Oral Communication Apprehensions among Jordanian Undergraduates in Hashemite University

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Abstract

The aim of this qualitative study was to understand the process and mechanism of Oral Communication Apprehension (OCA) in English among Jordanian students inside and outside classroom settings. Nine students were purposively recruited from the Hashemite University (HU) in Jordan from different programs where the Medium of Instruction is English. Interviews were employed to explain the process and mechanism of the apprehensive behavior of the students' oral communication scenarios. Findings revealed that the process of apprehensive behavior includes fear of negative evaluation, avoiding participation, avoiding coursework, anxiety, the missing opportunity for a job, limited social engagement, loss of confidence, and disorganized thinking patterns. Finally, pedagogical implications were suggested to reduce and alleviate the negative impacts of these psychological factors on the smoothness of oral communication and speaking fluency.

Key words: Oral Communication Apprehension, Undergraduate Students.

Problem Statement

Communication Apprehension is a psychological phenomenon that greatly influences the oral modality and speaking fluency in a negative fashion where language learners are reported to have physiological impediments that obstruct the fluency of their oral behavior in a plethora of multiple situations. Hunter et al. (2014), for example, reported that individuals with a high level of CA, despite their demonstrable receptive linguistic abilities, faced physical symptoms that include sweating, muscle tension, shaking hands, increased heart rate, hindered breathing, heart palpitations, dizziness, confusion, and speech disfluencies. Nonetheless, the process and mechanism that underpin these physiological changes in the oral modality changes from one group of people to another and is presumed to be dependent on personal factors and attitudes of a particular group over the other. Given the specificity of the Jordanian context where language policy, EF environment, linguistic exposure, academic field, pedagogy, and teacher professionalism are closely intertwined, the process of language production and apprehensive linguistic behaviors might represent different processes and mechanisms that are not similar to other language groups of language learners that define their oral performance. This qualitative research intends to fill in this gap in knowledge and investigates the processes and mechanisms that are responsible for the oral apprehensive behaviors of Jordanian students (Blume et al., 2013; Byrne, Flood, & Hanahan, 2012)

Research Design

A qualitative research study was employed to enable the researcher to understand and explain the processes and mechanisms that motivate or lead to the OCA phenomenon as experienced and expressed by the participants when using the English Language inside and outside the classrooms. Creswell (2013) defines qualitative research as "a type of educational

research in which the researcher relies on the views of participants, asks broad, general questions, collects data consisting largely of words (or text) from participants, describes and analyzes these words for themes, and conducts the inquiry in a subjective, biased manner" (p. 46).

Research Instrument

Data was collected through interviews where Jordanian students from Hashemite University were required to reflect deeply on the psychological processes of their experiences in communicating with the English language and explain the inhibitory mechanisms that are likely to prevent them from smooth communication inside and outside the classroom settings. From a phenomenological perspective, the researcher needs to probe deep into the psychological apprehensive processes that are accompanying oral behavior to understand the reasons and explanations that are affecting their inadequate language performance (Moustakas, 1994). The student respondents were asked to participate in a voluntary study to express and share the psychological processes that accompany their verbal behavior in English language use in formal and informal settings. The interview questions were specifically designed to understand the psychological processes that are involved in oral communication in order to decompose the apprehensive behavior into understandable components that help the researcher draw a pedagogical plan to reduce communication apprehension among future students.

Data Analysis

A content analysis was employed to analyze the data. The recorded data were transcribed into textual data and special attention was given to spotlighting the major themes and sub-themes (Miles & Huberman, 1984). The process of data coding involved highlighting, circling, and coloring the themes and sub-themes that were perceived as significant phenomenological data and might have the potential to stand as useful explanations (Saldana, 2013). The emerged language categories were later reduced and reclassified into themes and sub-themes of the apprehensive process of oral communication (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

Sampling

Twelve Jordanian students from different fields of specialization from Hashemite University were purposefully recruited to participate in the research study to explain the psychological processes and mechanisms that are involved in their experiences of Oral Communication Apprehension in language use. This purposive sampling was justified on the bases of the apprehensive oral behavior that was observed among the Jordanian students at Hashemite University. The participants were debriefed on the importance of the study and its significance in the improvement of language teaching and were assured of their anonymity and the withdrawal of the study whenever they perceive that necessary (Braggs, 2017). Three participants were excluded from the study because they were not willing to participate making the total number of participants nine students. The nine participants were Jordanian students from different fields of specialization who were recruited from Hashemite University.

Research Question

The following research question was formed to investigate the processes of Oral Communication Apprehension among the Jordanian undergraduate students of Hashemite University.

How does Oral Communication Apprehension affect the speaking process of students at HU?

Findings And Analysis

The research question was targeted at understanding how oral CA affects the speaking process of students at HU. Figure 1.1 presents the theme and sub-themes that emerged from the analysis of the interview transcripts. The students narrated their experiences with CA and how they are affecting them in the various communication encounters. Students recounted how CA is affecting them in their daily engagement in both academic and social settings. The effects in the academic domain include Avoiding Participation, Avoiding Coursework, Anxiety, and missing opportunity for jobs; the effects in the social domain include Fear of Negative Evaluation, Limited Social Engagement, Disorganized Thinking Patterns, and Loss of Self-Confidence. The effects of CA on the speaking process as socially constructed from the students' lived experiences are explained in the figure below:
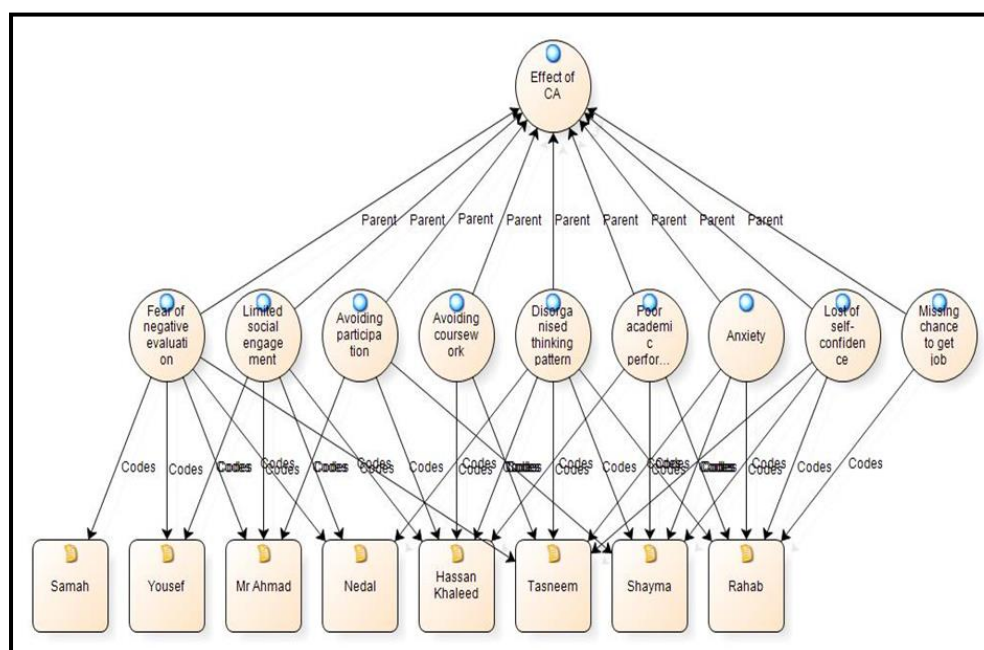
Figure 1.1. *Effects of CA*

Academic effects:

Fear of Negative Evaluation

Fear of negative evaluations is one of the processes and mechanisms that are associated with English communication among Jordanian students which has been identified as one of the effects of CA on students and has been highlighted by 6 out of 9 students. Due to the feelings that they are going to be evaluated and judged by others and the perception that there are more competent speakers in their academic settings, students develop feelings of insecurity when it comes to speaking in English in both interpersonal interaction and group settings. The following excerpts from the students' narration of their lived experiences indicate that they are being affected by CA in different contexts:

"When the people in front of you or around are incompetence or their level below yours, you will feel comfortable and confident but if you know they are competence and have a good level in the language, the problem is started and you will be apprehensive and nervous… you feel that you will be judged by them. Even sometimes their faces and looks make some changes on you like start shaking". (Ahmad)

"I do have problem with surprises… surprises from the person or persons among your audiences. Sometimes I discover that there was a very famous or qualified speakers among your audiences so I keep thinking whether I did well or they have taken an impression which I need a lot of time to change it". (Nedal)

"I think that I am not among qualified or very good level students in English. Caused me be weak in front of excellent students and teachers… [I don't want to be weak] in my personality. When I did my first presentations and I did not do well, some students change their impressions about me which they were consider me in very good level in English language" (Samah).

"I was shocked when some of them told me we thought you very excellent in English language. I told them I don't know what happened to me. I was scared and worried". (Tasneem)

"Yes sure, honestly, one time a friend of mine refused to put me in his group during the class and he claimed that I am not a good speaker, that story caused a lot of trouble personally. I have decided to push myself to be good in English". (Yousef)

The above narrations describe various aspects of the psychological process of communicating in English and the social implications that are involved in the speaking scenarios that students are experiencing in the communication engagements. The analysis implies that CA induced the feeling of being negatively evaluated by both course lecturers, classmates, and friends which could further result in other negative influences such as limited social engagements and low academic performance among the students. The result of this research comes in line with previous research on communication apprehension (Riasato & Rahimi, 2018). Riasati and Rahimi (2018) found that fear of negative evaluations is one of the affective factors that influence speaking fluency and willingness to communicate (p. 13). In speaking situations, students become under the effects of multiple factors, among which are task type, topic, and teacher/interlocutor, that exert huge levels of anxiety that is going to affect their oral performance (Riasati & Rahaimi, 2018). Furthermore, fear of negative evaluations was also found to be situational and is strongly dependent on task type. Communication apprehension was investigated in high-stake and low-stake situations as it is the case in group discussions and conversations against meetings and public speaking (Jalleh, Mahfoodh, & Singh, 2021). The results found that students with higher linguistic proficiency performed better in speaking than their lower-proficiency achievers in general; nonetheless, group discussions and conversations which require spontaneity of speech demonstrated higher levels of communication apprehensions than in meetings and public speaking which require less spontaneity, and less psychological anxiety as can be mediated by preparations and memorizations. However, although proficiency was a critical component for communication apprehension, task type can also determine the level of speaking anxiety due to its potential for increasing or decreasing oral performance (Jalleh, Mahfoodh, & Singh, 2021; Riasati & Rahaimi, 2018).

Avoiding Participation

The avoidance strategy of active involvement and participation in communicating in English characterize a direct implication of a self-motivated apprehensive mechanism that students employ to cope with the psychological load that accompanies their oral behaviors. The sampled narrations capture real-world experiences of the processes, and possible explanations, for the abstention of their participation in oral communication. The emergent social behaviors of avoidance and academic passivity are likely to be suggestive of negative implications are already been translated into actual social and verbal behaviors. In other words, due to the

negative psychological impacts of the inability to communicate properly in English, students had already made the decision of minimizing their verbal communication and retreat to their comfort zone (Riasati & Rahimi, 2018; Syed & Kuzborska, 2019). Such social and academic behaviors are expected to reduce the expected achievements of the students and reduce the productive quality of language acquisition that is necessary for their future careers. The following students' narrations are exemplary instances of the psychological processes that are involved in communicating with English.

> I dropped off one course before because the instructor of that course is tough and always asking sudden questions and he asking students to do presentations. (Hassan)

> But it was affect me as I kept think about what happened long time. I will try to avoid having class with the same teacher again as he got the first impression about me. I feel that I am weak and disappointed. (Tasneem)

In line with communication apprehension research, these students' willingness to communicate has researched unprecedented levels where they employed avoidance strategies to not get involved in any verbal speech (Riasati 2018). In explaining the relationship between learners' willingness to communicate from the one hand and language learning anxiety, learning motivations, and self-perceived ability, Riasati (2018) found that anxiety had negatively correlated with willingness to communicate while had positively correlated with learning motivation; furthermore, situational and individual traits had also played a role. The topic of discussion, the effect of interlocutors, teachers, shyness, self-confidence, teacher, and classroom atmosphere were all significant variables to affect the communication apprehension among the students. Similarly, while Syed and Kuzborska (2019) had highlighted the importance of situational variables like interlocutor, topic, and perceived opportunity to communicate, they had also spotlighted the individual variables like introversion and extraversion on the learning process and willingness to communicate. Previous research had found that communication apprehension is dependent on several variables and that students' unwillingness to communicate is related to their learning environment and their personality traits which comes in line with the findings of this study (Jalleh, Mahfoodh, & Singh, 2021; Riasati, 2018; Syed & Kuzborska, 2019).

Avoiding Coursework

While some students decided to minimize their active participation in English; others take more aggravating steps where they decide to drop the coursework altogether. The foregoing sampled narrations capture the real-world experiences of the students with the processes of the students' behaviors in relation to the potential impacts of CA on their academic activities. The emergent reality portrays the potential negative effects of CA on the students' academic performance since non-participation and/or avoidance of classes may result in the students not being able to fulfill the requirements to pass particular courses. The following narrations sample some of the students' responses.

> I dropped off one course before because the instructor of that course is tough and always asking sudden questions and he asking students to do presentations. (Khaleed)

> But it was affect me as I kept think about what happened long time. I will try to avoid having class with the same teacher again as he got the first impression about me. I feel that I am weak and disappointed. (Tasneem)

Previous research, to the best of the researcher knowledge , had not reported on the avoidance of specific coursework or the dropping of a program. However, research on teachers' research cooperative language learning highlights the importance of the teacher as a facilitator and the criticality of the learning environment to be comfortable and friendly to reduce the levels of anxiety, shyness, and lack of self-confidence to promote for constructive learning to take place (Almusharraf, 2020; Kristiansen, Burner, & Johnsen, 2019; Liu, 2018; Namaziandost, Neisi, Kheryadi, & Nasri, 2019; Vakilifard, Bahramlou, & Mousavian, 2020; Yasmin & Sohail, 2018; Zamani, 2016). Kristiansen, Burner, and Johnsen (2019) and Yasmin and Sohail (2018) stress the importance of cooperative language learning as a method of teaching to reduce tension, anxiety, self-confidence, shyness, and extraversion in the learning process to take place in which the teacher plays a critical role. In a literature review on the teaching context in Jordan, Alhabahba, Pandian, and Mahfoodh (2016) explained that the role of English language teachers in Jordan is still following the dogmatic conception of the centrality of their education process in a sense that interaction, discussion, and argumentations which gives no role for the exchange and negotiation for meanings that are necessary for the learning process. Positive learning outcomes were reported on cooperative language learning on vocabulary, speaking, and writing skills against traditional methods where language learners had been actively involved in the learning process as levels of affective variables such as shyness, self-confidence, anxiety, introversion, and lack of opportunities were significantly reduced (Almusharraf, 2020; Kristiansen, Burner, & Johnsen, 2019; Liu, 2018; Namaziandost, Neisi, Kheryadi, & Nasri, 2019; Vakilifard1, Bahramlou, & Mousavian, 2020; Yasmin & Sohail, 2018; Zamani, 2016). In the Jordanian context, however, it seems that still hold the old beliefs of authoritative perspective towards the learning process which led to some unfortunate students avoiding specific courses or dropping certain programs. The Jordanian teaching and learning context seem to be representing the extreme opposite of the cooperative language environment which increases affective variables for communication apprehension creating a stressful context that is not helping for the promotion of speaking fluency and oral skills to develop.

Anxiety

The analysis of the interview data also revealed that CA causes anxiety in the students. Students reported that they experienced nervousness and anxiety during communication encounters which result in disappointment and other physical and emotional manifestations. The following excerpts demonstrate the students' descriptions of their experiences:

"I feel very nervous, sweating, my face turn to be red and I could fell down again. fear and anxiety this our human nature". (Shayma)

"every time I experiences anxiety in any situations, I got disappointed and sad. I keep telling myself that this problem going to kill me and I will not overcome it. I fight myself, why I did that?. (Rahab)

The affective role of anxiety on oral communication apprehension had been strongly established in the literature on language learning and speaking ability (Riasati, 2018, Syed & Kuzborska, 2019) among others. What is revealing in this particular situation is that English language learners have the motivation to learn as they are trying to improve their language skills but, to them, failure is eternal for them. Situational variables such as teacher-centered education and the authoritative nature of instructors appear to be of great impediments to acquiring oral skills causing anxiety and decreasing self-confidence. Moreover, the integration of oral tasks in the classroom seems to be fulling summative assessments and following institutional orders rather than being incorporated to meet teaching and learning objectives

(Alhabahba, Pandian, & Mahfoodh, 2016). Such a perspective on language teaching and learning is not actually helping in the reduction of anxiety or promoting a smooth learning environment.

Missing Opportunity for Job

Due to the great chances of employability for students with high levels of speaking fluency in English, one student expressed her great concerns over her low English oral communication skills despite her excellence in other academic subjects. The fear of losing the chances of employability in the market seemed to be a great source of irritation to her and she had expressed her concerns about not being able to procure a job in the future. Although these concerns are job-related concerns and employability requirements, this instance refers to the huge psychological impacts of communication apprehension on the self, and the feeling of inadequacy and incompetency in oral communication can affect the personality of language learners and increase senses of insecurities and self-blaming

I am scared and worried about missing the chances to get a new jobs or participations. (Rahab)

To the best of my knowledge, I did not find any research that reports on the relationship between communication apprehension and employability in the job market. Rather, the contrary is what occurs; that is, the motivation for employability in the job market decreases anxiety and communication apprehension (Marcel, 2019). However, in this particular case, it seems that the student is severely caught between her aspiration for individual growth and her fear and inability to achieve her future career. It might be contemplated that this is a case where the student's personality traits, the teacher-teaching conceptions, strategies, and tass; and the educational system, professionalism, and regulations have all played a role in producing communication apprehension (Alhabahba, Pandian, & Mahfoodh. 2016).

Limited Social Engagement

Analysis of the interview participants' narration of their lived experiences revealed that CA affects the students' level of engagement in social activities. The narrations captured how CA affect the students:

"sometime if I have to present or doing activities in English, I will choose the easiest part. Sometimes I am avoiding participation with good level students. I also avoid to go to social activities or ceremonies with large numbers of people". (Ahmad)

"sometimes it get you in a critical situation which you choose to be silent rather than speaking and will affect you among your classmates…". (Yousef).

The education system in Jordan still adopts teacher-centered education system despite the claims otherwise, and students have few opportunities to communicate in the classroom and outside the classroom due to the EFL environment in Jordan. Such limited exposure to the natural English environment in an informal setting and the limited opportunities to use English inside the classroom (Ellis, 1981) have substantially prevented students from the opportunities for the negotiation of meaning, scaffolding, recasting, self-correct and self-reshape, and improving their language proficiency (Banaruee, Khatin-Zadeh, & Ruegg, 2018; Tasdemir & Arslan, 2018; Zarei, Ahour, & Seifoori, 2020). Investigating communication apprehension and career span, Marcel (2019) found out that age, levels of working experience, and frequency of presentations have significantly affected oral skills where more levels of working experience and frequency of presentations had produced lesser levels of communication apprehension

among participants. The direct implication of this study is that the improvement of oral skills is critically dependent on the use of language, meaning that language learning and its improvement are occurring where language use is produced to the maximum in order for students to eliminate their communication apprehensions and anxiety levels (Banaruee, Khatin-Zadeh, & Ruegg, 2018; Ellis, 1981; Marcel, 2019; Tasdemir & Arslan, 2018; Zarei, Ahour, & Seifoori, 2020).

Loss of Self Confidence

The analysis of the students' narratives also revealed that CA causes students to lose self-confidence which is likely going to deter them from communicating effectively. This leads students to feel inferior among competent peers in oral communication or people whom they think are good speakers of English. The following are the excerpts of the students' narratives to this effect:

"as a first language is easy to me to manage to get things done probably. As I have the prober words and grammars and can speak long sentences. in English Sometime I forgot the meaning of words. I am Lacking of confidence to communicate well in or out of classes".(Rahab)

"I lost my confidence, cause me psychological affect". (Shayma)

"I think that I am not among qualified or very good level students in English. Caused me be weak in front of excellent students and teachers". (Tasneem)

Research on self-confidence has always been an important variable in language acquisition and oral skills (Riasati, 2018; Riasati & Rahimi, 2018; Syed & Kuzborksa, 2019). In the Jordanian context, however, although the levels of self-confidence appear to be substantially lacking (Asassfeh, Al-Shaboul, Zuraiq, Alshboul, 2011), the ending result of oral communication apprehensions is something that is not to be only attributable to personal and individual variables alone. In the Jordanian context, the lack of self-confidence seems to be resulting from situational variables such as teacher-based teaching, teachers' beliefs, methods of teaching, and educational regulations (Alhabahba, Pandian, & Mahfoodh, 2016) that are not allowing any serious opportunities for interactive communications necessary for linguistic improvements (Banaruee, Khatin-Zadeh, & Ruegg, 2018; Ellis, 1981; Marcel, 2019; Tasdemir & Arslan, 2018; Zarei, Ahour, & Seifoori, 2020). As inspired by modern methods of teaching, like cooperative language learning, the teachers and students shall be engaged in in-class tasks and activities that motivate students to speak in a collaborative fashion and stress-free environment to enhance the learning process to reduce the lack of confidence of the students (Almusharraf, 2020; Kristiansen, Burner, & Johnsen, 2019; Liu, 2018; Namaziandost, Neisi, Kheryadi, & Nasri, 2019; Vakilifard, Bahramlou, & Mousavian, 2020; Yasmin & Sohail, 2018; Zamani, 2016).

Self-Criticism

One of the effects of CA identified by previous researchers is that it leads to self-criticism among people experiencing it. The analysis of the students' narrations of their experiences with CA provides evidence that some students developed this negative attitude after experiencing communication apprehensions in particular situations. Analysis of the students' descriptions of their experience with CA shows that after communication encounters; they felt ashamed and self-critical of themselves which usually lingers for a long time in their minds. They kept criticizing themselves and continue to negatively assess themselves. The following verbatim narrations highlight vivid descriptions of the students:

"Sometimes I feel that I am cowered, I am not brave especially when a female student doing a good presentation". (Hassan)

"surprises from the person or persons among your audiences. Sometimes I discover that there was a very famous or qualified speakers among your audiences so I keep thinking whether I did well or they have taken an impressions which I need a lot of time to change it".(Nedal)

"have this problem in most situations but it increased in interviews. I keep worried about not answering the questions so I will fail in the interviews".(Rahab)

"I experience it, I had a miserable memory with that…It cause me a lot. I lost my confidence, cause me psychological affect and I cannot forget". (Shayma)

"I was scared and worried…I kept think about what happened long time..I feel that I am weak and disappointed". (Tasneem)

As defined, self-criticism is an affective variable of a psychological state where individuals have extremely high standards which are mixed with great concerns about failure and self-scrutiny (Blatt, 1995; Blatt, Dafflitti, & Quinlan, 1976) and are associated with negative learning impacts (Harvey et al., 2015), eating disorder (Boone et al., 2014), depression symptoms (Hewitt et al., 2002), and anxiety (Essau, Leung, Conradt, Cheng, & Wong, 2008). Caught between high standards or learning outcomes and excessive current self-scrutiny of their achievements, students become self-critical of themselves for not being able to hold a conversation, carry out a speaking task, or deliver a presentation, especially when they compare themselves to their peers who outperform them. In this theme, students expressed dissatisfaction and disappointment with their learning outcomes in oral fluency representing a severe case of communication apprehensions.

Conclusion

This research question was mainly concerned to uncover the underlying processes and mechanisms that are presumably taking place in the minds of Jordanian English language learners to understand the possible explanations and/or reasons that are involved in their apprehension of oral communications in different settings. The investigations of the processes that are involved in the English language productions in social and academic environments can be taken to represent an inhibitory integrated mechanism that students employ to evade psychological loads of their inadequacy in oral communications. Jordanian students demonstrated seven themes of apprehensive behaviors that are associated with oral communication in English, and these inhibitory representations seem to represent two major categories of psychological behaviors. Fear of negative evaluations, avoiding participation and avoiding coursework, limited social engagements, employability concerns, loss of self-confidence, and disorganized thinking patterns can all be taken as negative psychological impacts that are involved in the process of English oral communication. Fallen under huge psychological pressure during speaking tasks, students employed different processes to minimize their oral communication in English whose main plausible explanations were motivated by a keen interest to protect their self-confidence and self-esteem which are severely threatened by oral situations. Overall, Jordanian students are caught between the requirements to perform high-stakes oral performance on one side and the lack of well-informed psychological preparations and lack of professional training on the other side. The teacher-centered perspective of language teachers and the lack of use inside and outside the classroom are not giving any chances for students to develop their oral language skills, activate their

formal and informal lexical repertoires, reduce anxiety levels, organize their discourse, and increase their confidence. Therefore, the research suggests that Jordanian students shall be given more oral communication training to reduce their anxiety levels and communication apprehension. One way to do that is to gradually shift from teacher-centered instruction into student-based learning, where the teacher only guides the learners, giving the students more independence to practice their language and the opportunity to fill the missing points in their oral skills. Another way of doing that is to encourage the students to speak up in a stress-free environment without letting any negative comments from the students in the classroom. Students become under great pressure when they are required to speak in English in front of their peers and friends in the classroom which naturally allows for some negative feedback or comments to occur. Therefore, it is recommended that teachers pay special attention to preparing the classroom that allows for a friendly environment to let the learning process develop in a progressive fashion (Almusharraf, 2020; Kristiansen, Burner, & Johnsen, 2019; Liu, 2018; Namaziandost, Neisi, Kheryadi, & Nasri, 2019; Vakilifard, Bahramlou, & Mousavian, 2020; Yasmin & Sohail, 2018; Zamani, 2016).

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