

Manifestations of Oral Communication Apprehensions among Jordanian Undergraduates in Hashemite University

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Abstract

The aim of this qualitative study was to uncover and understand the Jordanian student's attitudes and perceptions on their own Oral Communication Apprehension (OCA) in English language use inside and outside classroom settings. Nine students were purposively recruited from the Hashemite University (HU) in Jordan from different programs where the Medium of Instruction is English. Interviews were employed to elicit students' attitudes and perspectives on their apprehensive experiences in communicating the English language with either their professors in the classroom or with English-Speaking individuals and their possible explanations of their language apprehensive behavior in the oral modality. Findings revealed that the Jordanian students have strong levels of oral language apprehension in both the formal and informal settings which inhibits them from undertaking smooth communications with English. Among the explanations and the reasons of their Oral Communication Apprehension, the Jordanian students emphasized the lack of proper English pronunciation, limited vocabulary, and lack of self-confidence. Finally, pedagogical implications were suggested.

Date of Submission: 01-04-2022

Date of Acceptance: 10-04-2022

I. Problem Statement

With the rapid increase in technological advancements and globalization, English language competence in oral fluency has proven to be of critical importance and invaluable contribution to facilitating smooth communication for undergraduate students (Asassfeh, Al-Shaboul, Zuraiq & Alshboul, 2011; Hashim, 2020). In recent years, the role of speaking fluency and the skills of oral communications has occupied a major significance among language learners and educators alike as being emphasized and influenced by Western technologies and modernization. However, students are not always reported to have been successful language learners despite their motivation and aspiration, especially, in a foreign language setting as is the case in Jordan (Hajar, 2019; Haq, 1982; Zughoul & Taminian, 1984; Saed, Haidar, AL-Salman, & Hussein, 2021). According to Lapkin and Swain (2000) and Stryker and Leaver (1997), meanings are socially constructed and no smooth communication can take place without the social and pragmatic contexts being involved in the process, which in turn, suggest inherent learning difficulties for foreign language learners in theoretical terms (Yule, 2006). Similar to any EFL environment, Jordanian university students are undertaking serious hurdles to improve their English fluency and oral communication in a formal setting as in oral presentation and discussions in academic settings or in an informal environment where they are communicating with English-Speaking individuals like classmates or friends (Jdetawy, 2011; Hajar, 2019). Despite the financial and academic resources that are allocated to improve the quality of English acquisition in Jordan, the result seems to have fallen short to witness any significant achievements, and the average level of students at tertiary levels had not achieved what had not achieved the goal that had been set earlier (Alhabahba, Pandian, & Mahfoodh, 2016; Mukattash, 1983; Suleiman, 1983; Bueno-Alastuey, 2013). In Jordan, English subject is introduced to the students at the primary school and it is estimated that the Jordanian students receive twelve years in an average of English instruction (Alhabahba, Pandian, & Mahfoodh, 2016). Although the long period of English instruction received at school, recent research on English language acquisition in the Jordanian context indicates that students' proficiency is lagging behind as compared with their EFL peers, especially, with reference to oral communication. In comparison to other EFL settings in different parts of the world, the students in the Jordanian context seem to be more or less the same in encountering the same pedagogical and social constraints that are traditionally

occurring in foreign language environments in terms of in-class L1 use, teacher-student centeredness, lack of teacher training, and lack of communication opportunities and comprehensible linguistic input. Comparable to their Asian EFL learners, Jordanian university students are reported to have been representing oral communication apprehension that is inhibiting them from carrying out mutual comprehensible communication and demonstrating adequate speaking fluency in English that is compatible with school and tertiary education. Share similar learning and contextual situations with Asians and other EFL learners in terms of similar curricula and pedagogical orientation, the only possible explanation for the Jordanians' inability to deliver adequate speaking fluency and demonstrate comprehensible communications is most probably due to psychological rather than linguistic reasons. In the theory of language acquisition, the Oral Communication Apprehension framework emphasizes the psychological load upon the students are having the potential to inhibit them from carrying out their linguistic performances that are already internalized and acquired (Krishnan, Al-Lafi, & Pathan 2013). In the light of this psychological framework, the purpose of this study is initiated to identify the personal attitudes and experiences of the Jordanian students in communicating in English and to provide qualitative understandings of the apprehension oral behavior that are already lacking in the Jordanian context (Blume et al., 2013; Bragg, 2017).

Research Design

A qualitative research study was used to enable the researcher to understand the OCA phenomenon as described and experienced by the participants when using the English Language inside and outside the classrooms. Creswell (2013) defines qualitative research as “a type of educational research in which the researcher relies on the views of participants, asks broad, general questions, collects data consisting largely of words (or text) from participants, describes and analyzes these words for themes, and conducts the inquiry in a subjective, biased manner” (p. 46).

Research Instrument

Data was collected through interviews where Jordanian students from Hashemite University were asked to express their experiences and attitudes in using the English language inside and outside the classroom. From the phenomenological tradition and philosophical perspective, the researcher shall be sensitized to obtain deep descriptions of the individuals under investigation and delve deep to uncover the phenomenon open-ended questions and topical-guided interviews (Moustakas, 1994). The student respondents were invited to participate in the study through their instructors (after official permission was taken) in gathering assemblies that were located within the university campus. Each interview covered the experiences of these students at the university concerning their oral communication apprehensions and their psychological impacts on the learning process of speaking skills. The participants were freely allowed to speak in Arabic or English in an attempt to make them feel comfortable and express themselves.

Data Analysis

A content analysis was used to analyze the data. The recorded data was transcribed and converted into textual data that highlighted the major themes and sub-themes (Miles & Huberman, 1984). In order to make sense of the data, and before the coding process was initiated, the researcher circled, highlighted, and colored any significant quotes or phrases that were deemed important and revealing into understanding the phenomenon under investigation (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2013). The emerging vast array of words, sentences, paragraphs were reduced to manageable meaning units which were later coded into major themes and sub-themes (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

Sampling

A total number of twelve Jordanian students of different programs from Hashemite University were selected to participate in the study on voluntary bases to reflect on their experiences of Oral Communication Apprehension. This purposeful sampling was based on earlier observations that were directed to identify students possessing a high potential for oral communication apprehension. These students were briefed about the research in terms of the benefit of the research to the academia and language policy, their anonymity, and their voluntary participation (Braggs, 2017). Three participants refused to participate reducing the number to nine participants. The nine participants (Males and Females) were undergraduate students who were studying in different colleges of the Hashemite University whose language of instruction is English. Some of the participants had been abroad (in a native English-speaking country) for a while before pursuing their studies at Hashemite University.

Research Question

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

To what are the learning experiences of Oral Communication Apprehension among the Jordanian undergraduate students at Hashemite university?

II. Findings and Analysis

The research question of this study was aimed at discovering the experiences of oral CA while using English among HU undergraduate students. To answer this question, the interview participants were asked to describe their lived experiences with CA in their academic and social engagements. The participants were asked to comment on the most difficult English language skill based on their own constructed realities, the extent to which they experience CA, and the physical and emotional changes they encounter as a result of CA. This information allowed the researcher to fully understand the general situation of CA among the interview participants.

Most Difficult Skill

During the interviews, the participants were asked to mention the most difficult skills among the four English language skills (speaking, listening, reading, and writing). The purpose of this question was to understand their perceptions on the particular skill which would allow the researcher to make meaning on the subsequent opinions they would offer on CA. As shown in the figure, the majority of the participants, 7 out of 9 participants believed that speaking was the most difficult skill among the four English language skills. Sample extracts from the participants' narration of this reality were:

"I think speaking is the most common problem". (Ahmed).

"I think speaking is the major difficult common skill". (Yousef)

"Speaking is the most difficult especially when you are speaking to a group of people that you never met which means it is your first time to speak with". (Ahmad)

"The most difficult skill is speaking, as a student I can understand what people saying in English but I always find difficulties to respond or share my idea with them". (Hassan).

"It is different person to other; it is depending on the social environment he came from. I think I have difficulties in speaking. I think it easy to save vocabularies or grammars but to communicate in English is a major problem for me". (Nedal)

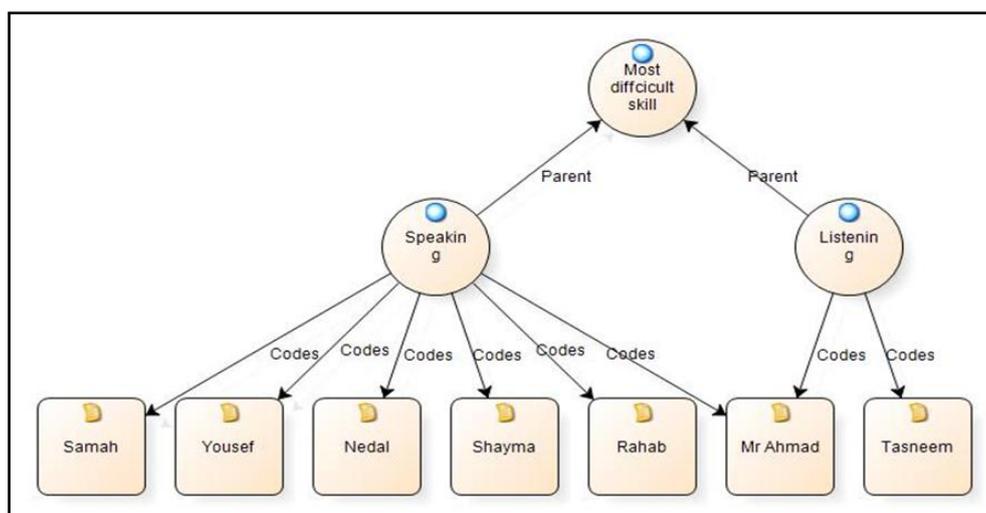


Figure 1.1. Most difficult skill

As clearly shown in figure 1.1, almost all the research participants identified speaking skills as the most difficult English language skill. Two of the respondents also indicated that they found listening skills difficult as well.

"I have a problem in listening comprehension as I don't understand everything being said and sometimes, I can't follow the speakers while he speaks". (Tasneem)

"Confidences, misunderstanding the meaning of words, listening also" (Ahmed)

Fear of Making Mistakes while Communicating in English

The first theme which emerged from the data was fear of making mistakes while communicating in English, which is divided into three sub-themes: problems such as lacking confidence in speaking, limited vocabulary, and pronunciation issues. The majority of the participants (7 out of 9 participants) feared making mistakes while communicating in English. The researcher showed how many times the sub-themes were mentioned by the participants. For example, the first sub-theme was mentioned 8 times by the 9 participants. The second sub-theme was mentioned 7 times and the last sub-theme was mentioned 8 times. Extracts on this theme are:

“I do feel but not all the time, for example if I need to speak English among friends, I will be ok if there was no one in good level more than me, but if there was one that I know better than me in English, I will try avoid using English in front of him to *avoid doing mistakes*.” (Awos)

“I am afraid to be assessed and evaluated from my colleges, *doing mistakes in communications*”. (Tasneem).

“You are afraid of *doing any mistakes* in front of people. Especially if they are a high-profile people or seniors to you”. (Ahmed).

I recently started to focus on Arabic language more so I start to *do mistakes* when I speak English (Samera)

Limited Vocabulary

The first sub-theme which emerged from the main theme of fear of making mistakes while communicating in English was inadequate vocabulary. Out of the 9 participants in this study, 7 of them mentioned that they were weak in speaking due to limited vocabulary.

Participants admitted that because they had limited vocabulary, they did not know which word to use, or they did not know the correct terms or concepts in their field. They expressed having limited vocabularies because of factors related to their educational background in school, foreign language environment, and the lack of linguistic exposure. When it came to speaking English, all seven participants reported that their major concern was vocabulary. They admitted to having a limited vocabulary and stated that they were occasionally unsure of how to utilize proper words. In this regard, the participants' perspectives clearly suggested that a limited vocabulary inhibited them from carrying out active and fluent English communication in several ways. For example, participant Rahaf stated that she overcomes her lack of vocabulary issues by trying to memorize the vocabulary and learn the correct pronunciation of the words.

“For the speaking problems, I am trying to save vocabularies and knowing the right or correct pronunciations”. Rahaf

Similarly, participant Hassan stated that it took him a long time to find the most suitable word in his field registers to use which made him worried. He commented:

“I sometimes speak English but the difficulties I face is when I need to use vocabularies related to the subject or story being narrated, so I keep it inside my heart”. (Hassan)

Participant Awos stated that his limited vocabulary prevented him from engaging with others or participating in the class.

“... Sometimes I feel that I have no enough vocabularies to start communicating so I keep silent.”(Awos)

Another extract from another participant is as follows:

“... Sometimes you have the idea in Arabic but you can't say it in English because you don't have enough vocabularies”. (Ahmed).

This indicates that another major cause of OCA mentioned by half of the participants of this study was attributed to the lack of vocabulary. The findings of this study were similar to other studies such as Lahtinen,(2013); Rafada (2017); Krashen (2013).

Lacking Confidence

The second sub-theme which emerged in this study was lacking of confidence which was related to fluency problems or the flow of the speech in long sentences (Rahaf), word choices (Ahmed) and past experience with the student (Shayma). Many participants (7 out of 9) admitted that they faced problems in this area of speaking English.

“I feel that I am not confident to speak long sentences without stops or pauses”. (Rahaf)

“Speaking long sentences without thinking or pauses and switching to Arabic sometimes while you are speaking” (Shayma)

“Yes of course, you could start grumbling or sometimes you are hesitated to *choose some words or changing them* to avoid committing mistakes” (Ahmed)

“I am okay with that unless the doctor is among them, I will not do well because *he knows me and the mistakes I will do*”. (Shayma)

Problems in English Language Pronunciation

The last sub-theme which emerged from this research was the problems in English language pronunciation. Seven out of nine participants admitted that they had problems with pronunciation, mainly, because of the influence of their mother tongue, i.e., which exerts a strong influence over the learners to achieve proper English pronunciation. Participants are usually inhibited to speak because they are afraid that their English pronunciation might be misunderstood or affect their self-esteem if they mispronounce individual words or provide the wrong intonation and suprasegmental.

“*Right pronunciations and ... switching to Arabic sometimes while you are speaking*” (Shayma)

“*mispronunciations of some words, ... accents as most students speak English in Arabic sounds*” (Rahaf)

“*I also have problem in words spellings and pronunciations*” (Tasneem).

“*I face difficulties in pronunciations...*”. (Awos).

“*Speaking pronunciations...*”. (Ahmed).

The extent of Communication Apprehension

From the researcher’s construction of reality during the interview with the participants, the undergraduate students at HU experienced CA in different communication contexts. The participants described their lived experiences of CA in different communication scenarios whether they were in small-group presentations, interviews, or in in-class presentations. The emergent themes from the data indicate that HU students experience moderate to high CA during multiple communication apprehension scenarios as portrayed in Figure 2.1.

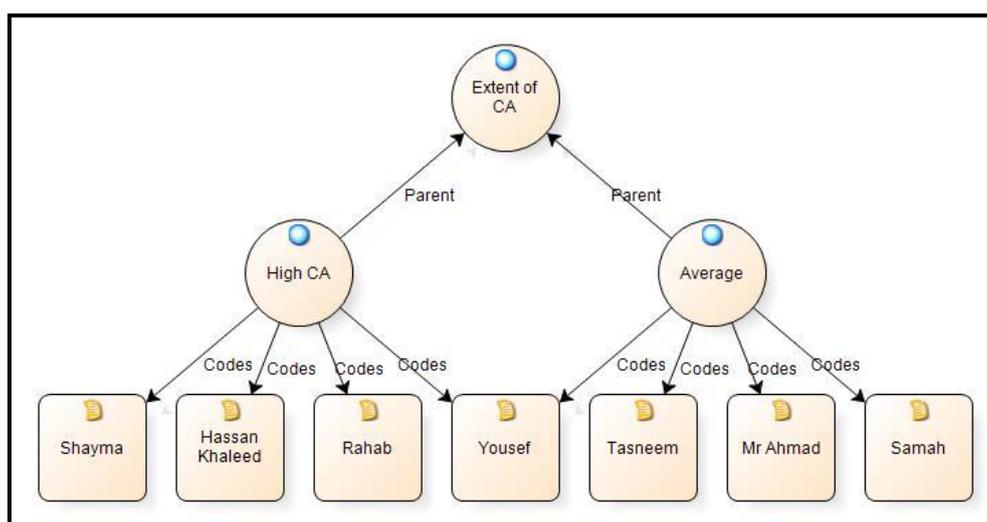


Figure 2.1. The extent of CA Encounter

Excerpts from the participant’s description of the extent to which they experience CA demonstrated that the level of CA experienced among some of them was dependent on the situation they found themselves in. For example, Hassan, who experienced high CA attributed it to his status of being a student. He mentioned that he become more apprehensive when being evaluated by both teachers and co-students when speaking in English.

“*it is maybe high. Because I am still student. In any task being assessed or evaluated....by teachers or your friends who are good in English*” (Hassan)

This revelation could be linked to fear of evaluation since he has the feeling that being in a working environment might induce more levels of CA. Similarly, Shayma described her CA experience as high in most situations. She specifically emphasizes that she experiences high CA during communication scenarios such as presentations and oral assessments where she is going to be evaluated.

“*it is high in most of the situations I experience especially if the speech is evaluated...presentations are the most and oral exams*” (Shayma)

Communication Scenario Where CA is Experienced

Elaborating further on the participants' lived experiences of CA in different communication scenarios revealed that the students are experiencing CA during group communication, individual presentations, interviews, and oral examinations as shown in Figure 3.1. Six of the participants mentioned that they experience CA during presentations; four reported that they experience CA during interviews and oral exams, while three of the participants mentioned that they experience CA during group communication settings.

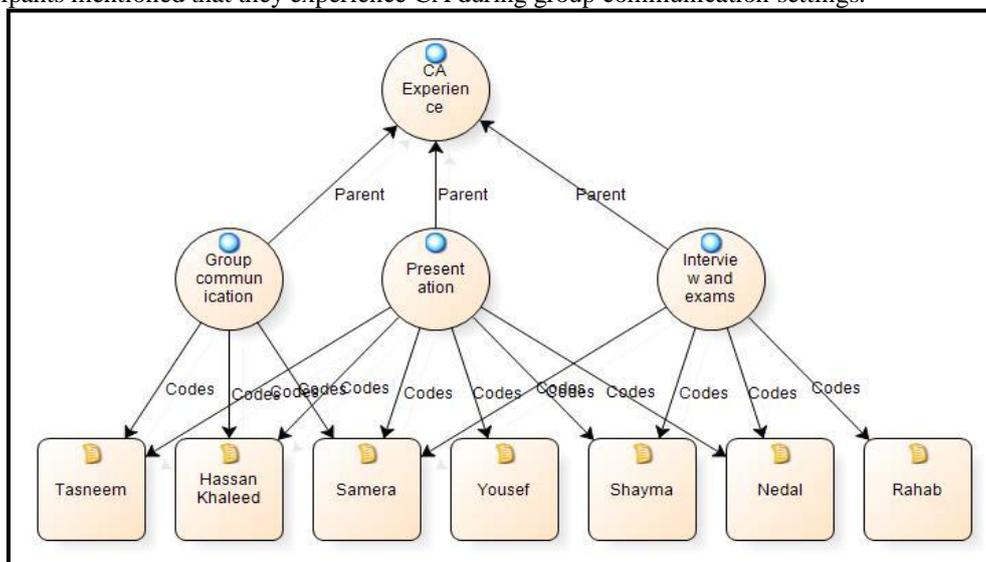


Figure 3.1. Communication scenarios CA is encountered

Samples of the students' lived experiences with CA during different communication scenes are thus presented:

During interviews, I do fine but when I *speak to a group of people* I get confused and worried. I consider myself that I am very good in English but *during presentation* I feel that I am incompetence”

“mostly, *during the classes, in front of students and teachers*. In general, social life it happened at the first moments but it will go quickly” (Samera)

“when I speak to a group of people or doing presentations. I am dying ohhhh (Hassan)

“...in my second year I had to *present a presentation* from two phases group and individuals. When I was to do my turn alone once I was on the floor, I fall down and lost consciousness” (Shayma)

“*In presentations*, I always have a problem and difficulties but they are start at the beginning then the fear and anxiety will start disappear gradually (Yousef)

“...if the instructor asks me suddenly to answer any question, I start sweating, my voice get changed like that I am crying, hand and foot shaking a lot...The signs mostly happened when I *do oral participations in front of class, exams and answering questions* in English”

“hesitation, hand shaking, stress and sweating when I use English. I sometimes have falter or halt when speak English. I pretend of coughing just to have time...I have this problem in most situations but it *increased in interviews*” (Rehab)

The foregoing discussion highlight HU students lived experience with English language CA in different contexts of the learning process. The analysis shows that the participants experience different levels of CA at different communication scenarios which results in various physical changes and emotional distress on them. Figure 4.1 displayed the themes that emerged from the data on the various physical changes experienced by the participant during a given communication scenario.

Physical and Emotional Changes Caused by CA

Analysis of the emerging themes revealed that students experience voice change, sweating, reddening of the face, quivering voice, loss of consciousness, hand and foot shaking, and avoid making eye contact during presentations, interviews, and group discussion scenarios as shown in Figure 4.1. The students narrate their lived experiences with these phenomena as follows:

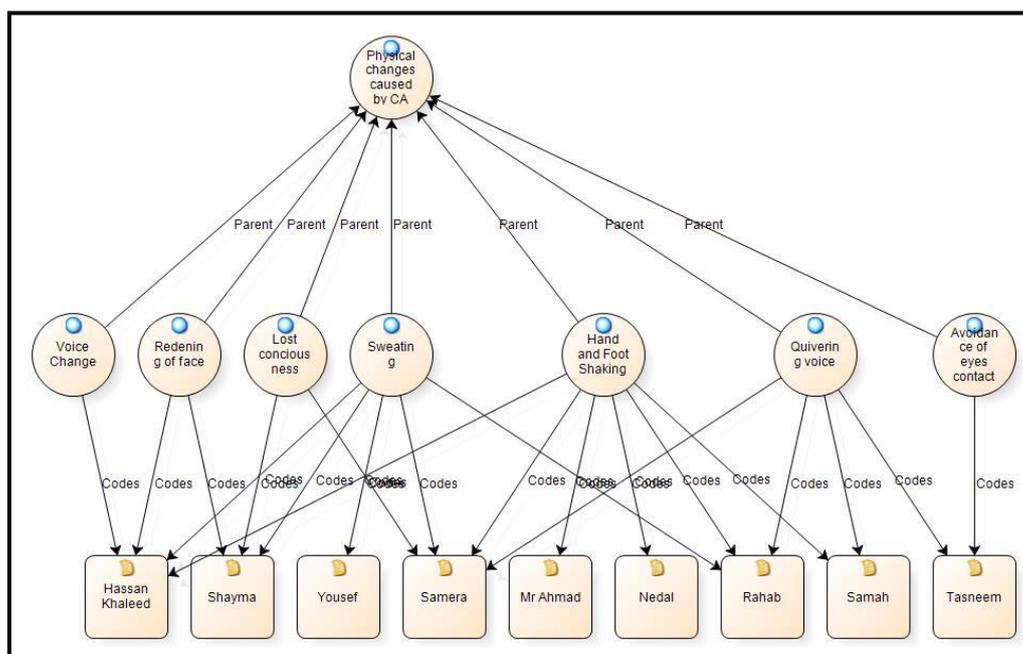


Figure 4.1. Physical changes caused by CA

“if the instructor asks me suddenly to answer any question, I start sweating, my voice get changed like that I am crying, hand and foot shaking a lot” (Hassan)

when I do presentation, once I be on the floor I start sweating and shaking. I usually forgot what I intend to say (Samera)

I feel very nervous, sweating, my face turn to be red and I could fell down again (Shayma)

“Fear and nervous are the most. I use to give speech in religion but every time I feel different depend on the number of audiences and people in front of you. Many situations I feel that my feet and hands get shake intentionally”. (Nedal)

“I did it once, I was dying to hear thank you from my instructors. I feel that I will fell down, sweating, and I could not stand on my feet. It was very harmful experiences”. (Hassan)

“I always try to avoid participating in English. ...my face turns to be red, I feel shy of that”

“Even sometimes their faces and looks make some changes on you like start shaking”. (Ahmad)

“ hesitation, hand shaking, stress and sweating when I use English. I sometimes have falter or halt when speak English. I pretend of coughing just to have time (Rahab)

“sometimes when I feel nervous I start mixing words from the 3 languages I speak. I pronounce different pronunciations for the 3 languages in the same times... (Samera)

“I usually have a funny signs like repetition, I repeat the word several times, I don’t know way. I have a cold fingers tips, shaking and (Samah).

“...my sound goes down intentionally, I have to keep my eyes on someone I know, I don’t like to look at those I don’t know (Tasneem)

“In my second year I had to present a presentation from two phases group and individuals. When I was to do my turn alone once I was on the floor, I fall down and lost conscious (Shayma)

“...have to keep my eyes on someone I know, I don’t like to look at those I don’t know. I am trying to not look at instructors and excellent students as they will find the mistakes I did. I try to read quickly”. (Tasneem)

The above construction of reality by the students on their CA experiences demonstrates the extent to which CA can affect students’ social interactions and emotions. The majority of the interviewed students described that they experienced high CA while engaging in oral communication using the English Language. Furthermore, CA experiences are predominant during presentations and oral interviews or examinations. During oral communication under the different communication scenarios, students reported having experienced both physical changes and emotional distress as a result of CA. The majority of the students mentioned that they experienced limb shaking, quivering voice, and sweating while engaging in presentations, interviews, and group discussions. Similarly, some experienced, fear and nervousness and to some extent unconsciousness.

III. Discussion

The first objective of this research was to establish the extent to which students in HU experience oral CA in their learning environment. In order to achieve this objective, the interviewees were engaged to narrate their experiences with oral CA in various communication scenarios using the English language as a medium. Four themes that described the lived experiences of the students with oral CA emerged from the analysis. The first theme identified the most difficult English Language skill according to the perspectives of the interviewees. Analysis of the result revealed that the majority of the students, precisely six among the nine, identified speaking as the most difficult English Language skill they were facing while two students mentioned Listening as the most difficult.

To further understand the experience of CA among students in HU, the students were asked to rate their perceived oral CA level as being either low or high. The result of the analysis revealed that the students classified themselves to belong to either the moderate or the high CA category. Specifically, three of the participants classified themselves as experiencing high CA during conversations in English while three others viewed themselves as experiencing average CA during English language communication encounters. This finding coincided with previous research where college and university students were reported to experience high CA during communication encounters (Bragg, 2017; Bowman, 2018). Similarly, one participant showed that he experienced the various level of CA depending on the scenario he is facing. He reported experiencing high CA at the beginning of presentations which usually subsided as the presentation session elapse.

The result further revealed the various communication scenarios where the students experienced CA. The majority of the students reported that they experienced CA during presentations, interviews, examinations, and group communication. The analysis revealed that the CA experience was more prevalent during an oral presentation. Some of the interviewees recounted such moments as the most challenging moments in their university life experienced. They narrated the negative effect of their CA experience which in one case involves the student falling unconscious due to anxiety.

To further understand the lived experience of CA among the interviewees, they were asked to narrate the various physical changes they experienced when face with communication encounters. The analysis of the interviews showed that they experienced voice change, reddening face, loss of consciousness, sweating, limb shaking, quivering voice, and avoidance of eye contact. Previous studies that investigated CA across different settings established the occurrence of similar changes to individuals faced with communication scenarios such as public speaking, group discussions, interviews, or examinations. For instance, Hunter et al. (2014) reported that individuals with a high level of CA faced physical symptoms which include sweating, muscle tension, shaking hands, increased heart rate, hindered breathing, heart palpitations, dizziness, confusion, and speech disfluencies. Similarly, Bodie (2010) stated that high CA individuals usually exposed to communicative situations may experience a quivering voice, nausea, and a temporary inability to speak. Therefore, the lived experiences of CA among the interviewees depict what is already known to occur in a communicative situation thus suggestive of being affected by CA. This finding seems to corroborate with other findings from the literature regarding students' levels of anxiety. In this regard, Zrekat and Kaur (2014) conducted a study in Jordan on students' levels of autonomy and anxiety and the relationship between these two constructs with oral achievement. Their study showed that 70.62 % of the sample faces anxiety while they try to speak in English. Moreover, Muhaisen and Abed Al-Haq (2012) found that students face high anxiety when they try to speak in English whether inside or outside the English classroom. The previous two studies were taken from Jordanian EFL students which in turn support the findings of this paper.

IV. Conclusion and Recommendation

The study investigated the lived experiences of communication apprehension among nine Jordanian University students of different programs from Hashemite University. Results indicated great levels of communication apprehension of the students in carrying out speaking tasks at university levels or in informal situations. The communication apprehensions are motivated by fear of making mistakes, limited vocabulary, lack of confidence, and pronunciation problems which exerted a psychological load on their language performance in a negative fashion. As it appears that students are experiencing these psychological inhibitions in situations that are characterized as high-state environments where they are expected by either society or the academic circles to demonstrate high linguistic performance which they might not be able to fulfill. In Jordan, the education system still follows the teacher-centered pedagogy where students' participation is practically considered marginal to the learning process, which, in principle, allows no space for learners to develop their language through group discussion and presentations in gradual form. Complementary to the teacher-centered approach is complemented with the summative approach of assessment where students are instantly pushed from the receiver of knowledge as students to the producers of knowledge as presenters or speakers with any training period in-between to gain the necessary skills for smooth communication. In the light of this study, it is recommended that teachers shall shift their teaching assessment from summative to formative giving the way for

students to develop their language and increase their confidence in high-stakes situations in order to prepare them for their future careers.

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