The Role of Social Evaluation in Influencing Public Speaking Anxiety of English Foreign Language Learners at Omar Al-Mukhtar University

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Abstract

This study investigates the effect of social evaluation on Public Speaking Anxiety of English foreign language learners at Omar Al-Mukhtar University in Libya. A random sample of 111 students was used in the study. To analyse the collected data, means, standard deviations, a three-way ANOVA analysis, and the correlation coefficients were used with social evaluation as the dependent variable and Public Speaking Anxiety as the independent variable. The findings show that social evaluation is a very significant aspect and is an important contributor to Public Speaking Anxiety of English foreign language learners at Omar Al-Mukhtar University.

Key Words: Language Performance, Anxiety, Language Learning, Audience, Speaking, Communication.

1. Introduction

Public Speaking Anxiety (PSA) appears to be rampant among English foreign language learners (EFLLs). The issue of PSA has become a general phenomenon across higher learning institutions around the world even in cases where the first language is being used by the speaker. For example, a survey conducted among the American college students showed that 35% of the total students (whether native speakers or EFLLs) evaluated indicated either a higher, high, or moderate readiness for help in respect of PSA (Bishop, Bower, & Becker, 1998). However, EFLLs often experience the impact of the anxiety to a greater extent in that it affects their ability to compose themselves and thus perform well in public speaking.

The impacts of PSA include the possibility that affected EFLLs do not attend lectures in order to avoid participation in oral presentations or group discussions, while others who attend the classes avoid speaking and/or fail to establish relations with their colleagues. The impact may even extend to not participating in social events. Anxiety in general can be likened to a phobia as the fear is not linked with danger (Al Shalabi & Salmani Nodoushan, 2009; Karami & Salmani Nodoushan, 2014; Nemati, Salmani Nodoushan & Ashrafzadeh, 2010; Salmani Nodoushan, 2015; Salmani Nodoushan & Daftarifard, 2011). More specifically, in a situation where nervousness about public speaking is so great that it interferes with a person's life, then the PSA may be classed as a social phobia. Thus, Tobias (1986, p.78) defines anxiety as a complex idea relying on one's feelings of self-efficacy as well as appraisals relating to the potential and perceived threats entrenched in particular situations. Similarly, Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope (1986, p.125) give a general definition of anxiety as "the subjective feeling of tension, apprehension, nervousness, and worry associated with an arousal of the

autonomic nervous system". Therefore, anxiety is a state of uncomfortable emotion in which danger is perceived, and the victim has a powerless feeling because of the tension related to the perceived danger.

Anxiety can be classified in a number of ways. Scovel (1978, p.67) refers to "trait anxiety" as a rapid permanent behaviour or feeling to be anxious which is considered to be part of the personality. Spielberger (1983, p.111) refers to a second classification as "state anxiety" which is explained as the apprehension encountered by the victim at a specific time period as a stimulus to a situation which is definite. Ellis (1994, p.98) refers to a third classification as "situation-specific anxiety" which is associated with apprehension that is related to a particular phenomenon and situations.

Gardner and MacIntyre (1994) explain the idea behind apprehension experienced in relation to PSA as often related to a particular situation whereby the second language in which the speaker is not fully competent is to be used in public speaking. It is important to note that PSA is usually associated with fear among different categories of people in any society (Gibson, Gruner, Hanna, Smythe & Hayes, 1980). In addition, "public speaking anxiety represents a cluster of evaluative feelings about speech making" (Daly, Vangelisti, Neel, & Cavanaugh, 1989, p.40) in which case speakers who are very anxious do not experience positive feelings related to the context of public speaking. For several years, researchers in communication have investigated explanations encompassing the psychological and physiological parts of PSA in order to proffer remedies that could lessen its adverse influence.

1.1 Statement of the Problem

In general, foreign language anxiety is a crucial factor affecting foreign language learning and performance (Aida, 1994; Miyuki, 2000), as language learners can experience devastating levels of language anxiety (Yukina, 2003; Ueda, 2004; Zhang, 2008). The effect of anxiety on foreign language learning has been the subject of a growing body of research, which has focused mostly on students studying foreign languages in the United States of America and Canada (Andrade, 2008). The researcher believes that most Libyan undergraduate students face similar difficulties when learning foreign languages. Based on the researcher's experience, one of the major problems for the Libyan EFLLs is speaking and learning a language effectively because of their anxiety. Many Libyan undergraduate students produce disconnected and isolated sentences as a result of the debilitating levels of anxiety that they experience when learning a foreign language. In relation to this, the major problems that Libyan undergraduate students face is a lack of confidence when speaking in the foreign language. Although these students understand the importance language learning, they still find it difficult to use the foreign language accurately.

English is taught in Libya as a foreign language (EFL) with students expected to master all the four basic language skills i.e. reading , listening, speaking, and writing (Al Jamal, 2007). The phenomenon of PSA is common among EFLLs at The English Language Department under the College of Arts and Sciences of Omar El-Mukhtar University. One of the fundamental objectives of the English Department is to ensure effectiveness and creativity in communication and language skills among the staff and students of Omar El-Mukhtar University through the provision of intensive training advantages. English language has become very important as a medium of group discussion. In addition, English can be used to communicate with native speakers and

non-Arabic speakers whose second language it is. Therefore, competency in English language speaking for Arab students at the University could play a prominent role in influencing the degree of PSA in different situations.

In recent years, the problem of PSA has been increasing among the EFLL of Omar El-Mukhtar University. This phenomenon is proving such a challenge that understanding the factors contributing to it is necessary with a view to providing possible solutions to overcome it. The current study focuses on the PSA among EFLLs at Omar El-Mukhtar University.

2. Defining Anxiety

The definition of anxiety is difficult as it can range from an amalgam of overt behavioural characteristics that can be studied scientifically to introspective feelings that are epistemologically inaccessible (Casado & Dereshiwsky, 2001, p.96). From the fields of anthropology, psychology and education, numerous perspectives on anxiety have been put forward; in the majority of cases, these perspectives concern the notions of fear and threats to a person's physical safety or psychological wellbeing in his/her interactions with the environment (Wilson, 2006 p.132). In the nineteenth century, Darwin, (1872) thought of anxiety as "an emotional reaction that is aroused when an organism feels physically under threat". In contrast, at the beginning of the twentieth century, Freud (1920) thought that anxiety was akin to fear or fright (cited in Wilson, 2006). In later decades, anxiety is seen as a "state of apprehension, a vague fear that is only indirectly associated with an object" (Scovel, 1978, p. 42).

The next step occurred when Spielberger distinguished between the notions of anxiety and fear (Wilson, 2006). According to him, fear is caused by "a real objective danger in the environment" (Wilson, 2006, p. 84), but the reasons behind anxiety may not be known to him/her. In this case, anxiety is defined as "the subjective feeling of tension, apprehension, nervousness and worry associated with the arousal of the nervous system" (Cubukcu, 2007, p.40).

Furthermore, Horwitz and Cope (1986) produce a definition similar to Spielberger's, except that for them the subjective feeling of tension, apprehension, nervousness and worry are associated with an arousal of the "autonomic nervous system". Along these lines, Weinberg and Gould define anxiety as a "negative emotional state characterized by nervousness, worry and apprehension, and associated with activation or arousal of the body" (1995, p.53) while for Prince, anxiety can be described as a "feeling unlike any other signal of distress" (2002, p.99).

Meanwhile, according to Ooi (2002), anxiety is triggered by a combination of one's biochemical changes, personal history and memory, and social situation. Although animals also experience anxiety, it does not involve the ability to use memory or imagination to move forward and backward in time. In other words, human anxiety can be caused by post-traumatic experiences or the anticipation of future events (Ooi, 2002). Without this sense of personal continuity over time, humans would not have anything to trigger anxiety. However, it is important to distinguish between anxiety as a disorder and anxiety as a feeling or experience. In other words, one may feel anxious and yet does not have anxiety disorder (Ooi, 2002).

2.1 Public Speaking Anxiety

PSA is a specific type of Communication Apprehension. MacIntyre, Thivierge and MacDonald define PSA as "an individual's level of fear or anxiety associated with either real or anticipated communication in front of a group of persons" (1997, p.158).

The fear of speaking in public goes by many different names. Previously, it was called 'stage fright'—a serious problem most often seen in actors—but is now called Communication Apprehension. The term covers many kinds of communication fears in diverse situations: fear of talking on the telephone, fear of face-to-face conversations, fear of talking to authority figures or high-status individuals, fear of speaking to another individual, fear of speaking in a small group, and fear of speaking to an audience. Similarly, certain medical practitioners argue that students who read about the fear of public speaking may see themselves as more apprehensive than those who do not know about it. However, as more teachers learn about Communication Apprehension, they support a discussion of the problem in textbooks (McCroskey, 1996).

This finding is corroborated by others who report that public speaking is the most common single fear regardless of age, sex, education level. Social Skills (2010) report that 20% of the population feels a specific fear of embarrassment while speaking, writing, or eating in public. Similarly, McCroskey (1999) reports that invariably 20% of students are faced with PSA.

2.2 Factors Affecting Public Speaking Anxiety
Many influencing factors have been considered in studies relating to PSA. For example, in relation to demographic factors, people are found to be more vulnerable to social anxiety, particularly the fear of unfavourable social evaluation because younger people tend to be more self-conscious and have concerns about public self-image (Levpuscek & Videc, 2008). Anxiety is stronger when underpinned by the fear of negative social evaluation (Levpuscek, 2004; Puklek & Vidmar, 2000; Salmani Nodoushan, 2003, 2006, 2007, 2008, 2009, 2011, 2012, 2013, 2014). Therefore, it is argued that the degree of anxiety in younger people would be higher, particularly because of the fear of negative evaluation. However, studies on age differences in positive imaginary audience are rare as most studies focus on negative imaginary audience (Levpuscek & Videc, 2008).

Gender difference is another demographic factor affecting the PSA. With respect to the effect of gender differences on PSA, studies such as Levpuscek (2004) and Puklek and Vidmar (2000) report that apprehension and fear of negative evaluation is higher among younger female students than their male counterparts because younger female students have a greater tendency to be more concerned with their public self-image. Similarly, Matsuda and Gobel (2004) record that gender and proficiency have a significant impact on the performance of students in the classroom. Furthermore, the results of Fakhri (2012) and Tasee (2009)) indicate that there is significant correlation between female students and PSA. In addition, McCroskey, Gudykunst, and Nishida (1985) in a study based in Japan found that there were different levels of PSA across the genders. However, Wang (2010) indicates that there is no significant difference in PSA with respect to gender. Thus, studies which have investigated gender as a factor affecting PSA have found conflicting and inconsistent results, such that the findings become inconclusive.

English language competency is another factor that is likely to influence anxiety among students in terms of public speaking. English language has become very important as a medium of group discussion, oral presentation and for proposal defence in Libyan universities. In addition, English language is used to communicate with native speakers. Gardner and MacIntyre (1994) explain that apprehension is often related to a particular situation where the second language in which the speaker is not fully competent is used in public speaking. Therefore, competency in English language speaking could play a prominent role in influencing the degree of PSA.

In this context, the impact of competency in English language on PSA has been related to insecurity or the absence of self-confidence (Gutierrez-Calvo & Miguel-Tobal, 1998) and the lack of competence in public speaking (Behnke & Sawyer, 1999; Westenberg, 1999). Furthermore, students' differences in their speaking ability due to English language competence has also been linked to affect the ability to overcome nervousness that results in PSA. Tasee (2009) found that students with lower perceived language ability are more anxious about speaking, while Gregersen and Horwitz (2002) reported that competency in English language is one of the major influences on PSA. In contrast, Pribyl, Keaten, and Sakamoto (2001) noted that the degree of competency in English language bears no relationship with the levels of PSA experienced.

Also in terms of English language competency, pronunciation is seen as an important facilitator of fluency in communication. However, studies focusing on the relationship between pronunciations as a component of oral performance and PSA are rare (Cheng, 1998) However, Liu (2006) and Woodrow (2006) find that oral performance is related to English language anxiety. This is because, as Price (1991) argues, speakers feel embarrassed because of their pronunciation errors. In addition, poor pronunciation is likely to contribute to Communication Apprehension, test anxiety, and the fear of negative evaluation. PSA could be ignited by Communication Apprehension because of the fear that communication may not be well-articulated due to poor pronunciation. Pronunciation may also play a role in test anxiety. This is particularly the case when students have the feeling of being graded by the teachers on the quality of their pronunciation. Finally, the fear of a negative evaluation occurs if the speaker fears that the audience think that their pronunciation is weak (Shams, 2006).

2.3 The Impact of Social Evaluation on Public Speaking Anxiety

As highlighted earlier, social evaluation plays a prominent role in the levels of PSA experienced by students, as younger individuals often base their self-evaluations on their imagined audience, which comprises two types, positive and negative (Goossens, 1984; Lapsley, FitzGerald, Rice & Jackson, 1989).

In this context, "public speaking anxiety represents a cluster of evaluative feelings about speech making" (Daly, Vangelisti, Neel & Cavanaugh, 1989, p.40). Thus, speakers who are highly anxious do not experience positive feelings related to the context of public speaking. In turn this is exacerbated as young students are preoccupied with their perception of their social evaluation and as such they assume that the audience is more concerned the students' appearance and behaviour rather than the message (Elkind, 1978). Thus, they are concerned about making mistakes and being perceived as looking stupid in front of their fellow students. Other students

become upset because they feel that they are the centre of attention but what they are about to say may not be of interest to the audience. This fear of an unfavourable assessment by the audience can aggravate their PSA. As a result, many international students believe that their contribution to any group discussion and oral presentation should be perfect. It is this anxiousness to appear perfect in order to attract a positive evaluation results in PSA that creates PSA.

3. Research Design

Research design performs the role of ensuring that the evidence gained clearly answers the research question. Sekaran and Bougie (2011) note that research design has to do with taking reasonable decisions in making the choices among the different methods of analysis such as exploratory, descriptive and hypothesis testing to realize the study's objectives. Furthermore, the methods of sampling, gathering data, the measurement of both dependent and independent variables, and data analysis in terms of hypotheses testing involve making rational decisions. The methods used serve the purpose of explaining the collection of the data involved (Bryman & Bell, 2007). Quantitative tests can be employed in an acceptable design in formulating hypotheses (which may or may not be supported); this may be slightly different from other inter-disciplinary research. The formulation of a hypothesis should be based on mathematical and statistical means which should not be subject to questioning. Furthermore, the use of randomization of groups in quantitative research and the inclusion of a control group where necessary are very important. The method used should be such that it could be replicated in the same way with the same results (Kumar, 2011).

3.1 Data Analysis

This section discusses how the quantitative data is collected from the students and how the data is analysed. The quantitative data is collected by means of a questionnaire survey, and then the researcher uses SPSS (Statistical Package for Social Sciences) to analyse the collected data. Descriptive statistics are also used to help answer the research questions relevant to the respondents' anxiety level.

4. Findings and Results

The following are the results of the study aimed at determining the effect of social evaluation on PSA of EFLLs at Omar al-Mukhtar University in the academic year 2014/2015.

4.1. Correlation between Social Evaluation and Public Speaking Anxiety

In order to examine the influence of social evaluation on PSA, this study analyses the correlation between the two variables. Table 4.1 presents the results of the relationship between the independent variable, social evaluation, and the dependent variable, PSA.

Table 4.1 highlights that the value of the Pearson Correlation based on 108 respondents is negative which implies that the total PSA as the dependent variable moves in the opposite direction to social evaluation (the independent variable). The value of the Pearson Correlation is -0.381 implying that there is a medium correlation

between the two variables. Furthermore, since p=0.000 (sig. 2-tailed) is smaller than 0.05%, this implies that social evaluation has significant impact on the total PSA. In other word, there is a significant negative correlation between the two variables.

Table 4.1: Correlation between Social Evaluation and Public Speaking Anxiety

	Independent Variable
Test	**Social Evaluation**
Person Correlation	-0.381***
Sig. (2-tailed)	0.000
No. of respondents	111

Note: *** indicates that correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

In order to investigate the significances of the above correlation between the variables in relation to the influence of English language competence on PSA, the results of the speaking skills of the sample students were obtained (see Table 4.2).

Table 4.2: Statistics of Speaking Skills for English Language Learners

Bands	No. of Students in A111 1st Year, 2015	No. of Students in A112 2nd Year, 2014	No. of Students in A112 3rd Year, 2014	Total
1.0	0	0	1	**1**
1.5	1	1	1	**3**
2.0	0	1	3	**4**
2.5	1	0	0	**1**
3.0	2	3	2	**7**
3.5	0	0	0	**0**
4.0	6	6	6	**18**
4.5	0	4	3	**7**
5.0	5	1	8	**14**
5.5	0	0	4	**4**
6.0	8	3	5	**16**
6.5	2	2	5	**9**
7.0	2	4	7	**13**
7.5	1	1	2	**4**
8.0	5	2	3	**10**
8.5	0	0	0	**0**
9.0	0	0	0	**0**
Total	**33**	**28**	**50**	**111**

Source: English Language Department, Omar Al-Mukhtar University.
Note: A111 and A112 are English course codes.

Table 4.2 shows the results of the speaking skills ranging from band 1.0 to band 9.0. Band 1 is the lowest marks scored by the students for the test of their English language skills while the Band 9.0 represents the highest possible mark. These skills are determined by testing the student on speaking, writing, reading, and listening. The results obtained are summarized for each year.

The results for the first year, 2015 show that out of total of 33 students, 15 students scored below band 6.0 which represents 45.45% of the population and 18 students scored band 6.0 or above which represents 54.55%. Therefore, in the first year slightly more students than the average were considered to be competent in English language skills. In terms of the second year, 2014 out of a total of 28 students, 16 were below band 6.0 which represents 57.14% of the population and 12 students achieved band 6.0 or above which represents 42.86%. Therefore, in the second year, 2014, less students than the average were considered to be competent in English language skills. In the third year, 2014, out of 50 students. 28 students achieved below band 6.0 which represents 54.90% of the population while 16 students got band 6.0 or above which represents 45.10%. Therefore, in the third year 2014, fewer students than the average were considered to be competent in English language skills.

In total, 59 students scored below band 6.0 out of the total population of 111, which represents 52.68%, while 16 students scored band 6.0 which represents 45.10%. This shows that the number of students considered to be competent in English language skills were lower than those who were not competent.

The above summary of the EFLLs' results were supported by the questionnaire survey. About 4/5 of the respondents to the survey agreed or strongly agreed with the statement that "I understand but cannot speak English so I have anxiety" (Item ELC3). The mean value was 2.24. Similarly, over 80% of the respondents agreed or strongly agreed with the statement that "My speaking ability is very poor which makes me fear making mistakes" (ELC9). The mean value was 4.31. This suggests that many students experienced PSA because of their weak competence in speaking.

In another question, 89 respondents (82.4%) either agreed or strongly agreed with the statement that "my thought become confused and jumped when I am giving a speech". Of the 89 students, 53 (49.07%) were males and 36 (33.33%) were females. Looking at the results, the mean value for this item (SA1) was 4.31 which was the high scores obtainable when compared to the other lower value for other items. A similarly result was gained in relation to the statement that "I am in constant fear of forgetting what I prepared to say". The numbers of students who either agreed or strongly agreed was again 82.4%. The mean value recorded for this item (SA4) was also 4.31.

5. Conclusion and Discussion

This study addresses the issue of what role is played by social evaluation in influencing the occurrence of PSA among EFLLs at Omar Al-Mukhtar University. In order to pursue this, a total of 111 students (for the academic year 2014/2015) completed a questionnaire. The data collected was analysed through a number of statistical tests including correlation in order to answer the research question, "What role has social evaluation played in affecting Public Speaking Anxiety of EFLLs in the English Department at Omar Al-Mukhtar University?". The results of the correlation suggest that social evaluation has a significant impact on PSA. It can be concluded that there are a significant number of factors responsible for the causes of anxiety among English language learners. The anxiety expressed itself in a number of ways including making the students fearful, confused, tremble, tense, rigid, their heart beat faster, and nervous. This lead the students to feel they made more mistakes and perform weakly when delivering speeches, attending interviews or during class room

presentations. Furthermore, students identified that they found great difficulty in speaking English although some of them understood it, which contributed to their PSA. Overall, the results suggest that student with weak skills and who lack competence in English language are more liable to experience PSA compared to those who have good skills and competence in English language. Finally, it can be concluded that the social evaluation factor is the most important motivating factor causing anxiety.

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