortcomings more readily. Despite having the same vocabulary, they all speak more fluently than I do.

c) Fear of Misunderstanding

Many students face the fear of misunderstanding. As one participant claimed,

If they can understand what I really want to convey in my style.

This comment demonstrate that fear of misunderstanding is a key cause of worry. This anxiety frequently results in reluctance, a decline in confidence and create difficulty to gather the thoughts. As a result, students concentrate more

on avoiding errors than on conveying their true meaning, which further impairs fluency.

d) Need for Social Approval

While speaking English, some students feel under pressure to “impress others” which makes them feel more nervous and self-conscious. One participant made the clear statement,

I have to impress people.

This response demonstrate how public speaking turns from a communicative act into a performance. Ultimately, the need to seem flawless and gain approval turns into a psychological obstacle that keeps people from speaking confidently and naturally.

Conclusion

The results of this exploratory study suggest that ESL students have various affective obstacles to public speaking, the most common ones are speaking anxiety, low self-confidence, and fear of negative evaluation. There are grammatical and pronunciation concerns, fear of speaking in front of a large audience, negative experiences, limited communication in English and continued self-doubt when speaking in front of others, which all contribute to these barriers. The study also shows that learners have different cognitive responses like fear of forgetting words, fear of being misunderstood, and pressure of making a good impression on others which is another contributor to their lack of confidence and competence in speaking. According to these results, language teachers are recommended to build a supportive classroom atmosphere and a non-judgemental classroom atmosphere, to carry out public speaking and impromptu speaking exercises more often, and to give learner friendly feedback in the classroom rather than to provide punitive feedback, and to use confidence building methods to decrease learners’ anxiety. The study builds on the previous research by providing a more detailed understanding of the affective nature of public speaking in ESL settings, as well as the need to include the emotional needs of learners in the learning process, along with the other linguistic ones. Pedagogically, it implies that communicative

competence, participation, and learner’s confidence can be enhanced in oral communication, as affective barriers in the learning process can be minimized, which will consequently increase the effectiveness of English language learning.

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