PERCEPTIONS OF STUDENTS OF ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE ABOUT ORAL COMMUNICATION APPREHENSION IN LIBYA

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Past literature has consistently highlighted the problem of oral communication apprehension (OCA) among English as foreign language (EFL) learners. However, these results are mostly applicable to developed countries. As such, this study gathers data from the interview with Focus group consisting of 20 EFL students from the faculty of education, Alzytouna University in Libya, in exploring the causes and effects of OCA. The findings of the study revealed that participants feel anxious and nervous while speaking English in front of others. They also mentioned that improper method of teaching is one of the factors that cause apprehension to them.

Keywords: Students' Perceptions, OCA, EFL.

1. INTRODUCTION

Globalization supports communication with people speaking different languages from around the world on a daily basis. The English language has been well accepted as a global language (Nunan, 2003) and thus, more and more people who do not originally speak the language are learning to communicate in English for a variety of reasons (Seidlhofer, 2005). For most parts of the world, the English language is part of the curriculum of basic primary and secondary schooling (Callahan, 2005). For effective communication and building up of international relationships, the language has become famous and is gaining prosperity all over the word. Libya has been at the fore front of encompassing the language at the centre of their education system (Pathan, Aldersi, and Alsout, 2014). Use of English in oral communication has not been easy particularly if you are not a native English speaker. According to McCroskey (2009), in learning to communicate in a foreign language, one may face the problem of oral communication apprehension or OCA. OCA is the fear or anxiety an individual or a group of people experience when anticipating the process of communicating with another individual or a group of individuals (James C McCroskey, 2009). This research study was carried out at the University of Alzytouna, School of education in Libya. The study took place in a speaking course for English department at the first year students. The researchers have used a case study methodology to explore EFL Students' Perceptions about OCA.

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2.   LITERATURE REVIEW

Previous studies have shown that the majority of individuals appreciate normal quantities of attention (J. McCroskey, Heisel, and Richmond, 2001). Concerns over judgement by peers can cause OCA while anxiety can be the result of the feeling of being assessed in a given situation. A variety of psycho-social motor elements have further been shown to play a role in OCA, including past history, novelty, the level of attention received from others, formality, unfamiliarity, a subordinate status, evaluation and variations thereof (James C. McCroskey and Beatty, 1984). In addition, circumstances outside of an individual's comfort zone, such as a formal interview or a situation where individuals must conduct themselves in a specific manner, can also lead to OCA and anxiety (Cole and McCroskey, 2003). Studies have shown that students learning a FL suffer from evaluation and anxiety more so with their teachers than their peers (Al-Mahrooqi., 2015). This was confirmed by a study conducted among tertiary level Omani EFL Learners. The results from the study revealed a high level of anxiety among students in English classes (Al-Mahrooqi., 2015). Students were unsure when answering questions in front of the classroom but were able to do so effectively in front of their peers. This portrayed a feeling of nervousness in presence of the teacher than their colleagues (Al-Mahrooqi., 2015). In fact, Horwitz (2002) described the apprehension as

> "the hidden communication disorder because it is frequently not observed, acknowledge or discussed" (Gregersen and Horwitz, 2002; He, 2011).

Most university learners lack competency in speaking since they have problems with communicating in the English (Elaine K Horwitz, 1988; Yahya, 2013). As a result, they are unwilling to communicate in English. According to Yahya (2013), the problem stems from teaching; more emphasis placed by teaching methods on national exams and English is considered as just knowledge subject, which is not a priority (Yahya, 2013). He examined the factors that lead to oral apprehension among students of EFL. He noted that the fear of negative evaluation is a strong source of foreign language anxiety. The oral skills, which need students to work in the real situation, are ignored in Libyan education and the focus is still on teaching vocabulary and the language structure (S. S. R. Najeeb, 2013). According to a study conducted in Libya among EFL students, fear of making mistakes, nervousness, feeling inferior and fear of being judged are some of the factors that hinder the learners from speaking the English proficiently (Mohammed, 2014).

3.   IMPORTANCE OF INTERACTION AT EFL LANGUAGE CLASSROOM

Interaction is a key of SLA and occurs as the central feature. It appears the interpersonal activity taking place during face-to-face communication (R. F. S.

Ellis, 1999). The interaction influencing SLA occurs among non-native speakers of second language or between non-native speakers and native speakers. Ellis (1985) describes interaction as the discourse which is jointly constructed by students and their interlocutors and output is the result of interaction. It facilitates language learning, engages learners in participating language learning activities and makes more communication or interaction with the environment (R. Ellis, 1985). In second language learning context, language learning is mainly conducted and initiated by language teachers in different ways such as teacher questioning, teacher instructions, or any other kind of activities that facilitate learners' language acquisition (Albakri, 2007).

A part from this, Krashen (1981) considered acquisition as an explicit process and implicit process. The former involves students' attending consciously to language in order to comprehend and memorize rules. On the other hand, the latter takes place when the language is used for communication. Acquisition occurs when students focus on conveying meaning (Krashen, 1981). Second language acquisition is primarily referred to as the process by which both linguistic competence and communicative competence are obtained by students. It can be conducted through direct exposure of the FL to students and according to formal language (R. F. S. Ellis, 1999).

Generally, the quality of interaction is largely decided by teachers in their face to face communication with students (Walsh, 2006). In fact,

> "Maximizing interaction should be regarded as less significant than optimizing it; that is, promoting appropriate interaction in the light of desired learning outcomes" (Walsh, 2006).

An awareness of interactional processes is central to an understanding by both teachers and students of how language is obtained in a formal context (Walsh, 2006).

4. THE PROBLEM STATEMENT OF THE STUDY

EFL students have experienced OCA speaking in an English class. It can be stressful when they are expected to communicate in English, since it is not a language they use when communicating with their peers who do not comprehend the language (Adebanji, 2014). As a result, they do not adequately exercise their oral English ability. Most of the English learners tend to believe that one must never say anything in the language until they can do it correctly, sometimes even influenced by their instructors (Diab, 2009; Norton and Tang, 1997). More so, some students prefer to be quiet during speaking class because they are reluctant to speak in the English language. These students would focus on the potential negative evaluation from people and this worsens their OCA (Ezzi, 2012).

Having said that, OCA is a problem faced by a variety of university students while learning a new language on all levels of education (Kakepoto, Said, Habil,

Umrani, and Memon, 2013; James C McCroskey, 2009; Patil and Karekatti, 2012; Rashidi, Yamini, and Shafiei, 2011; Shahbaz, Khan, Khan, and Mustafa, 2016; Singh, David, and Choo, 2011; Zulkurnain and Kaur, 2014). These studies have ignored the crucial elements of the effects related to OCA. However, little attention has been put on the effect OCA has on interaction of students (Byrne, Flood, and Shanahan, 2012). This study will look at these aspects embodying OCA, and its effect on the way university students communicate during their interaction.

5.   THE STUDY

The aim of this case study is to investigate the OCA of Alzytuona University students in the English Department at the Faculty of Education. The objective of this work is to explore the aspects embodying OCA, and its effect on the way university students communicate during their interaction.

5.1 Participants

The students who participated in this study were from the school of education at Alzytuona University. Sampling for this study were 20 EFL students who are non-native English speakers, grouped into five with four students per group. The sample was focused on first year EFL students at Alzytouna University. It is presumed that the university environment, being different from high school (Endo and Harpel, 1982), has greatly contributed to first year EFL students to develop OCA. The university environment is noted to be more interactive than the high school one (Endo and Harpel, 1982), making first year university students develop OCA.

5.2 DATA COLLECTION

This work is to explore the aspects embodying OCA, and its effect on the way university students communicate during their interaction. In achieving this goal, it was considered most appropriate and beneficial to carryout focus-group interviews with First year EFL students in order to reach the core of the matter rather than administrating questionnaires. The focus group will offer a platform for students to discuss their feeling pertaining to OCA. For instance, they can discuss what they think that makes them experience OCA. Instead of asking questions to each person in turn,

> "participants are encouraged to talk to one another: asking questions, exchanging anecdotes, and commenting on each other's' experiences and views, and thus generating data through interaction" (Barbour and Kitzinger, 1999: 4).

The discussions on the focus groups were carried out with five different groups, with each group comprised of four members. These group members were first year students of the Faculty of Education. The discussion lasted about one hour on questions provided beforehand (see appendix (A) for focus group questions.

5.3 Data Analysis

Data collected from the focus group have analysed easily by relying on information that is not conflicting, such that only opinions that are shared among other students will be analysed (Kitzinger, 2007). This was done by filtering the data during analysis. The most common opinion among majority of the focus group was more reliable while analyzing data. Some members of the focus group may not give opinions to some queries, the researcher had the duty of ensuring whether they support the majority or disagree. This it to ensure no assumptions of opinions are made. This is because only opinions supported by the majority will be considered and this will improve reliability of findings of this study. More so, obtaining data from the focus group will be done in English to ensure that the data is reliable in finding out causes of OCA among the students.

6.   RESEARCH FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Discussions on the findings of the focus groups were carried out with five different groups, with each group comprised of four members. These group members were first year students of the Faculty of Education. The findings presented here are the unanimous responses of all the groups during the discussion. Nine themes were set for the discussion, namely:

6.1 Theme One: Experience about Learning and Speaking English

All the groups agreed that they had been learning English for eight years and their experiences gathered from those eight years of learning English were described as good, pleasant, stressful, anxiety-provoking and hard. This was mentioned when the researcher asked the groups about their years of learning English and their experience in learning the course. See Appendix B for the details of Question One. This discussion was related to the findings of Tanveer (2007) and Byrne (2012).

6.2 Theme Two: Disturbances Faced During the Learning and Speaking of English

When asked about what disturbed them most during the learning and speaking of English, the groups mentioned factors such as making presentations, speaking in front of the class and particularly, during English classes, as the major factors that normally disturbed them the most during the learning and speaking of English. According to them, these factors created anxiety, which led to OCA. The details of Question Two are given in Appendix B.

6.3 Theme Three: Situations That Cause OCA

Many situations were mentioned as the causes of anxiety to students, such as speaking English in front of the class and lecturers, especially during oral

examinations. Another situation was when a male and female student had to speak to each other or to a person of high position. This was because, according to their culture and the environment in which they live, men and women do not normally interact freely, and even in the classroom they sit separately from each other. Therefore, whenever they were asked to interact or communicate with each other, they found it difficult and this gave rise to OCA. The details of Question Three are given in Appendix B.

6.4 Theme Four: What is done in a Stressful Situation While Speaking English?

All the groups agreed that it was stressful for them to speak in English; they would get nervous, lose confidence, and start blushing. They also stated that their heart rate increased when they became stressed while speaking in English. They mentioned that in order to overcome this anxiety, they would rush through and quickly finish the conversation by using short broken sentences and would try to restore their confidence to overcome the anxiety. Appendix B contains the details of this question.

6.5 Theme Five: The Reasons for OCA

The students mentioned various factors that were responsible for their OCA. These factors included psychological factors, personality traits, lack of confidence, language difficulties, improper method of teaching, and the feeling that English was very difficult to learn. According to them, these were the reasons for their nervousness and anxiety. Appendix B gives the details of this question.

6.6 Theme Six: Situations that Create Less OCA

According to the groups, they were normally less apprehensive when they were with their friends outside the class or school environment. During this period, the conversation would generally be in their first language and sometimes, a mixture of both their first and second languages. This meant that when the students were with their lecturers who shared the same culture as them or who were close to them, they felt less anxious.

6.7 Theme Seven: If Afraid of Making Mistakes, Why?

The groups admitted that they were afraid of making mistakes because they felt that their classmates would laugh at them and they would feel ashamed. Also, they were afraid of being given low marks by the English lecturer because they thought the system was the same as in the secondary schools. See Appendix B for the details of the question.

6.8 Theme Eight: Communicating in Groups (Chatting and the Effect of Evaluation)

Most of the interviewees (students) encountered difficulties when speaking during group discussions with their friends. However, some felt comfortable with people they knew and, as a result, were able to express themselves freely.

6.8.1 Comparison between Talking with Friends and to Groups

The groups agreed that talking to friends was different from talking to a group of unfamiliar persons or people they did not know well. They would be wary of what they said when speaking to a group of people they were not familiar with. Nevertheless, they could say just about anything in any way to the people they were familiar with.

6.9 Theme Nine: Communicating with Lecturers

All the groups asserted that their OCA increased when speaking in front of their lecturers because they were afraid of making mistakes, which they believed might negatively affect their results at the end of the course. They said,

> "We are conscious not to make mistakes in the class because the lecturer will grade us at the end of the learning period… We may feel less anxious if no grades will be awarded at the end".

They concluded that they did not have the chance to communicate in English outside the classroom.

7. CONCLUSION

Although the current study has provided a valuable insight into OCA from focus group discussion; the phenomenon, due to its complexity and multi-faceted nature, needs further exploration from different perspectives and methods. The use of focus group interviews by this study was an effort to understand the true nature of the OCA from a different viewpoint. The results of this interview study clearly indicate that students feel anxious and nervous while speaking English in front of others. However,when asked about what disturbed them most during the learning and speaking of English, the groups mentioned factors such as making presentations, speaking in front of the class and particularly, during English classes, improper method of teaching as the major factors that normally disturbed them the most during the learning and speaking of English. According to them, these factors created anxiety, which led to OCA.

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