Oral Communication Apprehension Among Undergraduate Engineering Students in Pakistan

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Abstract: *This paper investigates the levels of oral communication anxiety of undergraduate engineering students in Pakistan. The data was collected from four departments of the university. McCroskey (1978) oral Communication Apprehension (OCA) Survey Instrument was adopted for this study. The questionnaire was translated into Urdu (National Language of Pakistan) to make it clear to respondents. The data analysis revealed 18% of the sample had a high level of oral communication apprehension, 66% faced an average level of oral communication apprehension and 16% were in a low level of oral communication apprehension. This study also discloses that there is no significant difference in levels of oral communication apprehension of male and female. Further the study reports and compares levels of oral communication anxiety of the students to whom English is the second language and to whom English is the third language (both in foreign language context). Finally, the study concludes that although the majority of the undergraduate engineering students face an average level of writing anxiety, however, with attention and guidance they can be brought to low level of writing anxiety category.*

Keywords: Oral communication apprehension, undergraduate students, engineering students, gender, English as second language, English as third language

1   Introduction

Speaking is considered the most anxiety provoking in second language learning (Cheng, Horwitz, & Schallert, 1999) Formal education system in Pakistan focuses more on reading and writing skills of English language. Speaking and listening skills of English language remain almost ignored in the formal Pakistani education system up to school level in many cases even at tertiary level. According to Mashori (2007) at college and university level? Majority of students fail to understand the lectures, can't speak about their problems?(p.2). Khan (2011) also notes lack of English language oral communication skills among law undergraduate students. This ignorance of English language speaking skills has resulted in the mushrooming of thousands of below standard English language centers in urban areas of Pakistan, which focus only on speaking skills and inculcate in the language learners that speaking is the only skill the learners need

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to focus.

2   Review of Related Literature

Rachman (2004) defines anxiety "Anxiety is the tense, unsettling anticipation of a threatening but a vague event; a feeling of uneasy suspense. It is a negative affect so closely related to fear." According to Oxford language anxiety is "fear or apprehension occurring when a learner is expected to perform in the second or foreign language." (p.59) (As cited in Macros-Linas and Garau, 2009). McCroskey (1978) coined this term "Oral Communication Apprehension" (OCA). Since then there has been much research on OCA in first language, second language and foreign language contexts. In Mckroskey's words OCA is an ?individual's level of fear or anxiety associated with either real or anticipated communication with another person or persons" (McCroskey, 1977). Simons, Higgins and Lowe, (1995) define Oral Communication Apprehension as, "Oral communication apprehension (OCA) is a fear of having verbally communicating with people." (p. 160) (As cited in Marcos-Llinás and Garau (2009))

Oral communication apprehension is a very common phenomenon in foreign/second language context (Rashidi, Yamini, & Shafiei, 2011). Awan, Azher, Anwar, Naz, et al. (2010) also state that speaking in front of others is most anxiety provoking for non-native English language speakers. In oral communication public speaking is the most anxiety provoking. Speaking in public is a widely known fear, for decades, it has received attention of communication scholars (Witt & Behnke, 2006). "Public speaking anxiety is a common social phobia" (Docan-Morgan & Schmidt, 2012). In some public speakers, public speaking anxiety resembles permanent trait, in others it closely resembles to temporary state in many others, it is situation specific (Witt & Behnke, 2006). Studies have also reported different levels of oral communication apprehension (OCA) for male and female. Female are significantly more oral communication apprehensive than male (McKroskey) as cited in (Simons, Higgins, & Lowe, 1995). Tianjian (2010) reports an insignificant difference of speaking anxiety between male and female.

Many researches have explored reasons of OCA. Villar (2010) finds out eight reasons of oral communication anxiety given by beginning Filipino students. The eight factors are "expectations, training and experience, audience, self-worth, rejection, verbal fluency, preparation and previous unpleasant experience"(p.167). McCroskey (1976) notes that those students who have moderate communication apprehension at the preschool level, negative reinforcement of their peer and teacher can make them high apprehensive. (Subasi, 2010) proves empirically that the fear of negative evaluation and self-perception of speaking ability in the target language are potential sources of anxiety for Turkish learners of English. (Tsiplakides & Keramida, 2009) explorer causes of writing anxiety as: low self-perception about speaking, fear of negative evaluation from peers, fear of mistakes, high anxious students' comparison of speaking abilities with peers.

Statement of the Problem

English language oral communication skills are important for employment and higher studies in Pakistan (Dar, Zaki, & Kazmi, 2010). Employment interviews for graduates are in English language or most part of the interviews at the level is in English language. Similarly, the formal oral presentation and meetings in middle and higher management are also in English language. The importance of oral communication skills increases in multinational organization. At tertiary level speaking skills are given some importance. Many universities and institutions even offer oral communication courses at undergraduate level. Students at undergraduate and graduate level are also required to give oral presentations in English language in most of the subjects.

In Engineering, more focus is given to the field related subjects and communication - skills are not given much attention ? particularly oral communication skills. Pakistani employers appreciate engineers? fields? related knowledge and skills to some extent, but are not satisfied with the communication skills of the undergraduate engineers. Lack of communication skills among engineers is not only a local issue in Pakistan, it has also been reported in other countries. Devi and Feroz (2008) refer to The Boyer Commission (2003) which reports that faculty, administrators and potential employers are concerned about the graduates' lack of oral communication skills. (Devi & Feroz, 2008) rightly point out the need for engineering universities to meet the industry need and produce engineers who have communication competence.

Oral communication anxiety can be one of the reasons of engineers' low level of oral communication skills. To the best of the researcher's knowledge, no study in Pakistan has been carried out to measure levels of undergraduate engineers' oral communication anxiety. The purpose of this study was to measure levels of Oral Communication Apprehension (OCA) of undergraduate Engineering students in Pakistan. This study further investigates levels of oral communication apprehension for both genders and for those to whom English is a second language and third language in foreign language context.

Research Questions

1. What are levels of oral communication apprehension among undergraduate engineering students?

2. Does the oral communication anxiety they experience differ for gender and for those to who English is second language and to whom English is third language (both in foreign language context)?

3 Methodology and Sampling Technique

The study adopts a quantitative approach. Twenty one departments of a public sector engineering university in Karachi were taken as a target population of this study. The sample of this study consisted of four departments at the

university. Data for this study was collected from 2nd, 4th and 6th semester students of Bachelors of Engineering (BE) Program. Data for this study was collected through convenient sampling technique. McCroskey (1978) Oral Communication Apprehension (OCA) Survey Instrument with its Urdu translation was given to 400 undergraduate engineering students in fall 2012. 56 questionnaires were either not returned or partially filled which were not considered for this study, hence sample of the study were 334 undergraduate engineering students from the four departments of the university. The sample had a representation of both genders. The sample consisted of 29.3% (98) female and 70.7% (236) male. Ratio of male students in engineering studies in Pakistan is much greater than female as represented in the sample.

McCroskey (1978) Oral Communication Apprehension (OCA) Survey Instrument was adopted for this study. OCA is a five-point Likert scale ranging from 'strongly disagree' to 'strongly agree' other three options are 'disagree', 'agree' and 'undecided'. The questionnaire is composed of 25 statements concerning interpersonal oral communication. To facilitate participants and get true response the questionnaire was translated into Urdu (National Language of Pakistan) and the word 'in English' was included in parenthesis in some sentences both in English and Urdu translation to make the meaning clear to respondents. The reliability of the translation was judged by five experts. Quantitative data collected from McCroskey (1978) OCA were analyzed with the help of Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) ver. 22.

4 Findings

The sample represents both genders, male and female: 70.7%, and 20.3% respectively. The ratio of female in higher education in engineering is lower than male, as it can be seen in the sample. Majority (78.7%) of the participants belong to age group of 20-23, the second largest number of participants in the sample is of age group under 20 is 19.8%. The remaining three age groups: 24-27, 28-31 and others have very low representation: 0.9, 0.3 and 0.3 respectively. All of the participants were from the undergraduate engineering program. 91% of the participants were full time students; whereas 9% of the sample were part time student. The sample also represents all major races (based on language) in Pakistan. The study was conducted in Karachi hence maximum number of participants were Urdu Speaking 64.1% the second biggest representation was of Punjabi speaking 14.1%, others 8.7%, Sindhi speaking 6.3%, Pushtun 3.6%, Gujrati 2.1%, Saraiki 0.9%, and Baloch 0.3%.

Table 1: Demographics of the participants

Frequency		%
Gender		
Male	236	70.7
Female	98	29.3
Total	334	100
Age Group		
Under 20	66	19.8
20-23	263	78.7
24-27	3	0.9
28-31	1	0.3
Others	1	0.3
Total	334	100
Educational Program		
Undergraduate Engineering Students	334	100
Employment Status		
Full time student	304	91
Part time student	30	9
Total	334	100
Race/Ethnicity		
Punjabi	47	14.1
Pashtun	12	3.6
Sindhi	21	6.3
Saraiki	3	0.9
Urdu Speaking	214	64.1
Baloch	1	0.3
Gujrati	7	2.1
Others	29	8.7
Total	334	100

Table 2: Mean and standard deviation of the sample

N	Mean	Std. Deviation
334	72.16	8.663

Participants whose score is equal to or more than mean score of the sample plus one standard deviation are high apprehensive students -80 or above. Participants who score equal to or less than mean score of the sample minus one standard deviation are low apprehensive students -64 or below. The remaining participants who score between low and high apprehensive range 65-79 are average apprehensive students.

Table 3: Oral Communication Anxiety category and score range for each category

Oral Communication Anxiety Category	Score Range
High Apprehensive	80 or above
Average Apprehensive	65 - 79
Low Apprehensive	64 or below

Table 4: Participants' levels of oral communication apprehension

Categories	N	%*
High Apprehensive	60	18
Average Apprehensive	221	66
Low Apprehensive	53	16
Total	334	100

*rounded to closer whole number

Majority of the students 221 (66%) have average level of oral communication apprehension. Sixty participants who become 18% of the sample have high level of oral communication apprehension. 53 participants that make 16% of the sample fall into low level of oral communication apprehension.

Table 5: Male students' levels of oral communication apprehension

Categories	N	%*
High Apprehensive	44	19
Average Apprehensive	156	66
Low Apprehensive	36	15
Total	236	100

*rounded to closer whole number

Table 6: Female students' levels of oral communication apprehension

Categories	N	%
High Apprehensive	16	16.33
Average Apprehensive	65	66.33
Low Apprehensive	17	17.34
Total	98	100

19% of the male are high apprehensive, as compare to 16.33% of the female. The percentage of male and female students, in average apprehension category, is almost the same: for male 66% and for female 66.33%. Similarly, the difference of male and female students in low apprehensive category is also only of 2%: male 15% and female 17%. No significant difference, in the levels of oral communication apprehension between male and female, was notice in this study.

Table 7: Levels of oral communication apprehension of students English is the second language (in foreign language context)

Categories	N	%
High Apprehensive	43	20
Average Apprehensive	143	67
Low Apprehensive	28	13
Total	214	100

As compared to the comparison of levels of oral communication anxiety between male and female the difference between those to whom English is the second language and to whom English is the third language (both in foreign language contexts) difference more. The percentage of high apprehensive for whom English is second language is 20% and for those for whom English is

Table 8: Levels of oral communication apprehension of students English is third language (in foreign language context)

Categories	N	%
High Apprehensive	17	14
Average Apprehensive	78	65
Low Apprehensive	25	21
Total	120	100

third language is 14%. In average apprehensive category, the difference between the both is only of 2%. 67% of the students for whom English is the second language are in average apprehensive category and 65% of the students to whom English is the third language are in average level of OCA. In low apprehensive category percentage of students for whom English is the third language is eight percent more than those to whom English is the third language.

5 Discussion and Conclusion

Majority of the total participants 66% faced average level of oral communication apprehension, 18% of them faced high level of oral communication apprehension and 16% of the students reported low level of oral communication apprehension. The difference in the levels of oral communication anxiety across gender is not significant. 2.67% of the male students are more high oral communication apprehensive than female, whereas 0.33% of the female are more in average oral communication apprehension and 2% female are more in low communication apprehension category. Percentage of high apprehensive participants for whom English is a second language is 6% more than those for whom English is a third language. In average apprehensive category 2% students for whom English is second language are more than those to whom English is third language. In low apprehensive category percentage of students for whom English is the third language is 8% more than those to whom English is the third language.

Though majority of the undergraduate engineering students is average oral communication apprehensive, but at the same time, 18% of them are high apprehensive and only 16% are low oral communication apprehensive. The majority of the average communication apprehensive students can be taken to low average communication apprehension category if they are provided proper guidance and counseling. They can go to the high level of oral communication apprehension if proper attention is not given. The male and female difference in oral communication anxiety is not significant; hence both genders should be given equal chances and attention in oral communication. Though in a class of seventy students usually it is very difficult to detect the students to whom English is second language and the ones to whom English is third language. As the majority of the undergraduate students, 66% face average level of oral communication anxiety efforts should be made to reduce their writing anxiety level to low anxiety level, regardless of the fact, that either English is second or third language to them. Because, inquiring about learners' first language in

class can create problems. The students may feel the teacher wants to know their ethnicity to penalize or favor them, at the same time presence of political practices in universities/colleges/institutes can also give it a political color. The difference as shown in the result that those to whom English is third language are less oral communication apprehensive than those to whom English is second language (both in foreign language context), may be due to schooling system the participants have come from, because in Pakistan we have many standards for schooling such as elite schools non-elite schools and many further categories in elite schools and even dozens of categories in non-elite schools.

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