Strategies and Techniques for Fostering Oral Communication Confidence in EFL Students

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Abstract
This article is concerned with strategies and techniques for fostering EFL students' confidence and reducing their oral communication apprehension. This paper aims to explore strategies and techniques that could be implemented in the EFL classroom to encourage students’ oral communication and foster their confidence. The first part starts with a brief introduction to present the research topic. It states the aims, purpose, research questions, and significance of the study. The second part features the relevant literature review, focusing on the current body of knowledge. The literature review provides a detailed description of the substantive findings as well as methodological and theoretical contributions to this topic. The study furnishes a wide range of reflections on English as a foreign language, and the special needs of students learning the language. It can be described as the impact of confidence on EFL students’ oral communication apprehension in EFL students. In the third part, the paper discusses the methodology used in this study, followed by a discussion of an analysis of the findings in the fourth part. These two areas, i.e. discussion and findings answer the research questions and justify the research hypothesis. The last part of this work provides a conclusion to the study, accompanied by some recommendations.

Keywords: apprehension, communication competence, confidence, EFL students, oral communication, strategies, techniques

1. Introduction

1.1 Background of the Study

Students with English as a foreign language generally regard being confident in oral communication in the target language as very challenging. This is mainly due to oral communication apprehension. It also sheds light on how the EFL students reduce oral communication apprehension. In order to explore the strategies and techniques for increasing oral communication confidence, a qualitative research approach has been used in the study. The findings reveal that the oral communication apprehension of EFL students mainly depends on their confidence, and that a lack of confidence leads them to be apprehensive to communicate effectively in the English language.

Efficiency in oral communication is highly appreciated for career success. This is why most of the institutions offering higher learning are familiar with the importance of oral communication in their curriculum. (Hall, 2013).

In 2014, the researcher conducted a case study on EFL students at King Khalid University. He found that EFL students participate more in interpersonal conversations and group discussions compared to other contexts, such as meeting situations and public places. Students are reluctant to speak in various communicative situations due to their communication apprehension. According to Mahdi (2015), most students desire to learn how to speak English well and are willing to interact with others in oral English language classrooms. However, due to various reasons, for example a lack of practice, low English proficiency, lack of confidence, anxiety, shyness, personality, and the fear of losing face, more than two-thirds of the students remain reluctant to respond to the teacher and keep quiet until singled out to answer questions.

Sabri & Qin (2014) revealed that more than sixty thousand graduate students living in Malaysia are unable to enter their professions of choice as they “lack English language competency” and have “poor oral communication skills” (p. 46). They thus remain unemployed. Other studies conducted on Malaysia graduates conclude, “Inevitably, most language teachers and instructors agree that many students in Malaysia face problems communicating in English, as it is not their native language. Even at the university level, students feel apprehensive, awkward, shy, and insecure when asked to speak English in the classroom, let alone in public” (Mustapha, Ismail, Singh, & Elias, 2010, p. 23). It is a fact that a large number of students, speaking languages other than English, struggle to speak in English. Their primary aim is to have confidence when they are required to communicate in English language. (Sabri & Qin, 2014).

Although English is a foreign language for a large number of people living across the world, its significance internationally in almost every field, from educational to business, is undisputed. Language is a strong medium of communication through which people are connected in various settings; thereby it be ignored. When people do not have a firm grasp of the English language, whether spoken or written, they face several barriers concerning their academic progress. This is a major reason why English has been made a compulsory subject in curricula the world over.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

Preparing students whose native language is not English for a world where English is considered a prime and primary language is very challenging indeed. These students need strong language skills that are in accordance with industry needs. Pittenger, Miller, & Mott (2004) reveal that a large number of employers place a premium on oral communication competence among their employees. It is believed that one of the basic causes for a lack of communicative ability in their
target language is communication apprehension (CA), which impacts on oral communication as well as the presentation delivery of the employees. Mustapha, Ismail, Singh, & Elias (2010) state that many graduates with excellent grades in EFL have sound information and knowledge regarding reading and writing of the English language. However, they lack proficiency in oral communication in their target language. In other words, they are often not able to communicate effectively in the target language due to the existence of communication apprehension (CA). Trang (2012) declares, “Three related anxieties in their conceptualization of foreign language anxiety, including communication apprehension, test anxiety, and fear of negative evaluation” (p. 72). Trang (2012) also contends, “Theory of foreign language anxiety has played a vital role in language anxiety research with a large number of studies using it as the theoretical framework” (p. 73). Therefore, it is essential to investigate communication apprehension among EFL students in order to devise strategies for them to become competent speakers of their target language, able to meet the industry needs in the future.

1.3 Aims and Objectives
The aims and objectives of this research study are:

a) to foster EFL students’ confidence and reduce their oral communication apprehension,
b) to explore strategies and techniques that should be used in the EFL classroom to encourage students to participate in oral communication, and
c) to shed light on the special needs of EFL students, particularly those who have no appropriate environment for engaging in oral communication.

1.4 Research Questions

a) How can EFL teachers increase students’ confidence and reduce their oral communication apprehension?
b) What strategies and techniques should EFL teachers effectively use to maximize confidence in EFL students and minimize their oral communication apprehension?
c) How can EFL teachers enable English language learners to describe their experiences in the target language, rather than in their mother tongue?

2 Review of Literature

2.1 Communication Apprehension
The term “Communication Apprehension” refers to the fear that is associated with oral or verbal communication. In learning a foreign language, the concept of communication apprehension is used when an individual or a learner feels fear to speak in the target language in front of another person (Amogne & Yigzaw, 2013). Research reveals that 31 percent of all students in elementary school experience communication apprehension to some extent. The notion “communication apprehension” was initially introduced in 1970 as a form of anxiety related to oral communication apprehension. (Nakatani, 2006).

Through various courses, the needs and requirements of English language learners can be entertained. These courses put special emphasis on the spoken communication skills of the students (Lopez, 2011). In the same way, they also focus on the oral communication apprehension and competence among English as a foreign language (EFL) students. In other words, teaching English, or learning the English language, is considered to be the widespread phenomenon usually known by various abbreviations such as TESOL (Teaching English to
Speakers of Other Languages); TEFL (Teaching English as a Foreign Language); and TESL (Teaching English as a Second Language). The low frequency of English language speaking leads various students to excel in the target language in countries including China, Brazil, France, Russia and the Arab countries. Nevertheless, the practice of teaching English emphasizes the needs of EFL learners who are willing to use this language in their daily lives, but are anxious and nervous to do so (Braine, 2014).

Patil & Karekatti (2012) state, “One of the primary elements found to be associated with poor communication skills development is a phenomenon known as communication apprehension” (p. 2). Therefore, it would not be wrong to state that the term refers to the anxiety EFL speakers feel while being engaged in oral communication in the target language. It is a fact that there can be various reasons for communication apprehension, among which neuroticism is a major one. People suffering from neuroticism usually suffer from oral communication apprehension. Some people naturally experience anxiety while communicating in public even in their native tongue. Therefore, their natural anxiety discourages them from being engaged in oral communication in their target language. (Nakatani, 2006). On the other hand, they do not feel any anxiety while being engaged in small group discussions or in interpersonal conversations. (Amogne & Yigzaw, 2013).

However, the development of communication apprehension is not restricted to a particular phenomenon, rather it depends on the situation and varies from person to person. In the EFL setting, most learners develop oral communication apprehension due to a lack of knowledge of vocabulary, grammatical structure and pronunciation of the target language (Amogne & Yigzaw, 2013). For example, a large number of EFL students do not dare to speak up or be involved in the conversational session because they regard themselves as weak in the target language. This lengthy process makes them anxious of being engaged in oral communication. However, they do not stop their struggle to learn the target language and try to have conversations with people they feel themselves comfortable with. On the other hand, it is evident that they are competent to learn the target language, which is obviously the English language (Amogne & Yigzaw, 2013). Furthermore, the inverse relationship depicts that, the higher the EFL students’ communication competence, the lower their communication anxiety will be. In other words, communication apprehension among EFL students is directly related to their confidence, which is considered the lower competence.

2.2 Oral Communication Apprehension and Competence among EFL Students
Studies have demonstrated that teaching the English language to students who are not native English speakers requires diverse techniques and strategies if they are to be made comfortable in learning the target language (Kumaravadivelu, 2012). Elyas (2010) points out that these students, particularly those who study in Arab universities, are deficient in English language skills. For example, the sound /v/ (very) is not available in the entire phonology (patterns of sounds in the Arabic language). Therefore, EFL students who belong to Arab countries experience great anxiety when pronouncing words containing this sound. In this way, a large number of English words create barriers for EFL students in Arab countries when engaging in oral communication (Amogne & Yigzaw, 2013).

For example, Asian students are hesitant to pronounce words containing aspirated consonant sounds such as the initial sounds in the words tea, toffee, toe, tomato, tool, potato, cup etc. They tend not to speak English in front of native speakers as they fear the native speakers may make fun of them, even though they have the competency to speak the target language. As a result, it
may take them a long time to attain mastery in the English language, or they may fail to ever do so. On the other hand, their academic progress is also affected by their deficiency in the English language skills (Dove & Honigsfeld, 2010). In other words, it would be accurate to state that their deficiency in the English skills is not due to their reluctance to learn the target language, but the absence of a classroom that can provide them with an enhanced and appropriate environment to learn the English language. (Moussu, 2013 and Mahdi, 2015).

2.3 Reducing Communication Apprehension

The lack of efficiency on the EFL instructors’ side leads students to be less confident, which may make them communication-apprehensive. Therefore, the diversity of students should be considered as an advantage in the EFL classroom as it can reveal new things in the classroom. On the other hand, working with a diverse class is a great source of exciting new features in the classroom which can increase the confidence of EFL students (Teng, Huei-Chun, 2011). Ultimately, their confidence makes them competent to be engaged in oral communication and thus reduces their communication apprehension. To this end, it is preferable to engage in communication settings that strengthen students’ oral communication skills, leading to the development of confidence, as these challenge EFL students to be involved in the foreign language. (Martin, 2014).

EFL students often require time to formulate an answer to a particular question because they discern meaning by translating the question into their own language and only then formulate an answer in the target language. Although this practice is considered undesirable for EFL students, they are often unable to produce an answer in the target language otherwise (Afshar, Moazam, & Arbabi, 2014). Therefore, it is considered to be a good strategy to engage them in conversations on a familiar topic. In this way, a good EFL teacher can build confidence among EFL students and decrease communication apprehension. (Rosenfeld, Grant, & McCroskey, 1995).

The curriculum for the EFL class is usually designed with the average student in mind and does not allow for individual differences, which can lead to an increasing lack of interest on the part of the students and therefore ever-growing communication apprehension. It would not be wrong to state that if students do not take an active interest in the EFL class, they will never have the confidence to speak in front of native speakers (Rosenfeld, Grant, & McCroskey, 1995). Therefore, putting special emphasis on how each learner may gain access to diversified and individualized instruction has a noteworthy impact. Limiting all the EFL students to one type of activity to practice a specific body of knowledge or a certain skill may leave all those students whose preferred learning style or interests are different behind. Language instructors should bear in mind the diversity of the students in their class and put special emphasis on the needs of each student in the class. (Varghese, 2012).

2.4 Learning Strategies

The term “learning strategies” refers to “language learning communication strategies” that a learner rationally selects to enhance his or her learning, particularly for enhancing oral communication. The strategies that are relevant to the culture and tradition of a learner are considered effective (Amogne & Yigzaw, 2013). Yousef, Jamil, and Razak (2013) have defined “good L2 learners as those who are good guessers, willing to communicate, express, and analyze situations in an L2 production, leaders of their own speech, and mindful and observant of the meaning of words they use in conversation” (p. 206).
Some group activities and strategies require high-level communication skills. These strategies keep Second Language (L2) learners engaged in spontaneous interaction in their target language. Based on an investigation, Fushino (2010) has stated the relationship between learning style and communication as follows:

The relationship between communication apprehension and learning style preferences of undergraduate students in a public speaking course reveals that female students with high communication apprehension often do not have communication skills adequate to help them feel competent in an active, undirected learning environment p. 702.

Similarly, the strategies named “Achievement Strategies” that enable learners to continue pursuing their conversation goals, mainly within the EFL classroom (Yousef, Jamil, & Razak, 2013), may include:

- Help-Seeking Strategies: there are two strategies viz. appeal for help, and asking for repetition. Both encourage Second Language (L2) learners to be engaged in oral communication through using expressions such as “sorry, I do not understand” and “please repeat”.
- Signals for Negotiation Strategies: these include confirmation checks, clarification requests and comprehension checks.
- Modified Output Strategies: these strategies help learners to continue their discourse by modifying their previous statements.
- Time-Gaining Strategies: these strategies also help the learners to continue their discourse, this time through the use of various fillers, e.g. “Oh” or “Umm”.
- Response for Maintenance Strategies: these strategies include two types viz. shadowing, and providing active response. By employing these strategies learners extend their conversation, through either utilizing positive comments or partial repetition.
- Self-Repairing Strategies: these strategies are used when learners lack the necessary linguistic resources. They therefore need to use the appropriate linguistic expressions by approximating, restructuring or paraphrasing.
- Reduction Strategies: these strategies are used when L2 learners are unable to finish a particular message due to not finding the appropriate words or expressions to communicate in the target language. These strategies may include the Message Abandonment Strategy, First Language-Based Strategy and Inter-language-Based Reduction Strategy.

Yousef, Jamil, and Razak (2013) describe two aims for acquiring communication strategies: “to decrease students’ anxiety, and to increase students’ willingness to participate in conversations” (p. 207). It is observed that non-native English speakers with little or no exposure to an English-speaking culture are unable to converse about this culture. However, they are capable of holding forth on a culture or tradition they are familiar with. This may increase their confidence and make them competent to have a conversation in the target language (Amogne & Yigzaw, 2013). On the other hand, if they are called upon to have a conversation on an unfamiliar culture or tradition, they will be less confident and competent to sustain a conversation for any length of time.

Although learning the native culture of the target language plays a significant part, acknowledging the culture of the EFL learners themselves adds valuable language experiences.
and resources. Jones-Katz, Smolarek, Stolzenburg, & Williamson (2014) point out that prior knowledge, culture and, above all, the first language of EFL students, should be valued, respected and even incorporated into the curriculum whenever possible. An effective EFL teacher utilizes the diverse linguistic knowledge and experience of EFL students. By using this strategy in the EFL class, the language instructor may expand the understanding of linguistic diversity within the class. (Teng, Huei-Chun, 2011).

2.5 Differentiated Instruction to Increase the Confidence of EFL Students
The term “Differentiated Instruction” is used to describe an instructional approach used in the general classroom. This approach can be used in the EFL classroom with equal success. In the light of this approach, an EFL teacher tends to respond to and anticipate a larger variety of the needs of students learning English as a foreign language (Rosenfeld, Grant III, & McCroskey, 1995). In this way, modifying content refers to the material that is being taught in the EFL class; process refers to the way of teaching; product refers to the demonstration of the EFL students what they learn within the EFL class.

3. Methodology

3.1 Secondary Data
This research paper focuses on the collection of secondary data extracted from various sources including books, internet publications and journal articles. The fundamental goal of conducting such secondary research is to gather information on different mediums e.g. literature, publications, broadcast media, and some other sources that are generally categorized as non-human.

3.2 Data Collection Method
Since the nature of the research study is qualitative, secondary data was collected from various sources. In order to select an appropriate literature, both the relevance of the research topic and the year of publication were very important (Speziale, Streubert, & Carpenter, 2011). From this perspective, online, private, and public libraries were used for the collection of valid information. The online databases from which data was drawn include Ebsco, Proquest, Questia and Phoenix.

4. Analysis and Discussion

4.1 Strategies to Reduce Communication Apprehension and Improve Confidence
The literature reviewed presented a large number of learning strategies that can be beneficial for L2 learners to actively participate in oral communication in their target language. For example, help-seeking strategies and modified output strategies provide L2 learners with techniques to prolong their conversation in the target language. Through such strategies, they can speak extensively in the target language, as these strategies provide them with various means to continue their conversation in various dimensions along with various repetitions. These repetitions increase their interest in having oral communication in their target language. Yousef, Jamil & Razak (2013) maintain that the notion of repetition in the target language makes L2 learners self-confident and willing to communicate in their target language. On the other hand, Fushino (2010) holds that Communication Apprehension is not related to either the first-language (L1) or second-language (L2) speaker, but rather to the confidence of an individual in oral communication. Therefore, learning strategies are basically for those individuals who feel
shy or hesitant while speaking their first language in general, and their second language in particular.

4.2 Various Techniques and Strategies for EFL Class
EFL teachers should use the previously mentioned techniques and strategies to build the confidence of their EFL students so that they can become more competent to be engaged in oral communication (Breiseth, Robertson, & Lafond, 2011). Apart from oral communication skills, there are various other tips, which can be very effective for EFL learners, as well as for teachers, to make a particular lesson understandable.

4.2.1 Realia
A large number of EFL teachers tend to use real-life objects in the classroom, which has a remarkable impact on the understanding of a particular piece of language learning or a phenomenon. In other words, realia comprise actual items or objects that are used in the EFL classroom to exemplify as well as to teach vocabulary. Realia are also used to serve as help to facilitate language production and acquisition.

Through representing realia, an EFL teacher lets the students be engaged in oral communication as per their own perception. In this way, the teacher is not concerned with the actual message of the realia, but rather puts special emphasis on the oral communication of the students. Figure 1 conveys a specific message, but every student can have a different perception of the figure or the message it conveys (Percy, 2012). Similarly, a large number of other learning strategies can be beneficial for L2 learners to actively participate in oral communication in their target language. For example, help-seeking strategies and modified output strategies enable L2 learners to prolong their conversation in the target language.

![Figure 1 Walk Around Brainstorm](image)

Source: (More Activity Ideas)

4.2.2 Using Latest Technology
In teaching EFL it is considered professional and innovative to use the latest technologies e.g. multimedia, iPod, etc. as they enhance the listening power of EFL students. Ultimately, EFL students are exposed to the latest technologies to build their confidence and to make them competent in oral communication. It is often said that a good speaker is always a good listener. However, it would not be wrong to state that the Internet has made learning the English language very easy (Percy, 2012). By using the latest technology, EFL teachers can fulfill their goals in
teaching English as a foreign language. In this respect, the online interaction serves not only the listening but speaking to native speakers as well. (Dang, Nicholas, & Lewis, 2012).

4.3 The Impact of Confidence on Oral Communication Apprehension

In order to reduce oral communication apprehension and foster confidence in EFL students, it is imperative to comprehend the interest of EFL students in learning the English language. From this perspective, the term “confidence” is mainly associated with L2 learners actively engaged in oral communication. Fushino (2010) states, “confidence in one’s ability to communicate in the L2 may also impact on participation within a group” (p. 702). Since the interest of L2 learners is related to their confidence, their lack of confidence leads them towards “communication apprehension.” In other words, students lacking confidence usually suffer from communication apprehension. They prefer to remain silent in public or in front of native speakers rather than use their target language (Rosenfeld, Grant, & McCroskey, 1995). Furthermore, a competent student may fail to be engaged in oral communication in the target language if he or she is lacking confidence. Therefore, lacking confidence may make him or her less competent. In this way, competency depends upon confidence, which is the opposite of communication apprehension. Therefore, it would not be wrong to state that communication apprehension and competence have no relationship to each other. (Mahdi, 2015).

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

It can be concluded that confidence has a significant impact on EFL students’ oral communication apprehension. Although these are considered to be quite different, they interconnect in second language learning. With increased confidence, EFL students can be free from oral communication apprehension. On the other hand, the development of confidence among the EFL learners can be gained from meeting the special needs of EFL students, particularly those who have no appropriate environment to be engaged in oral communication. In light of the foregoing discussion, it is necessary for EFL teachers to find strategies and techniques to help their students overcome their oral communication apprehension. Students can be encouraged to carry out effective oral communication activities in their classrooms. These activities can enable them to have high confidence level and present themselves orally in public. The findings of this study provide some insights and guidelines for fostering confidence and reducing oral communication apprehension in EFL students.

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Dr. Dawood Ahmed Mahdi is an Assistant Professor of Applied Linguistics at King Khalid University. He has been teaching in higher education at undergraduate and postgraduate levels for more than 20 years in Yemen, India, Oman and Saudi Arabia. His research areas include oral communication apprehension, communicative competence, confidence, and public speaking. He is interested in strategies and techniques for enhancing communication skills. Among his other interests are second language acquisition and translation studies.
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