

Language Anxiety among Jordanian EFL Learners during Public Speaking

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Abstract

The current research attempted to explore how Jordanian EFL learners perceive their English public speaking anxiety. The study applied qualitative methodology via interviews. The research subjects comprised of six Jordanian postgraduate EFL learners (PhD students) selected from four public universities in Malaysia. The findings illustrated that the attitudes and motivation of Jordanian EFL learners play an important role in determining their English public speaking anxiety. More precisely, attitude and motivation negatively influenced Jordanians' English public speaking anxiety.

Keywords: English, foreign language, Jordanian EFL learners, Malaysia, motivation, public speaking anxiety

Introduction

In a person's life, communication is a regular occurrence. People interact with each other in various settings to carry out their everyday businesses. The primary aim of acquiring a language is to use it for communication purposes (Amiri & Puteh, 2018). Savignon (1987) stated that language learning is a product of involvement in communicative activities and that the ability to speak appropriately is an important factor in the quest for jobs. The process of speaking a foreign language involves understanding the grammatical and semantic rules as well as studying how native speakers use that language with interpersonal interactions, in which different variables interact. EFL learners, particularly adults, find it difficult to speak the target language fluently and properly (Shumin, 2002).

Nowadays, people all over the world feel an overwhelming need to learn to speak English appropriately. This is why students need to learn speaking skills and teachers must know how to teach speaking skills effectively. The process of teaching speaking skills to Arab learners is still a difficult activity for EFL teachers. This relates to teaching English to learners from countries

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where English is not commonly used (Rabab'ah, [2016](#)). Arab students face several problems while speaking in English. The main problem is that in Arab countries there is very little chance to learn English through normal target language contact (Rabab'ah, [2016](#)). Previous studies conducted in the Arab world reported that most Arab students are not highly motivated and they lack basic language skills that allow them to easily express themselves in their classes (Alrashidi & Phan, [2015](#); Al-Sobhi & Preece, [2018](#); Layali & Al-Shlowiy, [2020](#); Oteir & Al-Otaibi, [2019](#)).

According to Damayanti and Listyani ([2020](#)), to participate in discussions and communication exchanges that involve critical thinking and problem-solving, the development of academic speaking skills is necessary. He stated that oral presentations, group conversations, role-plays, whole-class discussions between teachers and students, questioning by teachers, question answer sessions between teachers and students, and contact with peers are the typical forms of academic speaking activities. Students need to speak and show their academic performance in these activities. However, the issue is that the students may not be able to practice orally due to their misinterpretation, weak language order, unwillingness to speak, and fear of pronunciation. These issues lead them towards embarrassment because their peers and instructors might not understand what they are trying to say. Due to the weakness in fluency and self-confidence to express ideas, oral presentations become difficult (Taly & Paramasivam, [2020](#)).

Jordan ([1997](#)) declared that students are required to learn and develop a variety of academic skills, a core component which is the provision of a spoken academic monologue, such as an oral presentation. Public speaking or oral presentation has become a greater part of language teaching, particularly in universities nowadays. The aim is also to prepare the students for business presentations which are likely required to be carried out after graduation and for job development (Utami, [2019](#)). Public speaking is an act of talking to or lecturing a group of people in a system to inform, inspire, encourage, educate, or entertain the listeners. Public speaking is a co-curricular activity with the highest reputation and acceptance and is even sponsored by some educational institutions (Krist, [2017](#)).

An academic presentation plays a significant role in determining the performance of PhD students. Academic presentations, such as viva, proposal defense, and conference presentations, which refer to the oral review of postgraduate students typically for an academic qualification, rely

heavily on the oral communication capacity of students (Viwattanabunchong, [2017](#)). During academic presentations, international EFL learners, particularly PhD students, encounter various difficulties in their oral communication. For instance, Liu ([2015](#)) argued that these learners encounter psychological problems related to academic presentations (for instance, loss of trust or having an inferiority complex).

Some people avoid interacting with others, despite its vital significance. This avoidance is related to the personal characteristic known as communication apprehension. Communication apprehension can hinder the success in school and work in today's global context (Blume et al., [2013](#)), and is described as a person's level of fear or anxiety with either actual or expected contact with others (McCroskey, [1977](#)). Public speaking anxiety refers to the level of fear or anxiety associated with actual or planned communication in front of a group of people (MacIntyre et al., [1997](#)). Adult learners are extremely worried about being criticized and misunderstood by others. Besides, there are a variety of factors that could lead to anxiety in public speaking; for instance, personality variables, second or foreign language proficiency, audience familiarity, rating criteria for teachers, preparedness, and familiarity with the subject. These factors are evident in the learner's emotions, such as fear, tension, nervousness, anxiety, and other negative feelings (Viwattanabunchong, [2017](#)).

Problem Statement

Jordanian international students face various difficulties while speaking in English due to their low interest in the respective language. When they are unable to understand and pronounce certain words, they feel pressured and embarrassed. Being foreign students, this makes them feel shy since they cannot speak English appropriately. Besides this, international students in Jordan are reluctant to speak in English because they have limited oral English practices due to their accent difficulties. Additionally, anxiety, shame, and self-confidence are the reasons why Jordanian international students face difficulties while speaking in English (Aprialita, [2018](#)). Due to language differences between English and Arabic, Jordanian graduate students seeking to acquire English as a Foreign Language (EFL) face a particularly difficult task. According to the regulations, the early education of middle and elementary schools and undergraduates in Middle Eastern countries is conducted in Arabic (Alkhasawneh, [2013](#)). Therefore, education in countries, such as the United Kingdom (UK), the United States

(US), Canada, or Malaysia would add more language difficulties since they lack language skills, especially speaking skills. Almatarneh et al. (2018) confirmed this observation. They pointed out that when Arab learners, such as Jordanians enter a foreign academic system, they find themselves out of date and eventually lose their journey.

When Jordanians decide to study abroad, learning English would become a compulsory course, which coincides with the development of global communication, which makes English a medium of communication (Ahmad et al., 2017). However, for graduate students in Jordan, this can cause language difficulties (Mahmoodzadeh, 2012). Resultantly, the difficulties they encounter would only promote obstacles in learning EFL, which may subsequently cause language anxiety (Abrar et al., 2018). Speaking ability is the most troublesome ability for most EFL learners (especially Arab learners) (Al-Sobhi & Preece, 2018). Since most Jordanians struggle to use English as a medium of communication and their mother tongue (Arabic) has become their most comforting language, the anxiety about using English to communicate in public has been increasing (Al-Jamal & Al-Jamal, 2014; Aprialita, 2018).

A good and effective speaker would not stammer during a speech. Therefore, speaking requires strong motivation and self-confidence. Learners need to be cautious about what they want to say and they must be satisfied with it as well. Otherwise, their speeches seem to become incoherent. Among four language skills, Arab learners, especially Jordanian graduate students, consider public speaking as the most difficult factor. Students in Jordan believe that talking and interacting with people is a difficult activity (Asmar, 2009; Zrekat et al., 2016). Oral communication is the most difficult skill among the four English skills for Jordanian English learners (Zrekat et al., 2016). Specifically, graduate students are required to use oral communication skills in various academic activities, such as class discussions, conference presentations, seminar presentations, research proposal defense, and live presentations (Alghail & Mahfoodh, 2019). EFL learners may have the ability to speak English, however, when they speak publicly in front of people, they cannot control their feelings. Usually, this is related to students' oral anxiety (Nurlaili & Kurniasih, 2016). Since Jordanian learners cannot speak English in public, they feel shy and afraid to speak English in public. Therefore, anxiety affects them. Furthermore, a

lack of experience and motivation can make them feel more anxious (Asmar, [2009](#); Huwari & Abd Aziz, [2010](#)).

Language anxiety, particularly in the context of public speaking, needs to be highlighted among Jordanians since most of the studies have been conducted in other Middle East countries, such as Iraq, Yemen, and Saudi Arabia. Therefore, it is crucial to conduct an investigation on Jordanians' speaking anxiety (Batiha et al., [2016](#)). Previously, studies on speaking in Jordanian have been conducted only among undergraduates (Asassfeh et al., [2011](#); Al-Jamal & Al -Jamal, [2014](#)). This highlights the need for more studies to be conducted on English public speaking anxiety among postgraduates, especially those studying abroad, such as Malaysia, since this is the most targeted country for pursuing postgraduate studies. The current study endeavoured to fill this gap of public speaking in a foreign language, especially English. The study aimed to explore how Jordanian EFL learners perceive their English public speaking anxiety and the factors that lead towards it.

Literature Review

Public Speaking Anxiety

Many studies have investigated anxiety in public speaking (Amiri & Puteh, [2018](#); Gaibani & Elmenfi, [2016](#); Hayaramae, [2016](#); Netta et al., [2020](#); Phinyadechasin, [2015](#); Pontillas, [2020](#); Qurnia & Marlina, [2020](#); Raja, [2017](#); Viwattanabunchong, [2017](#)). Phinyadechasin ([2015](#)) studied the variables that cause public speaking anxiety. About 80 undergraduates, studying in a public university, were selected to determine the cause of anxiety. The results showed that most students were affected by communication comprehension factors, while the fear of testing and negative feedback raised the students' anxiety to a moderate level. Besides this, most students preferred to receive English training to be more confident in public speaking.

Hayaramae ([2016](#)) studied the factors that cause anxiety in public speaking and the techniques used to conquer it among 13 graduate students. The results showed that both mental and physical variables are essential and different. Students tend to feel nervous and anxious when their speech structure is not good enough. Additionally, they cannot control their anxiety in public speeches. By choosing interesting subjects, graduate students use some methods to overcome their anxiety. In another study, Gaibani and

Elmenfi (2016) showed how age affected public speaking anxiety among English learners at Omar Almuttal University. A questionnaire was distributed to the participants. Besides, the influence of age on public speech anxiety was also examined. The results revealed that age differences have a significant negative impact on public speaking anxiety among English learners.

The levels of public speaking anxiety were analyzed by Raja (2017) and Viwattanabunchong (2017). Raja (2017) examined the levels of anxiety in public speaking and the factors behind these levels among 50 Karachi undergraduate students. The results showed that learners were afraid of public speaking and that is why they avoided speaking. It was discovered that practice can resolve public speaking anxieties. As for Viwattanabunchong (2017), the anxiety level was investigated in an English class in four different stages of public speaking (that is, pre-preparation, preparation, pre-performance, and performance). Moreover, the factors affecting public speaking anxiety in each stage were determined as well. The interviewees in the study comprised of 50 graduate students from the Language School of Thammasat University. The findings showed that, in public speaking classes, most students had significantly different levels of anxiety. In the performance stage, students showed the highest degree of anxiety, while in the pre-preparation and pre-performance stages, they showed a moderate degree of anxiety. Besides, the level of spoken English, personality, and subject familiarity are the three most important variables that affect public speaking anxiety in four different stages.

Amiri and Puteh (2018) discussed the experience of foreign PhD students in academic presentations (such as proposals and viva) as well as examples of oral communication apprehension. For this analysis, the interview participants comprised of 25 students from different public universities in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. The findings showed that, despite years of working experience as lecturers, the oral communication apprehension of these doctoral students is unavoidable. The study showed that linguistic issues, lack of research skills during presentations, negative perceptions of the presentation panel, and other related factors are increasing the oral communication apprehension of international PhD students. The students were apprehensive about their academic presentation and the above factors aggravated their level of OCA.

More recently, to determine the extent of speech anxiety of EFL students in public speaking class, Qurnia and Marlina (2020) conducted a study at the UNP English Department. About 63 students from public speech class at the UNP Department of English participated in the study. The findings showed that EFL students can come forward. However, they are not confident in their ability to communicate. This is due to their speaking anxiety at a medium stage. Pontillas (2020) focused to encourage the students in order to confront their anxiety in public speaking, which interferes with their oral communication skills. The instructor-researcher launched an initiative called Popsispeak. In this study, a one-shot case study was utilized among 28 students from Camarines Sur Polytechnic Colleges. An effective approach to help students improved their oral communication skills and reduced their anxiety about public speaking which was found to be Popsispeak.

Subsequently, Netta et al. (2020) studied the strategies of students coping with anxiety in English public speaking courses. The participants comprised of two junior high school students from the Department of English Education at Muhammadiyah Aceh University of Indonesia. The qualitative methods were used for analysis. The results revealed that students used various techniques to overcome their speaking anxiety including proper practice and the use of body gestures while speaking. The study showed that teachers should encourage other EFL students to use this technique so that they can overcome their fear of public speaking.

Methodology

The current study used a qualitative method to gain a deeper insight into how Jordanian EFL learners perceive their English public speaking anxiety. To achieve this goal, semi-structured interviews were conducted among six Jordanian EFL learners (Phstudentsnt) from four public universities in Malaysia. The interview items were adapted from Tanveer (2007) and comprised of a few open-ended questions.

An interview protocol was created which was validated by five experts to guarantee the consistency between interviews. The protocol comprised of time and place of the interview along with the name of the interviewee. All the respondents were interviewed within a span of 10-30 minutes. Each interview was recorded by using a professional Sony recorder. A consent form was signed by the interviewees before participating in the interviews.

At the beginning of each interview, the researcher explained the objective of the study, emphasized the confidential nature of the research, and guaranteed the anonymity of the interviewee. All the data in the interviews was analyzed by using thematic analysis.

Results

This section outlines interesting findings gathered from the interview sessions. Two significant factors emerged from the rich data and were categorized into; the influence of attitude on English public speaking anxiety and the influence of motivation on English public speaking anxiety.

The Influence of Attitude on English Public Speaking Anxiety

The findings revealed that attitude appeared to have an impact on the students' English public speaking anxiety. Students reported that they have a negative attitude towards speaking in English in public which was the reason that they would have anxiety when they want to speak English in public. Students mentioned many factors related to their negative attitude towards speaking in English in public.

All respondents (S1, S2, S3, S4, S5, and S6) reported that they do not like to speak English in public. Some students admitted that their English language is bad. For instance, S1 declared that Jordan as a country does not pay attention to English language and does not consider it an important language to learn and use for communication. Teachers in Jordan treat English language similarly as well. Therefore, S1 confessed that his English language is poor.

“Most of the teacher teachers concern about English language to teach students; that is why English language in my country not focused more to learn and teach students.” (S1)

“I know that my English language is very bad and I don't have experience about English language.” (S1)

“I don't like to speak English language.” (S1)

S2 mentioned that he would try to avoid speaking in English in public and would use short sentences to finish the speech quickly.

“I try when I speak in English to speak as much as short sentence and finish the conversation quickly.” (S2)

As for S5, he affirmed that Jordanians do not like to speak in English and added that it might be because they are not familiar with it and that it is a difficult language.

No, actually they don't like to speak in English. Maybe because they are not familiar with the language maybe because the language is hard to learn especially when you are like in my age when you start early after let at fifth or sixth grade start to using English you have the basic words, person with my age we have difficulties until now because we are not familiar with the language. (S5)

“We are not used to use or speak English.” (S5)

S4 and S6 stated that English is not important in Jordan and Jordanian people do not use it for communication purposes. Besides, it is a foreign language, which means that it is not the language for communication.

Yes, completely. In Jordan completely no, we don't prefer. Ahh, we prefer to speak in Arabic that is all. Our attitude just move us to speak in Arabic not in English. (S4)

“We do not prefer to speak English in Jordan.” (S6)

In our country you know we do not use it in Jordan publicly or it is not the second language let say. Therefore, we use it only in the schools you know that only in the schools just to finish the subject to get the degree and pass that subject that is all. Therefore, we do not have the experience also in that part to speak in a public publicly with the English language. (S6)

Lastly, all respondents reported that one of the reasons why they experience anxiety while speaking in public is their negative attitude towards speaking in English in public. In reality, they do not like to speak in English in public and English is not their mother tongue. Therefore, they would prefer to speak in their language which is Arabic.

“Yes, exactly negative attitude and low motivation are the reason for my anxiety.” (S1)

“My attitude about English language is not good.” (S1)

“I think I have negative attitude about speaking it.” (S1)

“My attitude about English language is bad.” (S1)

“Yes, exactly negative attitude.....are the reason for my anxiety.”
(S1)

“My attitude to speak English will be not good.” (S2)

“.....give me negative attitude regarding to learn English or to speak English in public.” (S2)

“Our attitude is not that much to push us to speak English.”
(S4)

“The attitude are very low.” (S6)

The Influence of Motivation on English Public Speaking Anxiety

The interview results showed that motivation seemed to have an impact on students' English public speaking anxiety. The students reported that they have a low motivation towards speaking English in public; thus, they would feel anxious while speaking English in public. They also mentioned many factors related to their low level of motivation towards speaking English in public.

The respondents shared the same information about motivation and declared that they do not have enough motivation to speak in English in public. S4 and S5 reported that they are not motivated enough to speak English in public which indicates their low motivation towards speaking English in public.

“... our motivation is not that much to push us to speak English.” (S4)

I think lack of motivation to learn or speak English in general. Like I say at the first of this interview since we start to learn English at, there is no enough motivation to speak English. (S4)

“We are not motivated enough to speak in public.” (S5)

“I think the most important one is that I am not motivated enough to speak in English {pause}. I don't have the wiling to speak English.” (S5)

In contrast, S1, S2, S3, and S6 stated that they are not motivated at all to speak in public.

“I think that I don't have motivate to speak English.” (S1)

“I need to have the desire to support me and motivate me speaking English.” (S2)

“I feel I am not motivated to speak in English in public at all.” (S2)

“You don’t feel that you get motivation.” (S3)

“We don’t have something push you to speak English, ahhh don’t have that motivation inside you to speak and to deal with the people in English.” (S3)

“I don’t have interest to speak English.” (S3)

We did not have this motivation so speak publicly, and also we just learn for the secondary school just like mark to get it not to do something more than a subject we have to finish and pass it. (S6)

“The motivation is let say is zero. You do not have the motivate to speak in English publicly, and we do not have the interest to do these things.” (S6)

All the respondents affirmed that they would feel anxious and stressed while speaking in English in public. For instance, S1 declared that he would feel stressed and scared in that particular setting. S2 shared the same feeling and admitted that he would get nervous and stressed when he would speak English publicly.

“I feel scare and anxiety when I want to speak.” (S1)

“Feel nervous not confident, heart bump it will be so speed.” (S2)

“You have something catch you and you be scared so you cannot speak.” (S3)

Anything that related to education especially when you speaking in your PD, your Viva, conference even when you speak with your supervisor, you are afraid that your supervisor just will take it like, ahh he think that you are not that good in English. So, this situation will put me in more stress like I say more stress me, more faults and more mistakes in English. (S4)

“I feel very anxiety and a lot of stress and the pressure of the stress.” (S6)

Besides, when the interviewees were asked about the psychological factors causing them anxiety while speaking in English in public, they reported low motivation as one of the reasons behind their anxiety in public speaking. S1, S2, and S3 stated that their low motivation towards speaking English in public cause them anxiety. S4 agreed that motivation plays an

important role in S4's anxiety. Similarly, S5 and S6 affirmed that motivation influences their anxiety. It can be understood that they have a low motivation towards speaking English in public and they would be anxious while speaking.

“...low motivation are the reason for my anxiety.” (S1)

“...I feel I am not interested or motivated enough to speak in English.” (S2)

“You don't have...motivation to speak English.” (S3)

“Maybe there is no motivation at all to speak in English in public.” (S4)

“I think the most important one is that I am not motivated enough to speak in English.” (S5)

The first one is the motivation...Both of them related with our past from the primary school we did not use the English language. Either I told you before we just want to pass the exam, get the degree and move for another for example from primary school to secondary school. It is related with we did not use a lot. (S6)

Discussion

The findings illustrated that the attitudes of Jordanians play an important role in determining their English public speaking anxiety and that their attitude is negative towards English public speaking. The respondents stated that they have a negative attitude towards speaking English in public in general. Besides, the respondents, that is, Jordanian PhD students, stated that their motivation level impacted their anxiety when they speak English in public. They stated that in public, they are not motivated enough to speak in English, and in other situations, they are simply not interested.

The findings showed that Jordanians had a bad experience in learning English since their schooling years. The respondents declared that their English language skills are weak because they believed that the Ministry of Education in Jordan did not pay enough attention to English in schools and universities. Besides, the teachers did not motivate and encourage the students to speak in English in schools and universities as well. Jordanians do not like to speak English and are not interested in it because English is not their mother tongue and it is a foreign language in Jordan. Other studies also mentioned that Jordanians do not use English in their daily life and only

inside the classroom (Al-Jamal & Al-Jamal, [2014](#); Aprialita, [2018](#)). It becomes a big challenge for them to speak in English in public, and subsequently, their anxiety would increase. Therefore, Jordanians have a negative attitude towards English and are not motivated to speak in English in public.

Limitations

The current analysis was qualitative in nature. It is recommended that further research should be carried out to gain insights into all viewpoints of the phenomena under review through a mixed-methods design. The data was collected from postgraduate Jordanian EFL learners, specifically PhD students. Thus, it might not be possible to generalize the findings of the current study to undergraduate students. Additionally, the current study was conducted only among Jordanian PhD students studying abroad. Future research should be conducted to explore other factors that influence English public speaking anxiety for Jordanian EFL learners.

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