
| RESEARCH ARTICLE

From Psychological Constructs to Socio- Cultural Dynamics: Moroccan EFL Students' Communication Apprehension

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| ABSTRACT

Communication apprehension is one of the communicative problems and psychological variables that interfere with Moroccan EFL communicative competence and performance. Although the causes of communication apprehension are well established in literature, they are attributed much more to psychological constructs such as the fear of negative evaluation and low self-esteem rather than to the socio-cultural constructs. From this perspective, the present paper aims at reconceptualizing the construct of speaking anxiety from a socio-cultural dimension. To this end, this study aimed at exploring 78 Moroccan EFL students' perceptions at the faculty of languages, Art and humanities, Ibn Tofail through the use of a five-point Likert scale and semi-structured interviews. Results showed that both psycholinguistic and socio-cultural factors are two major causes of students' communication apprehension.

| KEYWORDS

Communicative competence, students' perceptions, communication apprehension, psychological, socio-cultural

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1. Introduction

Foreign language Communication apprehension is one of the communication problems and psychological variables that interferes with Moroccan EFL students' communicative competence and oral communication performance. This is a phenomenal issue because it is a common problem among all foreign language learners and even among those who have a good level at English, especially that speaking is the most anxiety provoking skill in foreign language learning (Stroud &Wee, 2006; Woodrow,2006; Wood Shand, 2008; Zerey, 2008; Gai& Yang, 2010; Galante,2012 cited in Atlas, 2015). Although communication apprehension has a significant impact on language learning, EFL teachers cannot identify easily communication apprehensive students. From this perspective, the purpose of this paper is to identify the sources of communication apprehension among Moroccan EFL students and to provide teachers with suggestions to reduce its level. The study questions are as follows

- A. What is the level of communication apprehension among Moroccan EFL students at Ibn Tofail University?
- B. What are the sources of Moroccan students' communication apprehension?

2. Literature review

2.1 Conceptualization

Communication apprehension first appeared in the late 1960's when it was coined by James McCroskey. He defined it as "a person's fear or anxiety with any form of communication with other people, experienced either as a trait-like personality-type response or as a response to the situation constraints of a given communication transaction"(1982, p.139). In foreign language learning, foreign language communication apprehension designates "the special communication apprehension permeating foreign language learning [derived] from the personal knowledge that one will almost certainly have difficulty understanding

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others and making oneself understood" and which arises from "a distinct complex of self-perception, beliefs, feelings, and behaviors arising from the uniqueness of language learning process" (Horwitz et al, 1986, pp. 127-128).

In the present study, foreign language communication apprehension is operationally defined as the fear and anxiety associated with speaking English as a foreign language in classroom setting and which manifests through physical signs related to what follows:

Voice (quivering, too soft, monotonous, non emphatic, too fast); fluency (stammering, halting, awkward pauses, hunting for words, speech blocks); mouth and throat (swallowing repeatedly, clearing throat repeatedly, breathing heavily); facial expressions (no eye contact, rolling eyes, tense facial muscles, grimaces, twitches), arms and hands (rigid and tense, fidgeting, waving hands about); body movement (swaying, pacing, shuffling feet) and nonvisible symptoms (sweating, blushing, having too much saliva, dry mouth or 'cotton mouth', butterflies in the stomach (Chase, R. S., & Jones, S. G, 2012,p, 236).

2.2 The Causes of CA

In his definition of foreign language communication apprehension, Horwitz et al (1986) incorporated students' self-perception of the difficulty of comprehending others and making oneself understood as one of the causes of foreign language communication apprehension. This personal feeling may come from the apprehensive learners' awareness of speaking a language that remains foreign for them (Kao and Ganseder, 1995; Tatar, 2005, Liu and Littlewood, 1997; Berdine, 1986, as cited in Rocca, 2010) and the requirement of having a good linguistic command. This is another related cause which was referred to in communication literature as a "limited knowledge of language" which increases with the constant evaluation of their performance by both their peers and teachers whenever they speak. (Atlas, 2015 & Khannawut, 2011, as cited in Zia & Sultan, 2015)

Citing various empirical studies conducted in different countries to synthesize the potential sources of CA in EFL classes, Zia & Sultan (2015) concluded that it is due to negative self-perceptions of low English proficiency and the fear of negative evaluations from classmates, the fear of failure, the fear of making mistakes and producing ungrammatical sentences, psychological factors such as the fear of making mistakes, anxiety, shyness and lack of self-confidence and motivation, negative evaluation, having a negative stance from the English class, the fear of failure, unpreparedness in a speaking class, the constraints of insufficient wait-time, and the exclusive use of the foreign or second language in class.

From the aforementioned causes, we can classify the sources of communication apprehension in foreign language learning into those related to the learner and his/her self- perceptions, teacher and classmates and the learning process. Most of these causes are similar to the six sources of foreign language anxiety classified by Young (1991) into personal and interpersonal anxiety dynamics, learner beliefs about language learning, instructor beliefs about language learning, instructor- learner interactions, classroom procedures and language testing.

2.3 The Effects of Foreign Language CA

Previous research on the academic effects of communication apprehension demonstrated that it has a major negative impact on apprehensive students' level of success, academic achievement, classroom participation and the acquisition of adequate communication skills. It also showed that this effect is higher on high communication apprehensive students compared to the low ones. Citing McCroskey and McCroskey (2002), Powell & Powell (2010) stated that communication apprehension has a direct influence on students' communication behavior which manifests itself through communication behavior. For instance, high communication apprehensive students can avoid communication, withdraw from communication courses or communicate excessively. Other avoidance behaviors are related to classroom participation, classroom seating and the choice of what classes to take (McCroskey and Richmond 1982b).

In this context, McCroskey and Richmond (1982b) stated that low communication apprehensive students prefer classes with a small number of students which provide big chances for them to interact with classmates and teacher. By contrast, high apprehensive students prefer large classes where they prefer just to listen to their teachers and take notes. In terms of classroom seating, low communication apprehensive students, sit in the front and center of the classroom, where much of classroom interaction and communication take place, while high apprehensive students sit at the back and along the sides of the classroom. These behaviors have a negative influence on apprehensive students' attitudes towards their teachers and the classroom in general.

2.4 Coping with Foreign Language CA

The major cited treatments of communication apprehension in literature included Systematic Desensitization, Cognitive Restructuring, Visualization, Rhetoritherapy, and Skills Training.

2.4.1 Systematic Desensitization (SD)

It is a behavior therapy devised by Joseph Wolpe to desensitize people's fear and anxiety through counterconditioning. As its name implies, Systematic Desensitization follows three steps: (1) the use of muscle relaxation technique as a competing response for anxiety, (2) constructing an anxiety hierarchy through enlisting a set of imagined anxiety-provoking stimuli in a hierarchical order starting from the least to the most anxiety-provoking stimulus, (3) the visualization of the hierarchical anxiety-provoking stimuli which aims at desensitizing people's anxiety and remaining relaxed throughout the whole hierarchy. (Spielger, 2015) According to McCroskey (1972), the implementation of this treatment requires relaxing rooms with comfortable chairs, a relaxation tape recorder and an electrical signaling when having a big number of people, two items of software, and trainers to administer the treatment.

2.4.2 Cognitive Restructuring

Cognitive restructuring aims at restructuring people's irrational thoughts when engaging in communication experiences through replacing them by rational, positive thoughts. This involves identifying the irrational self-talk statements that engender the feeling of communication apprehension, substituting them with alternative coping statements and implementing these coping statements in anxiety-provoking situations.

2.4.3 Visualization

This treatment was developed by Ayres and Hoof (1993) and involves listening to a script and visualizing the positive images of a successful speech and performance visualization as a practice. "The treatment involves viewing a video of an outstanding professional speaker, repeatedly imprinting the linked mental images of the video-taped speaker, and eventually replacing the vivid images with oneself as the speaker" (Chang, 2015, p 72).

2.4.4 Rhetoritherapy

It is a behavioral therapy coined by Philips (1986) and refined by Kelly, it aims at modifying communication behavior during speech delivery and involves "instruction, goal setting, practice, in vivo assignments and instructor feedback" (Daly 2009, as cited in Hazel et al, 2008).

2.4.5 Skills Training

This treatment assumes that the lack of speaking skills sometimes leads to communication apprehension. Hence, it aims at developing such skills. This involves knowing reasonable speaking objectives, identifying the required skills or behaviors to achieve these objectives, and being able to evaluate the success of each objective. (Kelley, 1989; Philips, 1977, 1991, as cited in Hamilton, 2007)

3. Materials and Methods

A mix method design of quantitative and qualitative methods was used in this study. The Foreign Language Class Anxiety Scale (1986) was used to collect the quantitative data while the quantitative data were collected with the use of interviews in the form of focus group discussions consisting of six participants of the same background. FLCAS (1986) is a self-report measure in the form of a 5-point Likert-scale consisting of 33 items related to communication apprehension, test anxiety and fear of negative evaluation, it ranges from strongly agree to strongly disagree.

These choices were assigned a numerical value; strongly agree (5p), agree (4p), neither agree nor disagree (3p), disagree (2 p), and strongly disagree (1p). In this study, an adapted FLCAS was used, 17 items related to CA were chosen namely (1, 3, 7, 9, 13, 14, 16, 18, 19, 20, 23, 24, 27, 30, 31,32, 33) and were administered to the participants. To evaluate each student's speaking anxiety level, Participants' responses were added up. The theoretical total score of the FLCAS was from 33 (indicating a low level of anxiety) to 165 (indicating a high level of anxiety). Following this arithmetical procedure, the theoretical total score of the adapted FLCAS was from 17(indicating a low level of anxiety) to 85 (indicating a high level of anxiety).

These scores were later categorized into three levels; scores between 17 and 43 indicated a low level of communication apprehension, scores between 43 and 58 indicated a moderate level of communication apprehension and scores between 59 and 85 indicated a high level of communication apprehension.

4. Results

78 EFL students from the faculty of languages at Ibn Tofail university, Kenitra, who were randomly selected, participated in this study. The following table describes their demographic information

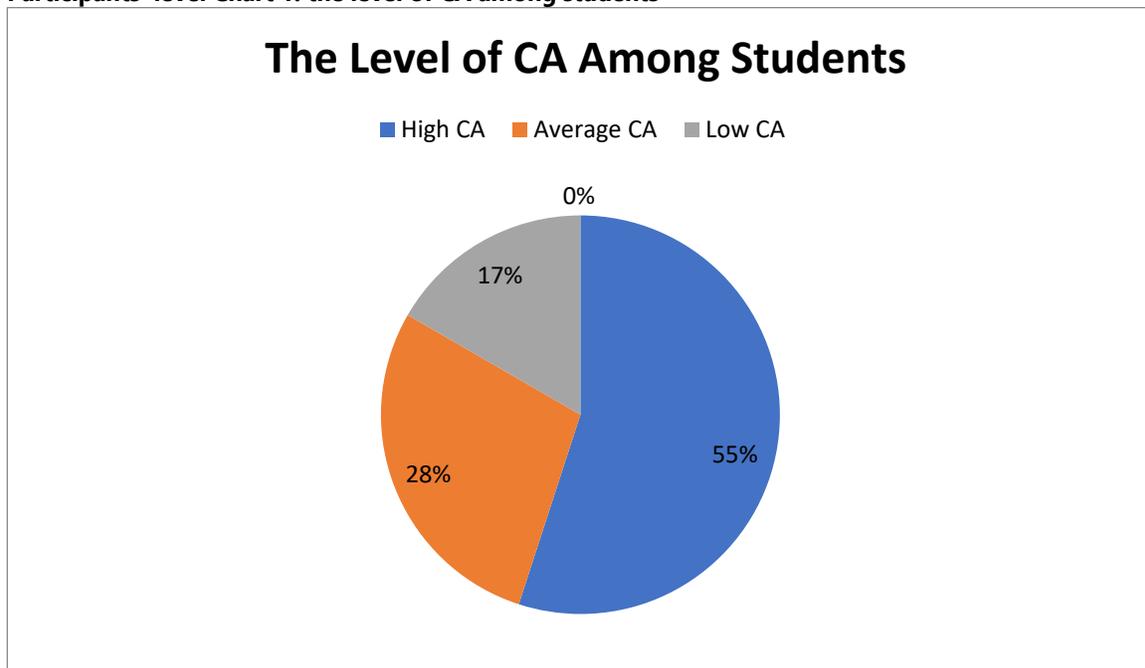
Table1: participants' demographic information

Variable	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent
Gender	55 (females)	72,4%	21 (males)	27,6%
Age	(18-30)	97%	10 (30-45)	3%

The above table shows that the female participants outnumbered the males; 72,4% were female and 27,6% were male. The participant's age ranged between 18 and 45 years,

With regard to the participants' perceptions of CA, they were analyzed with the use of SPSS (statistical product and service solutions) to compute the means and standard deviation of the FLCAS. Only the items loaded on the highest means (3.00 and above) were chosen. The data from the interview were also analyzed with the use of content analysis and common themes, from both the questionnaire and interviews, were categorized and explained. The analysis of the data indicated that two main factors contributed most to students' CA namely psycholinguistic and socio-cultural factors.

Participants' level Chart 1: the level of CA among students



The first research question aimed to find the level of CA among Moroccan EFL students at the faculty of languages, Art and Humanities at Ibn Tofail University. The above pie chart indicated that 55% of participants showed a high level of CA, 28% showed a medium level and 17% showed a low level. Results also indicated that females exhibited a high level of CA compared to their male counterparts, as demonstrated by the following table.

Table 2: CA levels for males and females

CA level	Females %	Males %
Low anxious	7%	10%
Moderate anxious	12%	16%
High anxious	40%	15%

40% of female participants had a high level of anxiety compared to 15% of male participants. Some of those females attributed their anxiety to the socio-cultural factors. A thorough explanation is in the following sub-section.

5.2 Participants' perceptions of CA

Regarding question two about participants' perceptions of CA, the yielded data from the FLCAS and the interviews showed that two main factors were responsible for students' communication apprehension: the psycholinguistic and socio-cultural factors.

5.2.1 The psycholinguistic factors

The psycholinguistic factors comprised both students' negative self-perceptions and the fear of negative evaluation of peers and the teacher. The following table illustrates the results.

Table 3. Means and standard deviations for EFL Moroccan students' self- perceptions in relation to self-confidence and the fear of negative evaluation.

Items	Mean	Standard Deviation
1. I never feel quite sure of myself when I am speaking in my foreign language class	4.00	1.33
2. I feel confident when I speak in foreign language class	3.48	1.41
3. I keep thinking that the other students are better at languages than I am	3.00	1.69
4. I am afraid that my language teacher is ready to correct every mistake I make	2.79	1.02
5. I am afraid that the other students will laugh at me when I speak the foreign language	2.39	1.47
6. I always feel that the other students speak the foreign language better than I do	2.11	1.30

5.2.1.1 Self-perceptions

The research findings indicated that participants had a low self-perception of their linguistic competence; the mean scores of FLCAS showed that this negative feeling was related to their low self-confidence as indicated by items 1, 2, 3 and 6. A large number of students admitted that they are not self-confident when speaking in foreign language classes (Mean=4.00/3.48).

To understand how students perceived their linguistic competence, the data from the interviews were analyzed and categorized to those related with having a low vocabulary, the inability to make complete and meaningful sentences and to the fear of making mistakes. For example, participant A stated, "I cannot speak in class because I do not have enough vocabulary to express myself clearly." Participant B also stated "I find it difficult to speak in English because I cannot make complete sentences. I am always afraid of making mistakes." Thus, self-perceptions is a complex construct which works through a cause-effect relationship with other variables namely self-confidence and linguistic competence.

5.2.1.2 The fear of negative evaluation

With respect to FLCAS item numbers 4 and 5, it was found that the participants were highly concerned about the negative evaluation of both their teacher and peers. The qualitative data from the interview supported the results of the above quantitative data as the following excerpts showed:

"I don't feel comfortable when speaking in front of my classmates because I feel that everyone will laugh at me"

"I feel nervous when the teacher interrupts me to correct every single mistake I make in front of the whole class"

5.2.2 The socio-cultural factors

The qualitative data from the interview revealed that a large number of female participants (40%) were high communicative apprehensive compared to 15% of male participants. They reported that is due to the type of our socio-cultural milieu which regulates the lives of men and women. Some female participants reported that their behavior is much more constrained by their society which is shame-oriented and in which speaking in public is not much encouraged. Thus, the significant difference between the males and females' level of anxiety was related to the socio-cultural factor as illustrated by the following excerpts of some female participants.

Participant A:

"I feel anxious when I engage in a speaking situation because I am afraid of being misjudged by others. I think that this is the effect of the fact that we were educated on the concept of "hshuma." It is "hshuma" for women to be engaged in public discussions and especially in front of men or with men they do not know."

Participant B:

"I do not feel comfortable while speaking in public; I feel that others are gazing on my physical appearance rather than being concerned with what I am saying. That is why I avoid speaking in front of others"

Participant C:

"I feel that whatever I say in class may be misjudged by others because we are not socially credible as men are."

Participant D:

"I find it difficult to keep eye contact with my classmates and teacher; I am not accustomed to such situations."

Discussion

The paper results indicated that three main reasons were responsible for the participants' communication apprehension, namely self-perceptions, the fear of negative evaluation and socio-cultural factors. All these reasons are interrelated and deeply intertwined, as one factor either stems from or leads to another factor. For instance, the participants' level of self-confidence shapes their self-perceptions. Thus, the higher the participants' self-confidence is, the higher is their self-perceptions of linguistic competence and vice versa.

The results also indicated that the participants' self-perceptions and self-confidence were related to comparing one's linguistic competence with others' competence. A large number of participants felt that their peers were better than them and had a good command of language (Mean=2.39/2.11). This is also a type of self-negative evaluation, which is referred to in literature as unequal linguistic competencies.

According to Horwitz et al (1986), the fear of negative evaluation designates "the apprehension about others' evaluation, avoidance of evaluation situations, and the expectations that others would evaluate oneself negatively." (p.128) In this context, when students avoid speaking in front of others in class, they avoid an evaluation situation which is anxiety-provoking for them because they feel threatened by the others' negative evaluation.

The same findings were reported by Koch and Terell (1991) who reported that speaking in front of others engendered anxiety and Kitano (2001) who found a positive correlation between CA and the fear of negative evaluation ($r = .31$). The fear of negative evaluation can also be influenced by the socio-cultural norms that govern the context in which discourse takes place, a phenomenon we can operationally refer to in this paper as "socio-cultural evaluation". A high proportion of female participants exhibited reticence in public speaking due to the entrenched social norms that regulate power dynamics.

This phenomenon can be attributed to the subordinate position often ascribed to women in Moroccan society, which consequently undermines their credibility as public speakers. As Sadiqi (2003) argued, the Moroccan cultural paradigm positions female voices as lacking discursive authority, largely due to the societal taboo that construes women as listeners rather than speakers. This notion is reinforced by the concept of 'awra, which Sadiqi identifies as a key factor contributing to the marginalization of women's voices in public discourse.

5. Conclusion and recommendations

To sum up, the participants' perceptions revealed that two major factors contributed most to their foreign language communication apprehension, namely the sociocultural factors and the psycholinguistic factors including negative self-perceptions and the fear of negative evaluation. The findings of the present study supported the findings of previous studies conducted in other countries but they also revealed that the Moroccan culture with its typical nature contributed to females' foreign language communication apprehension. From this perspective, teachers should re-consider the teaching of speaking skill and take the affective variables of their students into consideration. Creating relaxed learning environments, avoiding negative evaluations, equipping students with the necessary presentational skills, boosting their self-confidence and self-esteem as well as illuminating gender differences among students are prerequisite for the reduction of students' level of CA.

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