

Communication Apprehension Among Female EFL Majors: Quantitative Assessment and Qualitative Exploration of the Influencing Factors

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Abstract—This research sought to assess the status-quo of communication apprehension (henceforth CA) and investigate the influencing factors. To realise this objective, the research adopted the mixed method (the explanatory sequential design). The quantitative method was used to identify the status- quo of CA, and the qualitative method to uncover the factors influencing CA. PRCA (McCroskey, 2005) was adopted to assess the participants' level of CA, and the focus-group interview was used to explore the influencing factors. The subjects of the research in the quantitative phase were 111 female EFL majors from all academic levels registered in the Department of English, College of Science & Humanities, Prince Sattam bin Abdulaziz University; the subjects of the qualitative phase were 15 female EFL majors who agreed willingly to take part in the quantitative phase. The research findings revealed that the research participants display a high level of CA (very apprehensive); the focus group interview highlights various sub-factors under many categories such as personal, social, educational, psychological, and linguistic factors. The research recommended employing CA-reducing strategies such as creating a friendly environment, providing constructive feedback, and integrating technology tools in the teaching-learning process.

Index Terms—communication apprehension, female EFL majors, mixed method

I. INTRODUCTION

Communication plays a pivotal role in human interaction, and it is the cornerstone of social, professional, and personal development. Through communication, individuals can share ideas, voice opinions, express emotions, engage in discussions, and build relationships. In academia, students ought to be competent in communication to be able to cooperate and interact with their peers, acquire knowledge, and develop their academic and professional expertise. Mastering communication skills facilitates language learning, cultural understanding, and personal development.

Communication is not only a linguistic skill, but it is a multifaceted competency that is influenced by a plethora of factors. Communication anxiety might hinder learners' ability to use language effectively (McCroskey, 1977). CA has also a negative impact on the EFL learners' motivation, performance, and overall language proficiency linked to many other factors such as gender, self-efficacy, and social expectations (Abdulaal et al., 2023; Abdou, 2023; Al-Najjar & Merhi, 2022; Horwitz et al., 1986; Musa, 2019). MacIntyre and Gardner (1994) highlighted that higher levels of CA might lead to avoidance of communication situations, reduction in participation in class activities as well as lowering academic achievement. Therefore, identifying the multifaceted aspects and factors associated with CA might help in identifying the essence of CA and the possible remedies for facing such a phenomenon.

Bragg (2017) underscored that CA, a feeling that most people experience to a specific level, is the fear of presentation in public accompanied by feelings of reluctance and nervousness. McCroskey (1984) underscored that CA has oral and written forms. Gardner et al. (2005) depicted CA as the feeling of anxiety experienced by an individual before or during communication triggered by various factors. More significantly, Mahdi (2015) identified a significant relationship between EFL learners' level of CA and their communicative competence. Horwitz et al. (1986) delineated CA as "a distinct complex of self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings, and behaviours related to classroom language learning arising from the uniqueness of the language learning process" (p. 28). Gardner and MacIntyre (1993) highlighted anxiety as "fear or apprehension occurring when a learner is expected to perform in the second or foreign language" (p. 59). Spielberger (1983) cited that psychologists categorise apprehension into three categories, namely trait apprehension, state apprehension, and situation-specific apprehension. CA is a trait-like in most situations, a situation-like in public speeches or job interviews and a state in some people that hinders acquiring knowledge, skills and interpersonal relationships (Olam et al., 2024).

Constructivism represents a theoretical assumption for second language learning and acquisition. It highlights the significance of the learner's characteristics and interaction in the learning process; however, CA means a fear of real or anticipated communicative situations impacted by the learners' autonomy and self-esteem (Benson, 2011). In other words, learners with higher levels of self-esteem, and autonomy are more likely to communicate effectively than those with

higher degrees of anxiety and with lower degrees of self-confidence. Learners can construct their knowledge effectively and meaningfully (Naylor & Keogh, 1999; Schunk, 2012).

Horwitz (1986) proposed a framework highlighting CA, including mainly three components: CA, test anxiety, and fear of negative evaluation. The framework confirmed that CA stems from self-perception. Tanveer's (2007) framework focused on three factors responsible for second language anxiety: learners' self-perceptions, teachers' beliefs, and classroom management. The framework focused on the components of the teaching-learning process that impact apprehension such as the instructor, peers, and classroom environment.

Krashen's (1982) second language acquisition theory of the input hypothesis and the affective filter hypothesis confirms that language acquisition increases in low-anxiety situation contexts. CA has myriad negative impacts on students, specifically in the context of EFL learning (Frymier, 2005; Machell et al., 2016). Highly apprehensive students would not seek help from their instructors when needed (Amara, 2018; Shad et al., 2020); they tend to withdraw from situations which require communication whether inside or outside the class and prefer to be occupied with tasks and activities that require fewer communication activities (Minj et al., 2024). CA has a significant impact on the students' self-esteem, self-concept, and social relations, which leads to stress, and anxiety that negatively affects their psychological well-being (Agrawal & Krishna, 2021; Mahmud, 2014). Amiri and Puteh (2022) identified six strategies for overcoming CA, namely: self-confidence, acquiring background knowledge of the subject matter; employing efficient presentation strategies, preparing and rehearsing the presentation; passivity, reacting expressively but non verbally in response to the CA; positive cognitive restructuring, changing reflection about self and accepting comments from the examiners; visualisation techniques, i.e. imagining the questions asked and scenario of the presentation; and cultural awareness, recognising cultural differences and the different aspects of audience.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Rickards-Schlichting et al. (2004) conducted a study to investigate the effect of an intervention based on self-modelling on reducing speaking anxiety. The subjects of the study were high school students: five males and six females. Many instruments were adopted for fulfilling the purpose of the study, namely the BASA scale (Mulac & Sherman, 1974); the PRPSA scale (McCroskey, 1970); and the self-reported state anxiety of Spielberger (1983). Results revealed that the participants experienced a decrease in their anxiety which appeared in the follow-up tests.

Jones and Procopio (2017) aimed to develop communication skills through mentoring and assess the level of CA among at-risk students. The study participants were 47 middle school students: 20 males and 27 females. The PRCA of McCroskey (1982) was adopted to fulfil the study purpose. The results revealed that the mentoring intervention was effective in lowering the level of CA among the participants.

Herbein et al. (2017) sought to enhance public speaking skills and reduce speech anxiety among primary-stage pupils. The study participants were 65 primary school students: 38 males and 27 females. The study made use of some tools for fulfilling its purpose namely, a performance questionnaire (Cartwright-Hatton et al., 2005); appropriateness of public speaking observation sheet; performance anxiety questionnaire (Cox & Kenardy, 1993; German et al., 2005); and DESSA test (LeBuffe & Naglieri, 2009). The results highlighted that public speaking skills were positively impacted by the training aimed at improving the participants' nonverbal and organisational skills.

Casteleyn (2018) investigated the influence of theatre training on the students' public speaking stress, and public speaking competence. The study employed the 'Personal Report of Confidence as a Speaker' (Hook et al., 2008) for collecting the study data. The study participants were 35 high school students. The results underscored that the participants may benefit from the intervention.

Asan and Sezgin (2020) examined the impact of education games on improving speaking skills and reducing speaking anxiety. The study participants were 28 primary school students: 12 males and 16 females. For collecting the study data, the personal information form, the impromptu speaking achievement rubric, and the speaking anxiety scale (Yildirim, 2015) were administered to the participants. Results revealed that the educational games were effective in developing the participants' speaking skills but were not successful in reducing speaking apprehension.

Alkhaldi et al. (2023) conducted a qualitative study to investigate CA among Jordanian students inside and outside the educational environment. The study participants were from various programs and English was the language of instruction. The interview was used as a means for collecting the study data. The results underscored that the participants employed the following five strategies for overcoming CA: interpersonal interaction, building self-confidence, practice and preparation, external motivation, and faking it as a coping mechanism.

Ordoubadi et al. (2023) questioned the relationship among CA, privacy preferences, willingness to communicate, and foreign language achievement considering the differences related to gender between males and females. The study administered three questionnaires as instruments for collecting the study data. Participants of the study were 250 English learners. The results revealed that CA has a negative correlation with foreign language achievement; willingness to communicate has a significant positive correlation with foreign language achievement.

Shan et al. (2020) enumerated the factors contributing to foreign language CA such as improper tasks, lack of language input, overuse of the native language, and many linguistic, emotional, and socio-cultural problems. Further, several studies investigated the factors influencing apprehension in many different contexts and identified a plethora of categories such as the learners' personality factors, namely introversion and extroversion, shyness, lack of linguistic knowledge, and peer

pressure (Asif et al., 2019; Irfan et al., 2020; Samad et al., 2021; Soomro et al., 2020). Some other factors are related to the teaching-learning environment such as lack of motivation, discouragement from instructors, and the learner's personality type (Samad, 2014). A study by Kayaoğlu and Sağlamel (2013) concluded that the main causes of CA are linguistic factors, namely semantic, syntactic, and phonetic problems.

Bearing this in mind, foreign language communication has been explored in a plethora of contexts addressing its causes, manifestations, and remedies based on a prominent foundational theoretical base (Horwitz et al., 1986; McCroskey, 1977; Musa, 2023) which highlighted some related factors such as self-perceptions, linguistic background and the educational environment. Much subsequent research, based on the previous framework, has developed copious inventions for combating such negatively impacting states. Although most studies focus on the general population or mixed gender, the current study focuses on the female EFL majors considering all the societal aspects that might interfere with the CA phenomenon. Some studies have targeted some context-specific remedies such as theatre exercises and public speaking drills (Casteleyn, 2018; Shan et al., 2020). Furthermore, the dependence on the quantitative approaches only might provide a superficial understanding of the phenomenon investigated and might not identify the multivarious factors of CA in the educational context (Shan et al., 2020). Although most studies have depended on quantitative instruments, qualitative instruments, such as self-reports, interviews, and observations, remain scarce; this research utilises both the quantitative lens and qualitative ones for verifying both the status-quo of CA and the impacting factors.

Considering that female EFL majors might face some challenges such as community expectations, the norms of the culture, the perceptions of competence, which might have a negative influence on their communication, the present research sought to investigate the status-quo of CA among the research participants as well as identify the factors influencing CA among the EFL majors in the Department of English, Sattam University. The findings of the research might pave the way for future research to devise strategies for enhancing communication skills among female EFL majors; the results, furthermore, might give insights for educators, curriculum developers, and policymakers to construct a supportive learning environment to empower EFL female learners to excel academically and professionally.

Impacting communication negatively, CA is considered one of the critical challenges and a main barrier to language development. Communication skills are deemed to be a cornerstone of EFL education, specifically for female students who are seeking a career necessitating using a foreign language professionally. With this in mind, a closer examination of the factors influencing CA reveals a knowledge gap in understanding the interplay among these factors within specific demographic categories. Moreover, much of the literature targeting CA addresses the general population, not gender directly.

Moreover, as an EFL instructor, the researcher has noticed that a significant number of students are reluctant to participate in oral activities, classroom presentations, class discussions, or communication activities. They are afraid of making grammatical mistakes, committing pronunciation errors, or receiving negative evaluations from their peers or their instructors. Female EFL majors' background knowledge and proficiency levels in language are shaped by a myriad of social, personal, linguistic, and gender-specific factors. Bearing this in mind, the present research sought to answer the following questions:

- [1] What is the status-quo of CA among the female EFL majors in the Department of English Language and Literature, Prince Sattam bin Abdulaziz University, KSA?
- [2] What are the factors impacting the female EFL majors' CA in the Department of English Language and Literature, Prince Sattam bin Abdulaziz University, KSA?

III. METHOD

A. Research Design

The mixed method was adopted for assessing the status-quo of CA and the influencing factors among the female EFL majors. The quantitative method was adopted to identify the measurable trends to direct the qualitative inquiry to uncover personal experiences. The descriptive survey method, due to its aptness, was employed to collect robust quantitative data from a large audience to form the foundation for the subsequent qualitative phase. Procedurally, the research adopted the *explanatory sequential design* which begins with the quantitative phase, namely collecting the quantitative data followed by collecting the qualitative data. Subsequently, a holistic overview of the target phenomenon under investigation would be developed.

B. Participants

The population of the current research comprises the female EFL majors in the Department of English, Saudi Arabia. They study linguistics, literature, and communication skills courses. Selection of the research participants followed two phases: quantitatively, the research participants totalling 111 included all the academic levels, namely freshmen, sophomores, juniors, and seniors who completed the CA test. Qualitatively, the research participants were purposively selected (availability sampling technique), totalling 15 to complete the qualitative phase of the research.

C. Instruments

PRCA Scale developed by McCroskey was adopted for quantitatively assessing the research participants' CA. It is a standardised instrument developed for assessing CA across various contexts, and it consists of 24 items under the

following main factors: group discussions, meetings, interpersonal conversations, and public speaking (McCroskey, 2005). The PRCA, moreover, uses a 5-point Likert scale as follows: not at all apprehensive, slightly apprehensive, moderately apprehensive, very apprehensive, highly apprehensive.

On the other hand, for fulfilling the purpose of the current research, a focus-group interview was used as a qualitative instrument for attaining a deeper insight into the personal experiences for fulfilling the research purpose. The employment of the focus-group interview was to identify the inner thoughts and emotions perceived by the participants to delimit the factors not elicited by the PRCA scale.

D. Data Collection and Analysis

The research participants completed the PRCA scale, which was delivered through a Google Form. The total score of the scale ranged from 24 to 120, demonstrating that the higher scores mean higher levels of CA and vice versa. Statistically, the scores below 51 mean low CA; the scores ranging from 51 to 80 mean average CA; and the scores above 80 mean high CA. The PRCA scale proved to be an effective tool for assessing the participants' level of apprehension in various contexts and different cultural settings; it was validated, and its reliability was checked using Cronbach's Alpha (> 0.90).

The interview was conducted under the supervision of the researcher, and the participants have given their agreement regarding recording the interview. Procedurally, the participants were given some prompts to guide the interview, considering their freedom to express their ideas. Participants were encouraged to participate in the focus group interview actively as they were informed that their responses would not be used except for research purposes.

Thematic analysis was utilised for analysing the participants' responses substantiating the quantitative findings and offering deeper insights into the factors influencing CA (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). To ensure credibility, the participants were encouraged to provide frank and detailed responses. The dependability of the attained results was ensured via following systematic documentation of the results as well as bringing an external audit for checking all the procedures pursued by the researcher, such as data collection and analysis. Transferability was ensured by providing a comprehensive description of the participants and the context of data collection to determine the relevance and applicability of the attained results. To ensure confirmability, the research used a journal to document any assumption or bias in the data collection or the analysis process to ensure that the findings reached are based on solid data and rigorous analysis rather than the researcher's perspective. Furthermore, to enhance trustworthiness, participants' responses were cited verbatim in the results discussion to ensure authenticity and contextual depth.

E. Ethical Considerations

Considering the significance of ensuring ethical integrity, informed consent was obtained before participating in the research. Participants received detailed information about the purpose, method, and potential benefits and risks of partaking in the research; they were informed that their participation was merely voluntary, and they had the right to withdraw when it would be pertinent for them. Furthermore, confidentiality of the collected data was rigorously considered throughout the collection and analysis phases.

IV. RESULTS

A. The Status-Quo of CA

For identifying the status-quo of CA, the first research question "What is the status-quo of CA among the female EFL majors in the Department of English Language and Literature, Prince Sattam bin Abdulaziz University, KSA", was addressed. The participants' responses were categorised using the Likert scale analysis formula as follows: not at all apprehensive (from 1 to 1.80); slightly apprehensive (from 1.81 to 2.60), moderately apprehensive (from 2.61 to 3.40), very apprehensive (from 3.41 to 4.20), and highly apprehensive (greater than 4.20). The participants' responses to the PRCA scale were collected and statistically analysed. The following table depicts the statistical analysis.

TABLE 1
THE STATUS-QUO OF CA AMONG THE RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS (PRCA SCALE)

Items	Not at All Apprehensive	Slightly Apprehensive	Moderately Apprehensive	Very Apprehensive	Highly Apprehensive	Mean	SD	Direction
	Total	Total	Total	Total	Total			
	%	%	%	%	%			
Item 1	-	6	54	29	22	3.60	.866	Very Apprehensive
	-	%5.4	%48.6	%26.1	%19.8			
Item 2	-	58	19	10	24	3.00	1.221	Moderately Apprehensive
	-	%52.3	%17.1	%9.0	%21.6			
Item 3	-	23	40	12	36	3.55	1.150	Very Apprehensive
	-	%20.7	%36.0	%10.8	%32.4			
Item 4	-	20	23	9	59	3.96	1.213	Very Apprehensive
	-	%18.0	%20.7	%8.1	%53.2			
Item 5	-	15	11	19	66	4.23	1.093	Highly Apprehensive
	-	%13.5	%9.9	%17.1	%59.5			
Item 6	-	46	35	22	8	2.93	.951	Moderately Apprehensive
	-	%41.4	%31.5	%19.8	%7.2			
Item 7	-	12	21	45	33	3.89	.957	Very Apprehensive
	-	%10.8	%18.9	%40.5	%29.7			
Item 8	-	13	29	19	50	3.95	1.090	Very Apprehensive
	-	%11.7	%26.1	%17.1	%45.0			
Item 9	-	11	14	38	48	4.11	.976	Very Apprehensive
	-	%9.9	%12.6	%34.2	%43.2			
Item 10	-	11	9	27	64	4.30	.987	Highly Apprehensive
	-	%9.9	%8.1	%24.3	%57.7			
Item 11	-	24	45	20	22	3.36	1.034	Very Apprehensive
	-	%21.6	%40.5	%18.0	%19.8			
Item 12	-	36	41	10	24	3.20	1.119	Moderately Apprehensive
	-	%32.4	%36.9	%9.0	%21.6			
Item 13	-	18	41	5	47	3.73	1.175	Very Apprehensive
	-	%16.2	%36.9	%4.5	%42.3			
Item 14	-	53	29	14	15	2.92	1.071	Moderately Apprehensive
	-	%47.7	%26.1	%12.6	%13.5			
Item 15	-	15	25	31	40	3.86	1.057	Very Apprehensive
	-	%13.5	%22.5	%27.9	%36.0			
Item 16	-	15	17	21	58	4.10	1.103	Very Apprehensive
	-	%13.5	%15.3	%18.9	%52.3			
Item 17	-	28	35	21	27	3.42	1.116	Very Apprehensive
	-	%25.2	%31.5	%18.9	%24.3			
Item 18	-	9	4	22	76	4.49	.903	Highly Apprehensive
	-	%8.1	%3.6	%19.8	%68.5			
Item 19	-	46	29	9	27	3.15	1.208	Moderately Apprehensive
	-	%41.4	%26.1	%8.1	%24.3			
Item 20	-	11	25	21	54	4.06	1.056	Very Apprehensive
	-	%9.9	%22.5	%18.9	%48.6			
Item 21	-	29	45	11	26	3.31	1.102	Moderately Apprehensive
	-	%26.1	%40.5	%9.9	%23.4			
Item 22	-	25	37	22	27	3.46	1.094	Very Apprehensive
	-	%22.5	%33.3	%19.8	%24.3			
Item 23	-	7	17	47	40	4.08	.875	Very Apprehensive
	-	%6.3	%15.3	%42.3	%36.0			
Item 24	-	8	8	32	63	4.35	.901	Highly Apprehensive
	-	%7.2	%7.2	%28.8	%56.8			

Weighted mean = 89.01 = 3.70

The above table shows that the weighted mean was 3.70, underscoring that female EFL majors are “very apprehensive”, underscoring that a considerable portion of them is suffering from higher levels of CA. Digging deep, items 5,10,18, and 24 show higher degrees of apprehension as the scores were 4.23, 4.30, 4.49, and 4.35 respectively. While items 2, 6, 12, 14, 19, and 21 were moderately apprehensive as their scores were 3.00, 2.93, 3.20, 2.92, 3.15, and 3.31 respectively. The participants’ responses to 14 items of the scale were “very apprehensive” where their responses ranged from 3.36 to 4.11; notably, the participants’ responses do not include “Not at All Apprehensive”. The following Figure 1 depicts the frequencies of apprehension among the research participants.

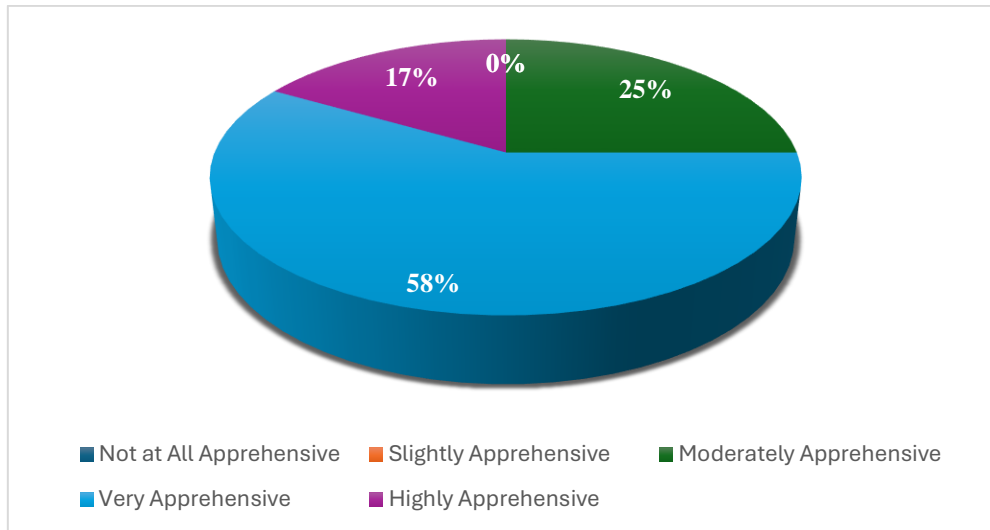


Figure 1. The Status-Quo of CA Among the Research Participants

B. Factors Influencing Communication Apprehension

To identify the factors triggering CA, the second research question “What are the factors impacting the female EFL majors’ CA in the Department of English Language and Literature, Prince Sattam bin Abdulaziz University, KSA?”, was tackled. The focus group interview was conducted online by the researcher with the research participants and lasted for 150 minutes. The script of the interview was reviewed and matched with the recorded track for generating the themes underscoring the factors influencing CA. The main themes attained from the interview are depicted in the following Figure 2.

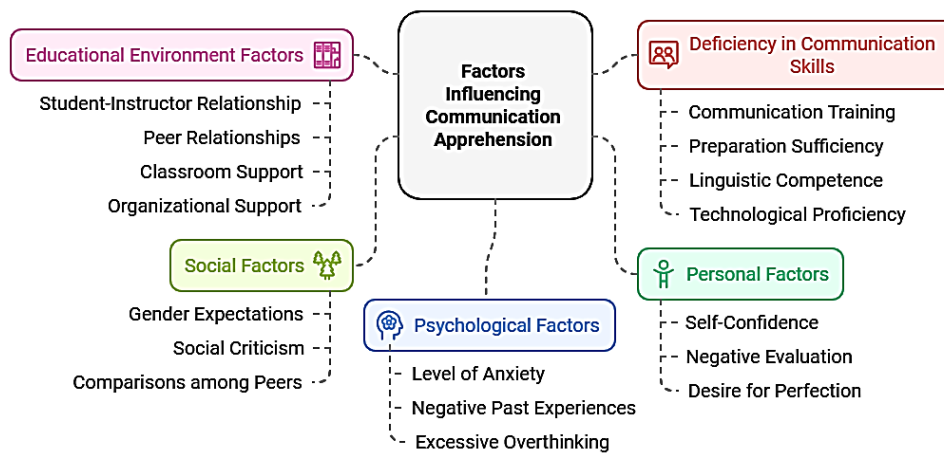


Figure 2. Factors Influencing Communication Apprehension

1) Personal Factors

A) Self-confidence

Female EFL majors underscored that they avoid communicating in English as they fear making mistakes that will ruin their self-image due to others’ bullying. They are less willing to participate in activities that require communication because of others’ expectations, and they are always hesitant to ask questions. One of the participants articulated, “I usually feel that I don’t have good ideas”.

B) Negative evaluation

The participants expressed self-negative judgment due to avoidance of communication activities. The competitiveness of the classroom pushes the students to amplify these fears, specifically when the classroom focuses on mistakes. Frequent abstention from participation in class activities leads to underperformance and self-doubt. A respondent articulated, “My friends will say that I’m weak”.

C) Desire for perfection

The interviewees highlighted that they have a strong desire to speak fluently among others, and they usually compare themselves to native speakers. This desire to achieve perfectionism puts pressure on them to cope with classroom activities. Thus, some students prefer to stay silent in class and not risk their imperfections. An interviewee conveyed, “I know that I should learn more, and if I’m not good enough, I won’t speak at all”.

2) Social Factors

A) Gender expectations

The participants reported that they, as females, feel anxious in communication settings. The traditional society requirements do not encourage assertive communication from women; the students perceive that they should be quieter and less assertive. A subject in the interview remarked, *"The girl should be quieter and more reasonable when speaking"*.

B) Social criticism

The respondents confirmed that they fear social criticism if they participate improperly. They are aware that they might communicate inadequately in the classroom. A respondent asserted, *"If I speak too much, people will say that I'm talkative, stupid, or speaking wrong"*.

C) Comparisons among peers

The participants pinpointed that they always compare themselves to their peers, specifically those who excel in language skills and believe that making a mistake is not acceptable in most settings. They feel that staying silent is better than being below the expected level. A participant reported, *"I don't know why I can't speak fluently like my friends"*.

3) Education Environment Factors

A) Student-instructor relationship

Female EFL majors perceive that there are barriers between them and their instructors, and they feel that there ought to be some restrictions when they communicate with them. Sometimes, they find it difficult to ask a question or voice an opinion, which reduces their participation and willingness to communicate. A respondent disclosed, *"I'm afraid that my professor will say that I'm weak"*.

B) Peer relationships

The research subjects highlighted that their relationship with their peers has an integral role in identifying the quality of communication. Working with a collaborative group or diverse group has an impact on the way students interact with each other. When students feel less comfortable in the group, they might withdraw from interaction in and act passively. An interviewee contributed, *"Sometimes, I can speak more with my friends when we work in my cooperative groups to do something"*.

C) Classroom support

The interviewees confirmed that support and encouragement play a significant role in encouraging them to participate effectively. When students feel safe while communicating, they will be more engaged and less apprehensive. A respondent disclosed, *"I feel that my friends collect my mistakes when I speak"*.

D) Organization support

The research subjects underscored that supportiveness from the educational institution is also crucial. Whenever they feel rigidity in any context, they abstain from participation. Feeling supported might help in overcoming the personal barriers and empower them to participate willingly and effectively. An informant affirmed, *"I can't speak during the events we make at the college. I can't"*.

4) The Psychological Factors

A) Level of anxiety

The participants showed that they feel stressed when involved in communication contexts such as oral exams or presentations. Higher levels of stress negatively impact the students' communication willingness and apprehension. An interviewee said, *"I feel that my heart races when I present something"*.

B) The negative past experiences

The research subjects stated that they have old negative experiences of communicating in public or with others, which resulted in apprehension and reluctance to communicate. Past experiences such as bullying, negative feedback, and sarcasm from peers might stimulate students to avoid communication activities. A contributor asserted, *"They laughed at me when I said the word -improvements- in a wrong way"*.

C) Excessive overthinking

Surprisingly, the participants highlighted that engagement with overthinking and over-analysis of past, current, and future negative thoughts has a negative impact on their future participation, specifically when focusing on situations related to communication and interaction. One of the research participants reflected, *"I overthink my words when I speak"*.

5) Deficiency of Communication Skills

A) Communication training

The interviewees elicited that they lack adequate communication training in the previous stages, which hindered possessing advanced communication skills. Public speaking and communication skills were not paid the due attention and training. Thus, they feel challenged when it comes to communication activities. A respondent disclosed, *"I hope that they provide for me more training on speaking"*.

B) Preparation sufficiency

The female EFL majors revealed that they do not feel adequately prepared for most communication tasks. The limited time and insufficient preparation, alongside the lack of resources and activities, might negatively influence communicative competence, so they feel apprehensive and less willing to communicate. A participant reported, *"I did not study speaking in the past, and I can't speak about a different topic"*.

C) Linguistic competence

The participants shed light on a plethora of linguistic factors which are perceived to be impacting their communication skills; thus, they feel apprehensive due to the weaknesses of their linguistic competence. An informant affirmed, “*I hope that I memorise many vocabularies to say everything that I want to say*”.

D) Technological proficiency

The interviewees underscored that the new advancement in technology and the services provided by artificial intelligence might contribute to the development of their communicative skills. However, they underscored that they are not competent enough to best employ artificial intelligence in the teaching-learning process effectively. A respondent exclaimed, “*Why don't they teach me how to learn the AI to use it in speaking!*”

V. DISCUSSION

The present research sought to investigate the level of CA and the influencing factors among female EFL majors using mixed-method research. The results obtained underscored that the subjects of the research suffer from high levels of CA due to a plethora of factors: personal factors, social factors, educational environment factors, psychological factors, and a deficiency of communication skills factor. The findings underscored that CA is a multidimensional factor (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1994; Horwitz et al., 1986). The results obtained are in line with the body of literature about CA. McCroskey (1984) and Horwitz et al. (1986) highlighted that CA is mainly affected by the students' lack of linguistic competence; when the students think about their mistakes, they avoid the communication tasks.

The results also echo those of Kayaoğlu and Sağlamel (2013) who verified that mistakes related to phonetics and syntax are among the most influential factors of CA. Social factors are also a main influencer of CA as the cultural context and the community expectations contribute to CA, specifically among female students as illustrated by a plethora of studies (Asif et al., 2019; Irfan et al., 2020; Shan et al., 2020). Moreover, the findings of the research highlight the role of self-perception in CA. The perceptions of the students, whether positive or negative, are the main factors affecting their CA (Abdulrazzaq & Abdellatif, 2023; Ahmad, 2021). The students' perceptions of their peers, instructors, and the educational institution are important contributors to CA; such findings are in line with Tanveer's (2007) framework of apprehension. The perceptions were found to be a strong motive or cause of human behaviour, e.g. CA (Gardner et al., 2005). Linguistic competence is considered a fundamental factor that is linked directly to the learner's perceptions, specifically the level of CA which ought to be considered by educators. Moreover, the adoption of new technologies and AI tools provides a secure environment for learners to practice language (Shalan & Ahmad, 2024).

VI. CONCLUSIONS

It can be concluded that CA is a prevalent feature among the participants, which results from a plethora of factors, namely personal, social, educational environment, psychological, and deficiency of communication skills, which uncover a dire need for developing systematic interventions for providing safe spaces so that the learners can enhance their communication skills. The results of the research call for developing a supportive and friendly environment; the teacher is the main element for developing such an environment through constructive feedback, tolerance of mistakes, and a friendly atmosphere. The affective filter will be lowered when anxiety is reduced as illustrated by Krashen (1982); consequently, it will impact language acquisition. The findings also necessitate providing extra practice on the different communication aspects such as pronunciation, grammar, and vocabulary, which are necessary language components to raise self-esteem and self-confidence as demonstrated by Amiri and Puteh (2022). More critically, it is apparent that the multifariousness of CA entails the development of a holistic approach to combat its negative consequences considering all other factors.

The research offers a myriad of avenues for future researchers to address many gaps in literature. Firstly, gender differences should be thoroughly investigated to draw a comparison between genders to identify the potential differences. Intervention strategies ought to be employed by future researchers to reduce apprehension and increase willingness to communicate. Another area of interest, the interference of the personality traits and self-perceptions, should be studied in future research to identify the relationship between them and CA. Finally, a future researcher can investigate the impact of employing technology in the form of online activities and AI tools to mitigate CA.

APPENDIX

THE PERSONAL REPORT OF CA SCALE (PRCA) (McCroskey, 2005)

No.	Statement	Response				
		Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
1	I dislike participating in group discussions.					
2	Generally, I am comfortable while participating in group discussions.					
3	I am tense and nervous while participating in group discussions.					
4	I like to get involved in group discussions.					
5	Engaging in a group discussion with new people makes me tense and nervous.					
6	I am calm and relaxed while participating in group discussions.					
7	Generally, I am nervous when I have to participate in a meeting.					
8	Usually, I am comfortable when I have to participate in a meeting.					
9	I am very calm and relaxed when I am called upon to express an opinion at a meeting.					
10	I am afraid to express myself at meetings.					
11	Communicating at meetings usually makes me uncomfortable.					
12	I am very relaxed when answering questions at a meeting.					
13	While participating in a conversation with a new acquaintance, I feel very nervous.					
14	I have no fear of speaking up in conversations.					
15	Ordinarily I am very tense and nervous in conversations.					
16	Ordinarily I am very calm and relaxed in conversations.					
17	While conversing with a new acquaintance, I feel very relaxed.					
18	I'm afraid to speak up in conversations.					
19	I have no fear of giving a speech.					
20	Certain parts of my body feel very tense and rigid while giving a speech.					
21	I feel relaxed while giving a speech.					
22	My thoughts become confused and jumbled when I am giving a speech.					
23	I face the prospect of giving a speech with confidence.					
24	While giving a speech, I get so nervous I forget facts I really know.					

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