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Research Article

Communication Apprehension among ESL College Learners

Nova Ness Fabrienne Baniga Carin*

English and Literature Department, Negros Oriental State University, 6201, Philippines

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*Corresponding author:

E-mail:

fabrienne08@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Language learners often encounter challenges when speaking a non-native language, such as English as a Second Language (ESL). These difficulties can arise not only from the complexity of language skills but also due to anxiety. This study investigated language anxiety, specifically communication apprehension, among freshmen college students enrolled in a basic communication course. Quantitative and qualitative methods were employed, including a survey questionnaire and focus group discussions. The findings indicate that a majority of students experience average levels of communication apprehension. Notably, females exhibited higher communication apprehension compared to males. These results suggest that language anxiety, particularly communication apprehension, may be influenced by exposure to language use and the classroom environment.

Keywords: *Communication apprehension, Language anxiety, Gender differences, College language learners*

Introduction

In language classes designed for non-native speakers of English as a Second Language (ESL), the primary objective is to equip learners with the cognitive skills necessary for listening, speaking, reading, and writing. However, contemporary language learners often encounter challenges due to anxiety when speaking in front of the class during oral presentations, recitations, or group activities.

Anxiety plays a significant role in Second Language Acquisition (SLA) and is considered a crucial personality factor in language learning. One specific manifestation of anxiety is communication apprehension, which can be described as a form of shyness experienced

during interpersonal communication. According to Horwitz et al. (1986), whether speaking in dyads, groups, or public settings, individuals with communication apprehension struggle to express themselves effectively. Additionally, they mentioned that people who typically have trouble speaking in a group are likely to experience even greater difficulty speaking in a second language class especially when they do not have any control over the communicative situation and their language teachers will pay close attention to their performance.

In an ESL context, language learners usually feel anxious. Most studies revealed that communication apprehension originates from learners' sense of worth, fear of failure,

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language learning difficulties, and attitude toward the target language (Liu, 2007; Tanveer, 2007; Cebreros, 1998 & Aydin, 2008). Mulyono and Ningsih (2019) also pointed out that communication apprehension stems from language barriers and negative attitudes toward language learning.

Moreover, findings revealed that female learners have more positive attitudes toward learning the English language as manifested in their levels of communication apprehension compared to males (Kao & Craigie, 2010; Na, 2007; & MacIntyre et al., 2003). Some studies have reported lower levels of anxiety in females compared to males (Kitano, 2001), while others found no significant gender differences (Alamri & Qasem, 2024)

The study examined communication apprehension as a debilitating factor in language learning. By determining (a) participants' level of communication apprehension and (b) exploring their opinions, perceptions, and feelings, the researcher and ESL language teachers will gain insight into students' attitudes and feelings towards learning a second language. Such knowledge can help them address the problems associated with this affective state by using teaching strategies and creating a relaxed and friendly language classroom atmosphere conducive to learning a language.

Methods

This study employed both quantitative and qualitative methods to comprehensively explore communication apprehension among Basic Communication (BC) students at one of the top-performing universities in Dumaguete City. A total of 159 BC students participated in the survey, representing various colleges within the university. The sample size was determined using Slovin's formula with a margin of error of 0.05. From the initial pool of 314 BC students, 176 were randomly selected to form the study's respondent group, of which 88 were male and 71 were female.

One data source was the English version of the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS), designed by Horwitz et al. (1986). This questionnaire was used to probe students' experiences of anxiety related to second lan-

guage learning in the classroom context. It consists of 33 statements, eight of which focus on communication apprehension (1, 9, 14, 18, 24, 27, 29, 32).

Another valuable data source was the Focus Group Discussion (FGD). Seven students were randomly selected to comprise the FGD. The discussion aimed to substantiate BC students' responses to the FLCAS and to explore their opinions, perceptions, and feelings regarding language learning. A faculty member from the English and Literature Department facilitated the discussion, ensuring that everyone had an opportunity to contribute, even the more reserved participants (Dornyei, 2007). The researcher actively observed, took notes, videotaped, and recorded the discussion, which was later transcribed for further analysis.

To analyze the data, the responses were tabulated and analyzed using mean and standard deviation. Moreover, a t-test was employed to determine which gender had a higher level of communication apprehension. The principle of gender differences in language learning suggests that females "nearly outstrip males in the standardness of their speech and use of prestige forms, and yet they also tend to be in the forefront of linguistic change" (Ellis, 1994, p. 202).

By combining quantitative and qualitative approaches, this study aimed to provide a comprehensive understanding of communication apprehension and its impact on language learning. The insights gained will help ESL teachers and researchers create effective strategies to manage this affective state and cultivate a supportive classroom environment that promotes language acquisition and learning.

Results and Discussions

Communication Apprehension

One crucial component of the FLCAS questionnaire and the focus of this study is communication apprehension. This study aimed to understand the level of communication apprehension experienced by college learners. Table 1 shows that the overall communication apprehension of BC students is average ($\bar{x} = 2.940$), which means that BC students are neither too apprehensive nor lack apprehension in their

communication. These students exhibit a moderate level of communication apprehension when communicating in the target language. This indicates that they experience some anxiety but are not overly fearful or completely at ease. Moreover, the average result implies a

healthy balance between confidence and anxiety. Students recognize the challenges of language use but also feel capable of overcoming them.

Table 1. Frequency and Percentage Distribution of the Level of Communication Apprehension

Communication Apprehension		Total	
Numeric Description	Verbal Description	<i>f</i>	%
4.20 - 4.99	Very High	2	1 %
3.40 - 4.19	High	44	28 %
2.60 - 3.39	Average	89	56 %
1.80 - 2.59	Low	20	13 %
1.00 - 1.79	Very Low	4	2%
Total		159	100 %
Overall Communication Apprehension Level		$\bar{x} = 2.940$	
		$s = 0.529$	
		Average	

Table 1 also shows how the students' responses to the questions related to communication apprehension are distributed. As the table shows, approximately 89 (56%), or slightly more than half of the students, fall into the average category, indicating a moderate level of communication apprehension. This finding is incongruent with the study of Al Majali (2020), which also revealed that the majority of the language learners experienced moderate level of anxiety.

Moreover, a significant proportion of students (29%) experienced high to very high anxiety levels in communication apprehension. Conversely, 15% of students exhibited low to

very low anxiety levels in communication apprehension. These results highlight the diverse range of communication apprehension experienced by BC students in classroom communicative contexts.

Distribution of Specific Situations under Communication Apprehension

Table 2 below shows a detailed breakdown of students' responses concerning communication apprehension across eight specific situations. This analysis will provide further insights into the contexts where students feel most anxious.

Table 2. Frequency and Percentage Distribution of Specific Situations under Communication Apprehension

Situations	Responses										Total	
	Strongly Agree		Agree		Neither Agree nor Disagree		Disagree		Strongly Disagree		<i>f</i>	%
	<i>f</i>	%	<i>f</i>	%	<i>f</i>	%	<i>f</i>	%	<i>f</i>	%		
1. I never feel quite sure of myself when I am speaking in my English language class.	6	3.77	55	34.59	54	33.96	30	18.86	14	8.80		
2. I start to panic when I have to speak without preparation in language class.	15	9.43	47	29.55	45	28.30	35	22.01	17	10.69		

Situations	Responses										Total	
	Strongly Agree		Agree		Neither Agree nor Disagree		Disagree		Strongly Disagree		f	%
	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%		
3. I would not be nervous speaking the English language with native speakers.	5	3.87	29	18.23	68	42.76	37	23.27	20	12.57		
4. I feel confident when I speak in English language class.	5	3.87	20	12.57	89	55.97	33	20.75	12	7.54	159	100
5. I feel very self-conscious about speaking the English language in front of other students.	16	10.06	49	30.81	60	37.73	27	16.98	7	4.40		
6. I get nervous and confused when I am speaking in my language class.	12	7.54	31	19.49	60	37.73	44	27.67	12	7.54		
7. I get nervous when I don't understand every word the language teacher says.	5	3.14	47	29.55	53	33.33	45	28.30	9	5.66		
8. I would probably feel comfortable around native speakers of the English language.	2	1.25	15	9.43	84	52.83	44	27.67	13	8.17		

In Table 2, respondents' opinions regarding speaking in their English language class are clearly evident. **Thirty-eight point thirty-six percent (38.36%)** of students agree or strongly agree that they "never feel quite sure" of themselves when speaking in class. Similarly, a comparable number of students (38.98%) express anxiety when they have to speak without prior preparation. These findings align with the research conducted by Cubukcu (2007), who investigated the causes of anxiety in language classrooms. According to Cubukcu, language anxiety often stems from students' struggle to express their opinions and ideas effectively during language lessons.

In language classrooms, some students manifest communication apprehension when they feel worried or unable to speak confidently. An illustrative example comes from a focus group discussion (FGD):

Facilitator (F): Do you feel anxious in the English classroom?

Student 3 (S3): Yes Ma'am. I think speaking coz it's hard for me to construct

words and it takes time for me to construct words.

Student 4 (S4): Yes, in speaking. I mumble sometimes and think too much. Also, I am overloaded with information at times. Sometimes, it affects my performance in class.

According to Tobias (1986), anxiety arousal significantly impacts the quality of second-language communication during the output stage. At this point, anxious learners often experience a phenomenon known as having words "on the tip of their tongue," yet they struggle to express them. This cognitive blockage can hinder their ability to articulate their thoughts effectively. An FGD transcript corroborates this.

Facilitator (F): Are you conscious when you speak in English in front of your classmates?

Student 6 (S6): Sometimes, I am conscious. But sometimes, I get confused. My problem is speaking Ma'am because I am afraid of making mistakes.

Blume, Baldwin, and Ryan (2013) argue that language learners who experience social anxiety are more likely to encounter communication apprehension when engaging with others. Although the psychology and communication literatures have developed separately, they are related because socially anxious individuals are also likely to have higher communication apprehension when interacting with others. Blume, Baldwin, and Ryan (2013) argue that language learners who experience social anxiety are more likely to encounter communication apprehension when engaging with others.

In the context of students' feelings about speaking in their English language class, some students neither agree nor disagree with the statement that they "never feel quite sure" of themselves when speaking in class (33.96%). This group maintains a neutral position, possibly reflecting uncertainty or a lack of strong feelings.

On the other hand, other students explicitly disagree and even strongly disagree with the same statement (27.66%). For them, feeling unsure during English language communication is not a common experience.

An insightful student from the FGD expressed his perspective:

Student 5 (S5): Speaking and reading are not a problem.

Regarding item number five, which states, "I feel very self-conscious about speaking the English language in front of other students," students' responses exhibit a range of feelings. The majority of students agree or strongly agree that they feel self-conscious when speaking English in front of their peers (40.81%). This suggests that many students experienced heightened awareness and anxiety during communicative situations. A significant portion of students neither agree nor disagree with the statement (21.38%). These students may have mixed feelings or lack a strong opinion on the matter. Some students explicitly disagree or strongly disagree that they feel self-conscious. For them, speaking English in front of others is not a source of communication apprehension. FGD data reflect this.

Student 4 (S4): Sometimes, I am conscious, Ma'am, but I don't care as long as they understand me.

Student 7 (S7): Uhhh...I am not conscious Ma'am. I always recite in my class.

The study revealed interesting insights into the attitudes of respondents toward native speakers of the English language. Specifically, items three and eight garnered attention. For item three, "would not feel nervous speaking the English language with native speakers," approximately 42.76% of respondents neither agreed nor disagreed with the statement. This ambivalence suggests that some participants may experience mixed feelings when communicating with native English speakers.

For item eight, "would feel comfortable around native speakers of the English language," about 52.83% of respondents also neither agreed nor disagreed with this statement. The lack of a clear stance indicates that comfort levels vary among language learners when interacting with native speakers. Cebberos (1998) conducted a study examining participants' interactions with native English speakers and their involvement in class discussions led by native English teachers. His findings indicate that native speakers could be intimidating for certain students. This intimidation might stem from concerns about making mistakes, fear of judgment, or perceived linguistic inadequacy, leading language learners to hesitate during conversations.

Male and Female Students' Communication Apprehension

MacIntyre and Gardner (1994) explain that both male and female students' language anxiety levels may differ according to their attitudes toward learning the English language. Table 3 presents the communication apprehension levels of male and female respondents. A t-test was employed to assess and compare their communication apprehension.

Table 3. Comparison between Male and Female Students' Communication Apprehension

Variables	Compared groups		Test statistic	Interpretation
	Males (n=88)	Females (n=71)	t-test ($\alpha = 0.05$)	
Communication Apprehension	$\bar{x} = 2.842$ $s = 0.541$	$\bar{x} = 3.062$ $s = 0.491$	$t = -2.647$ $p\text{-value} = 0.009$	There is a significant difference.

Table 3 reveals a significant difference ($t = -2.647$ and $p\text{-value} = 0.009$) between males and females. Specifically, females exhibit higher apprehension when interacting with peers in the classroom than males.

Horwitz (2001) attributes this gender difference to females' heightened awareness of their communication abilities. Females may be more self-critical and evaluate their language performance more intensely. Their concern about making mistakes or not meeting their standards increases apprehension.

These findings support the idea that females generally set higher standards in language learning. Additionally, these elevated expectations may contribute to their increased communication apprehension level.

Conclusion

This study investigated communication apprehension among ESL learners, focusing on sex differences. The findings indicated that most students demonstrated moderate levels of communication apprehension. While learning English may not pose significant difficulties for many students in BC classes due to their substantial exposure to the target language as their second language, language teachers should remain attuned to students' affective states. Such awareness can help mitigate communication apprehension or general language anxiety in the English language classroom.

Interestingly, moderate feelings of language anxiety may serve as a motivating factor for students. Hadley (1992) suggests that such anxiety can prompt learners to work harder and invest more effort to succeed in the target language. Additionally, results from the FGD indicated varying student opinions regarding communication apprehension. Some students expressed confidence in their language classes,

while others reported feeling anxious and pressured. These diverse experiences highlight the role of exposure to language use and the classroom environment in shaping communication apprehension among learners. **Therefore, targeted interventions - such as affective and social strategies (Oxford, 1990) that address these apprehensive states and foster a supportive, anxiety-reducing environment are critical for enhancing ESL instruction and learning outcomes.**

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