



Oral Communication Apprehension Among Libyan EFL University Students: A Correlational Study of Proficiency and Communication Contexts

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رهاب التواصل الشفهي لدى طلاب اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية في الجامعات الليبية:
دراسة ارتباطية بين مستوى الكفاءة وسياقات التواصل

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Abstract

This study aimed to examine the level of Oral Communication Apprehension (OCA) experienced by English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners. Seventy undergraduate students from the Department of English Language at the University of Derna participated in the study. A structured questionnaire was administered and analysed using SPSS software. Descriptive statistics were used to summarise participants' levels of OCA, while Pearson correlation analysis was employed to examine the relationship between English language proficiency and speaking-related anxiety. Participants were asked to report their experiences of OCA across a range of communicative contexts, including group discussions, meetings, interactions with peers, and public speaking. The results indicate that EFL learners in this study experience a relatively high level of oral communication apprehension across all the examined contexts. Furthermore, the findings reveal a statistically significant negative correlation between English language proficiency and speaking anxiety, indicating that higher levels of proficiency are associated with lower levels of communication apprehension. These results suggest that learners' anxiety in speaking English is largely associated with limited linguistic competence rather than solely psychological factors. In other words, insufficient language proficiency appears to be a key contributor to communication apprehension in this context. Based on these findings, it is essential to focus not only on developing learners' linguistic competence but also on addressing affective barriers such as fear of speaking to enhance overall oral communicative competence.

Keywords: Anxiety; Communication; EFL Learners; fear; Language Proficiency.

المخلص

هدفت الدراسة الحالية إلى فحص مستوى رهاب التواصل الشفهي (OCA) الذي يعاني منه متعلمو اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية (EFL). شارك في هذه الدراسة سبعون طالباً من طلاب المرحلة الجامعية بقسم اللغة الإنجليزية بجامعة درنة. تم استخدام استبيان مقنن وتحليل البيانات الناتجة بواسطة برنامج SPSS. كما استخدمت الإحصاءات الوصفية لتلخيص مستوى رهاب التواصل لدى المشاركين، وأجري تحليل ارتباط بيرسون لاستكشاف العلاقة بين مستوى الكفاءة ورهاب التواصل عند التحدث باللغة الإنجليزية. سُئل المشاركون عن تجاربهم مع رهاب التواصل في سياقات متنوعة، مثل: المناقشات الجماعية، الاجتماعات، التفاعل مع الزملاء والأصدقاء، والتحدث أمام الجمهور. أظهرت النتائج أن متعلمي اللغة الإنجليزية في هذه الدراسة يعانون من درجة كبيرة من رهاب التواصل الشفهي في السياقات المذكورة أعلاه. وعلاوة على ذلك، أظهرت النتائج وجود ارتباط سلبي ذو دلالة إحصائية بين الكفاءة في اللغة الإنجليزية وقلق التحدث؛ أي أنه كلما زادت الكفاءة اللغوية، قلَّ قلق الطلاب عند التحدث بالإنجليزية. ويبدو أن خوف الطلاب من التحدث لم يكن ناتجاً عن عوامل نفسية، بل بسبب

ضعف كفاءتهم في اللغة الإنجليزية. وفي ضوء هذه النتائج، من الضروري التركيز ليس فقط على تحسين الكفاءة اللغوية للمتعلمين، بل أيضاً على الصعوبات الأخرى مثل الخوف من التحدث، وذلك للوصول إلى الكفاءة التواصلية الشفهية.

الكلمات المفتاحية: القلق؛ التواصل؛ متعلمو اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية؛ الخوف؛ الكفاءة اللغوية.

1. Introduction

Oral Communication Apprehension (OCA) refers to the level of fear or anxiety an individual experiences when anticipating or engaging in oral communication. Foundational research identifies this apprehension as a pervasive phenomenon that manifests across a range of social contexts, often undermining effective interpersonal interaction (Rashidi et al., 2011). Oral Communication Apprehension (OCA) is commonly understood as a continuum where varying levels of apprehension lead to different communicative outcomes. Low levels of apprehension are generally associated with improved social interaction and the gradual development of speaking skills, whereas high levels tend to significantly hinder effective communication.

High OCA is often linked to low self-esteem, forming a reciprocal cycle in which reduced self-confidence exacerbates communication-related anxiety (Tom et al., 2013). Recent studies have further expanded this concept into digital communication contexts, identifying OCA as a significant predictor of “video conferencing fatigue.” This is largely attributed to the increased cognitive load and psychological pressure associated with real-time online interaction (Bailenson, 2021). In addition, contemporary workplace research suggests that effective management of OCA is becoming increasingly important for career development, as elevated levels of anxiety are associated with lower job satisfaction and reduced performance in collaborative professional environments.

It is important to emphasise that OCA does not reflect an inherent inability to communicate; rather, it represents an internal psychological response experienced when preparing to interact with others or address an audience. For foreign language learners in particular, this often manifests as heightened anxiety stemming from limited linguistic competence or fear of negative evaluation (McCroskey et al., 1985). Research consistently characterises OCA as a multidimensional construct. For instance, Rashidi et al. (2011) identify several contributing factors among language learners, including deficits in speaking skills, general communication anxiety, social interaction challenges, low self-esteem, social isolation, and differences in cultural and ethnic communication styles. These challenges are often exacerbated in digital contexts, where requirements such as keeping cameras on can intensify anxiety related not only to language performance but also to physical appearance (Bailenson, 2021; Castaneda, 2023).

Within the Libyan context, research highlights significant linguistic and institutional challenges affecting both teachers and students in English Language Teaching (ELT). A key issue lies in the predominance of non-native English-speaking teachers instructing non-native learners, often within environments that lack authentic exposure to the target language. Additionally, pedagogical approaches and learning environments differ substantially from those found in English-speaking contexts, further complicating language acquisition (Ageila, 2014). These systemic limitations contribute to widespread OCA, as Libyan university students frequently experience heightened anxiety when attempting to communicate in English within restricted and artificial settings.

Recent studies suggest that this anxiety does not stem solely from a lack of competence, but rather from a linguistic gap combined with limited opportunities for meaningful interaction—a persistent issue across many North African higher education contexts (Abugohar et al., 2022). Gadour (2006) identifies cultural differences and outdated teaching methods as two critical factors hindering the effectiveness of English language instruction in Libya. These factors directly impede the development of oral competence and contribute to the growing prevalence of OCA among university students. When instructional practices fail to bridge cultural gaps or move beyond rote memorisation, learners’ anxiety increases, limiting their ability to achieve proficiency in English.

Similarly, Nor Aini and Normazla (2008) report high levels of OCA among university students during academic participation, interpersonal communication, and public speaking tasks. Their findings suggest that this elevated anxiety is largely influenced by personality traits and low proficiency levels.

Communication itself is fundamental to human development and occurs in various forms, including instruction, information exchange, discussion, persuasion, and entertainment (Davies, 2005). Berko et al. (1992) emphasise that individuals engage in communicative activities throughout most of their daily lives, whether through verbal interaction, social engagement, or non-verbal expression. Cathcart (1988) further describes communication as a continuous and dynamic process through which individuals share ideas and emotions. According to Berko et al. (1992), communication primarily serves to inform others and facilitate change.

McCroskey (1975, p. 78) defines communication apprehension as “fear or anxiety associated with either real or anticipated communication with another individual or individuals.” MacIntyre and Gardner (1991) argue that communication apprehension is more prevalent than commonly assumed and can be observed across various contexts, including classrooms, workplaces, meetings, and group discussions. McCroskey (1975) further notes that classroom challenges are often linked to at least one form of communication apprehension. These forms include apprehension related to public speaking, language use, and performance-based communication activities.

When individuals experience communication apprehension, avoidance behaviours may emerge. Students, for instance, may avoid enrolling in courses that require oral participation. If avoidance is not possible, OCA may still negatively affect their ability to complete academic tasks successfully. Among the various forms of communication apprehension, oral communication apprehension—particularly the fear of public speaking—remains the most prevalent and extensively studied (Cutrone, 2009).

1.1 Statement of the Problem

Recent research indicates that Libyan and Arab EFL learners face significant challenges in developing speaking skills, particularly in terms of performance. Studies consistently report that speaking anxiety and fear of oral communication are widespread among university students in Arab contexts, including Libya (Toubot et al., 2018; Alamaría et al., 2022; Othman, 2025). These studies demonstrate that learners experience varying levels of speaking anxiety, which negatively impacts classroom participation and overall speaking proficiency.

In Libya, English is taught as a foreign language within an Arabic-dominant environment, with limited opportunities for authentic communication. The lack of exposure to real-life language use, combined with insufficient oral practice, significantly contributes to learners’ speaking difficulties. Consequently, students tend to rely heavily on Arabic both inside and outside the classroom, further restricting the development of communicative competence.

Oral proficiency is an essential skill for university graduates, particularly given the increasing role of English as a global medium of academic and professional communication. However, communication apprehension remains one of the most significant barriers to acquiring this skill. Addressing speaking anxiety is therefore crucial, as it directly influences students’ communicative competence and academic success.

Despite the growing body of international and regional research on speaking anxiety, there remains a clear gap in context-specific studies examining the levels and determinants of OCA among Libyan university students. This gap underscores the need for further empirical investigation. Accordingly, the present study seeks to address this deficiency by examining the key factors contributing to oral communication apprehension among EFL students at the University of Derna.

1.2 Objectives of the study

The current study aims to investigate the level of Oral Communication Apprehension (OCA) among English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners at the University of Derna. It also seeks to examine the potential relationship between students’ English language proficiency and their levels of oral communication apprehension.

1.3 Research Questions

1. What is the level of Oral Communication Apprehension (OCA) among EFL learners at the University of Derna when speaking English?
2. What is the relationship between learners’ English language proficiency and their Oral Communication Apprehension (OCA)?

2. Literature Review

2.1 Conceptualising Communication Apprehension

Communication apprehension (CA) is most commonly defined as the fear or anxiety associated with communication, arising when individuals anticipate or engage in interaction with others. As a context-sensitive psychological construct, CA may manifest across interpersonal, group, public, and instructional communication settings. Contemporary research characterises CA as a form of communicative anxiety that can lead to avoidance behaviours, physiological responses, and impaired communicative performance (McCroskey, 1984; Richmond et al., 2020; McCroskey & Beatty, 2021).

Within the field of applied linguistics, Oral Communication Apprehension (OCA) is typically conceptualised as a specific type of communication apprehension related to speaking in a second or foreign language. This construct is particularly salient in EFL contexts, where learners are often required to communicate in a language in which they lack full confidence. Empirical studies have demonstrated a strong relationship

between OCA, communication reluctance, and speaking proficiency among EFL learners (MacIntyre & Gregersen, 2020; Dewaele & Pavelescu, 2021).

Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA) is closely related to CA and is generally defined as a negative emotional state characterised by worry, nervousness, and tension experienced during language learning or use. Recent literature conceptualises FLA as a multidimensional construct encompassing communication apprehension, fear of negative evaluation, and test anxiety. These components collectively influence learners' participation and language achievement (Brkan & Brash, 2025; Yu, 2024).

Another related construct is communication anxiety, a broader term referring to the anxiety experienced during communication across various contexts. Although communication anxiety can be more context-specific, it is often used as an umbrella term to describe a wide range of emotional responses associated with speaking situations (MacIntyre et al., 2023).

In contrast, Willingness to Communicate (WTC) has emerged as a central concept in contemporary second language research. WTC refers to a learner's readiness to initiate communication in a second language at a given time and in a specific context. Research consistently reports a negative relationship between communication apprehension and WTC, indicating that learners with higher levels of apprehension are less likely to engage in communication (MacIntyre et al., 2021; Zhang & Han, 2024).

Taken together, these constructs—communication apprehension, oral communication apprehension, foreign language anxiety, and willingness to communicate—provide a comprehensive framework for understanding the psychological factors that influence learners' oral communication in foreign language environments.

2.2 Categorisations of Oral Communication Apprehension

Contemporary research suggests that communication apprehension (CA) cannot be adequately explained through a simple trait–state dichotomy. Instead, it is increasingly viewed as the result of an interaction between relatively stable individual predispositions and dynamic situational variables (Richmond et al., 2020; McCroskey & Beatty, 2021). This perspective builds on McCroskey's continuum model while incorporating more recent interactional approaches, particularly within second language contexts where apprehension varies depending on task type, audience, and communicative environment (MacIntyre & Wang, 2021; Dewaele et al., 2023).

Based on this framework, Richmond and colleagues identify four primary types of communication apprehension: trait-like, context-based, audience-based, and situational apprehension (Richmond et al., 2020).

Trait-like communication apprehension refers to a relatively stable personality disposition characterised by a tendency to experience anxiety across a wide range of communicative situations. Individuals with high levels of trait-like CA consistently report discomfort when engaging in oral communication, regardless of context. Research in second language acquisition suggests that this stable predisposition is associated with persistent speaking difficulties and reduced willingness to communicate in English (Khajavy et al., 2022).

Context-based communication apprehension arises in specific communicative contexts, such as oral presentations, interviews, classroom discussions, or formal participation. Learners who appear confident in informal interactions may still experience significant anxiety in structured or evaluative settings. Empirical evidence indicates that this type of apprehension is particularly pronounced in EFL classrooms, where performance is often subject to assessment (Li & Wei, 2023).

Audience-based communication apprehension refers to anxiety triggered by interaction with particular audiences. This form of apprehension reflects the influence of social dynamics and perceived evaluation. For example, learners often report higher anxiety levels when communicating in front of authority figures, such as teachers or native speakers, while feeling more at ease when interacting with peers (Zhang et al., 2024).

Situational communication apprehension, in contrast, is a temporary and context-dependent form of anxiety that emerges in response to specific circumstances. This may include being unexpectedly called upon to speak or responding under time pressure. Research in educational psychology suggests that situational apprehension is highly dynamic and influenced by factors such as classroom atmosphere, task familiarity, and preparation time (Brkan & Brash, 2025).

Collectively, these four dimensions demonstrate that OCA is not a singular or isolated construct. Rather, it is a multifaceted phenomenon shaped by the interaction between enduring personality traits and fluctuating situational conditions. This interactional perspective has gained increasing support in applied linguistics, particularly in explaining variability in learners' oral performance across different communicative contexts.

2.3 Theoretical perspectives and models of communication apprehension

Oral communication has been extensively investigated, with particular attention given to the role of fear and anxiety in shaping individuals' communicative processes. For instance, McCroskey et al. (1976) note that scholars have long examined the effects of communication-related anxiety on speech and interpersonal relationships. Brown (1993) defines anxiety as a psychological state characterised by tension, apprehension, self-

doubt, worry, and uneasiness. In the context of second and foreign language acquisition, anxiety plays a dual role, as it can either facilitate or hinder the learning process.

A range of variables influences students' learning processes. In many cases, students study English as a compulsory subject for academic or professional purposes. One of the primary contributors to passive and silent classroom behaviour is anxiety, which often leads learners to withdraw from participation. This withdrawal may stem from multiple factors, including psychological stress, fear of making errors in front of others, and limited vocabulary knowledge. Consequently, communication apprehension (CA) can be closely associated with fear of negative evaluation and difficulties in expressing ideas effectively.

McCroskey et al. (1976) further conceptualise communication apprehension as a subcategory of reticence and unwillingness to communicate. Reticence refers to a general tendency to avoid communication and may arise from various factors, such as anxiety, loneliness, low self-esteem, or introversion (Phillips, 1968). Communication apprehension typically manifests across four main communication contexts: interpersonal (dyadic), group, public, and organisational. Individuals with high levels of CA often avoid such communicative situations due to fear and anxiety, although related constructs may encompass broader patterns of avoidance and their underlying causes.

Communication apprehension is commonly classified into two primary types: trait and state. Trait communication apprehension refers to a relatively stable predisposition to experience anxiety across a wide range of communicative situations, from small-group interactions to public speaking. In contrast, state communication apprehension is temporary and context-dependent, arising in specific situations such as addressing unfamiliar audiences or participating in formal interviews.

According to McCroskey (1975), state communication apprehension represents a normal response to perceived threats in particular communicative contexts, such as public speaking. An individual may generally feel relaxed but become apprehensive when interacting with unfamiliar individuals or speaking before an audience. A classic example of state CA is stage fright, which occurs when individuals are required to perform in front of an evaluative audience.

Trait communication apprehension, however, operates more broadly, influencing individuals across most communicative contexts. Those with high trait CA tend to experience persistent anxiety regardless of the situation, whether engaging in casual conversation or delivering a formal presentation. It has been estimated that approximately 20% of university students exhibit high levels of trait communication apprehension.

Despite extensive research, the underlying causes of communication apprehension remain inconclusive. While numerous studies have identified contributing variables, no single factor has been definitively established as the primary cause of CA.

2.4 Previous Studies on Communication Apprehension

Tuna (2015) highlights a discrepancy between learners' perceived and actual language competence, identifying communication apprehension as a key psychological factor that inhibits the full development of linguistic abilities. The study demonstrates that high levels of CA can lead even competent learners to underestimate their abilities, creating a self-reinforcing cycle in which fear of inadequacy results in avoidance of communication, thereby limiting opportunities for practice. Tuna argues that addressing the psychological dimensions of anxiety is essential for helping learners realise their latent language potential.

King and Smith (2016), in their study *Silence in the Language Classroom from a Social-Psychological Perspective*, argue that classroom silence is often rooted not in lack of motivation or ability but in social anxiety. They conceptualise silence as a protective strategy used by learners to cope with the pressures of public communication in a second language. Their findings indicate that fear of peer evaluation, combined with the demand for immediate oral performance, can lead to psychological withdrawal.

Sun et al. (2017) examine the impact of voice-recorded blogging (vlogging) on learners' oral competence and speaking anxiety. Their findings suggest that asynchronous communication environments allow learners to rehearse, revise, and refine their spoken output before sharing it, thereby reducing anxiety. Over time, participants demonstrated improved fluency, increased confidence, and greater engagement, highlighting the potential of technology-mediated environments to support low-anxiety language practice.

Chuang (2018) investigates the relationship between listening and speaking skills, emphasising their interdependence. The study finds that difficulties in comprehending spoken input can significantly increase speaking anxiety, as learners who struggle to understand input often experience reduced confidence in producing output. Chuang concludes that improving listening skills can serve as an effective strategy for reducing speaking anxiety, suggesting that these skills should be taught as an integrated system.

Oteir and Al-Otaibi (2019) provide a comprehensive review of the sources, effects, and interventions related to Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA). They conceptualise FLA as a multidimensional construct encompassing communication apprehension, test anxiety, and fear of negative evaluation. While moderate levels of anxiety may have facilitative effects, the authors argue that anxiety is predominantly debilitating, negatively

affecting cognitive processing and language production. They emphasise the importance of supportive classroom environments and learner-centred approaches in mitigating anxiety.

Derakhshan et al. (2021) shift the focus from individual psychological factors to interpersonal classroom dynamics, examining the impact of teacher–student relationships on language anxiety. Their findings indicate that teacher behaviours—such as care, recognition, and rapport—significantly reduce students’ anxiety levels. A supportive and empathetic classroom environment fosters a sense of psychological safety, enabling learners to participate more confidently.

Resnik and Dewaele (2023) explore the emotional experiences of learners transitioning from face-to-face to online learning environments. Their study reveals that while positive emotions such as Foreign Language Enjoyment (FLE) remain relatively stable, negative emotions like Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety (FLCA) vary in digital contexts. The “screen effect” can both reduce anxiety for some learners and increase it for others due to reduced non-verbal cues and increased feelings of isolation. The authors highlight the importance of maintaining social presence in online classrooms to support learners’ emotional well-being.

Kuluakl and Gen (2024) examine the relationship between communication apprehension and communicative competence among pre-service EFL teachers. Their findings confirm that CA is context-dependent and closely related to learners’ perceived communicative competence, underscoring the need for instructional strategies that reduce apprehension and promote speaking skills.

Fan and Wang (2025) investigate the interplay between the L2 Motivational Self System, communication anxiety, growth mindset, and willingness to communicate among secondary school learners. Their results indicate that motivation significantly influences communication behaviour, while anxiety negatively impacts learners’ willingness to engage in interaction. Importantly, a growth mindset is shown to mitigate anxiety and enhance learners’ confidence in communication.

Ding and Yusof (2025) explore the use of AI-powered conversational chatbots in reducing speaking anxiety and improving proficiency among EFL learners. Their mixed-methods study demonstrates that chatbot interactions provide a low-anxiety environment for practice, leading to increased fluency, confidence, and willingness to communicate. The findings suggest that AI-supported learning environments can effectively address affective barriers such as communication apprehension.

Overall, empirical research consistently demonstrates that communication apprehension is a widespread and persistent challenge among language learners. It significantly affects speaking performance, classroom participation, and overall language development. Moreover, CA is shaped by a complex interaction of psychological, pedagogical, and situational factors. In light of these findings, the present study seeks to examine the level of communication apprehension among EFL learners at the University of Derna, thereby contributing to the limited body of empirical research within the Libyan context.

3. Methodology

The present study employed a quantitative survey research design to investigate Oral Communication Apprehension (OCA) among EFL learners at the University of Derna, with particular focus on determining the level of OCA and examining its relationship with English language proficiency. Survey research is defined as a methodological approach in which numerical data are collected through structured instruments, such as questionnaires, and subsequently analysed using statistical procedures to identify patterns and explain trends (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Creswell & Guetterman, 2021). This design was deemed appropriate, as the study seeks to measure communication apprehension and explore its association with language proficiency.

The target population comprised EFL students enrolled at the University of Derna. A sample of seventy students was selected using simple random sampling, ensuring that each member of the population had an equal chance of participation. This sampling technique minimises selection bias and enhances the representativeness of the sample, thereby strengthening the validity of the findings (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

For data collection, McCroskey’s Personal Report of Communication Apprehension (PRCA-24) was utilised. The PRCA-24 is a widely recognised and validated instrument designed to measure individuals’ levels of communication apprehension across different contexts. It consists of 24 items that assess self-reported apprehension in four domains: group discussions, meetings (or classroom discussions), dyadic communication, and public speaking (McCroskey, 1984; Richmond et al., 2020).

The instrument employs a five-point Likert scale ranging from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree.” The items are formulated to capture participants’ emotional responses and behavioural tendencies in various communicative situations. For example, the questionnaire includes statements related to discomfort when speaking in groups, anxiety during meetings or class discussions, fear of public speaking, and levels of comfort when delivering presentations.

Data analysis was conducted using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). Descriptive statistical measures—including mean scores, frequencies, and standard deviations—were calculated to determine the overall level of communication apprehension among participants. These analyses enabled the researcher to

address the research questions by identifying patterns in learners' OCA levels and examining their distribution across the sample.

4. Results

This section presents a systematic analysis of the data collected in this study to address the research questions effectively and rigorously.

Table 4.1 English Language Proficiency Levels on Oral Communication Apprehension

English Language Proficiency Levels	Frequency	Percentage
Low Level	40	57
Middle Level	17	24
High Level	13	19
Total	70	100

As shown in Table 4.1, there is a clear imbalance in the English proficiency levels of the 70 respondents. The data indicate that 57% of the sample falls within the "Low Level" category, suggesting that more than half of the participants lack the linguistic resources necessary for confident oral communication.

In contrast, considerably fewer participants are represented at higher proficiency levels. Specifically, only 24% of the students fall within the "Middle Level," while a mere 19% are classified as having "High Level" proficiency. This distribution is particularly significant for interpreting the OCA results, as the predominance of low-proficiency learners appears to be a key factor contributing to elevated levels of anxiety and communicative avoidance observed in the study.

Table 4.2. Correlation Between English Language Proficiency and Oral Communication Apprehension

oral communication apprehension	English Language Proficiency
Pearson Correlation	-0.443***
Sig. (2-tailed)	0.000
No of Respondents	70

The table shows that the correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed). The statistical analysis presented in Table 4.2 reveals a moderate negative correlation between English speaking proficiency and Oral Communication Apprehension (OCA) ($r = -0.443$), which is statistically significant at the $p < 0.001$ level. This finding indicates a meaningful inverse relationship between the two variables within the Libyan EFL context.

The negative Pearson correlation coefficient suggests that as students' English proficiency increases, their levels of communication apprehension decrease. In other words, learners with lower levels of language proficiency are more likely to experience higher levels of anxiety. This pattern implies that limited lexical knowledge, weak grammatical control, and insufficient phonological competence contribute to heightened fear of negative evaluation—one of the core dimensions of communication apprehension.

From a pedagogical perspective, these findings suggest that OCA is not merely a fixed psychological trait but is, to a considerable extent, reinforced by linguistic limitations. When learners perceive themselves as lacking the necessary language skills to communicate accurately and effectively, their anxiety intensifies, often resulting in avoidance behaviours and reduced classroom participation. This, in turn, may lead to a cycle of limited practice and stagnation in language development.

Accordingly, addressing OCA in EFL classrooms requires a dual-focused approach. On the one hand, educators should provide psychological support to enhance learners' confidence and reduce anxiety. On the other hand, instructional practices should prioritise the development of core language skills, enabling students to communicate more fluently and accurately. Integrating these two dimensions is essential for breaking the cycle of apprehension and fostering more active and confident participation in oral communication.

Table 4.3 Percentage, Mean And Standard Deviation For Oral Communication In Groups

	Items	Strongly Disagree		Disagree		Undecided		Agree		Strongly Agree	
		1		2		3		4		5	
		<i>f</i>	%	<i>f</i>	%	<i>f</i>	%	<i>f</i>	%	<i>f</i>	%
1	“I dislike participating in group discussions” Mean= 4.07 Sd= 1.32	8	11	2	3	4	6	19	27	37	53
2	“Generally, I am comfortable while participating in group discussions” Mean= 2.63 Sd= 1.46	20	29	21	30	4	6	15	21	10	14
3	“I am tense and nervous while participating in group discussions” Mean=2.59 Sd= 1.36	6	8	13	19	6	9	22	31	23	33
4	“I like to get involved in group discussions” Mean= 2.76 Sd= 1.39	16	23	22	31	2	3	23	33	7	10
5	“Participating in group discussions with new people makes me tense and nervous” Mean= 3.67 Sd= 1.22	6	9	7	10	9	13	29	41	19	27
6	“I am calm and relaxed while participating in group discussions” Mean= 2.70 Sd= 1.41	18	26	19	27	8	11	16	23	9	13
	Oral communication in groups Mean= 3.24 Sd= 0.44	1.0 – 2.4				2.5 – 3.4				3.5 – 5.0	
		7		10		52		74		11 16	

The data were subjected to quantitative analysis, revealing a notable prevalence of Oral Communication Apprehension (OCA) in relation to group communication. Group communication apprehension yielded a mean score of 3.24 (SD = 0.44), indicating that approximately 74% of the sample falls within the moderate apprehension range. A particularly significant finding is the extent of learners’ reluctance to participate in group interaction. This is clearly reflected in Item 1, which recorded the highest mean score (M = 4.07), with over 80% of respondents indicating agreement or strong agreement, suggesting a strong tendency toward avoidance of group communication.

The results further indicate that social novelty and negative affect are key contributors to this form of anxiety. Participants reported relatively high levels of discomfort when interacting with unfamiliar individuals, as demonstrated by Item 5 (M = 3.67), where 68% of respondents expressed nervousness in such situations. In contrast, items measuring positive affect—such as feelings of calmness and comfort—received comparatively lower mean scores (Item 2: M = 2.63; Item 6: M = 2.70). This pattern suggests that a lack of emotional ease is a common feature of the participants’ communicative experiences.

A noteworthy inconsistency emerges when comparing responses to Item 1 and Item 4. While the majority of students expressed reluctance toward group participation in Item 1, a considerable proportion (43%) indicated a willingness or desire to engage in group activities in Item 4. This apparent contradiction suggests a divergence between learners’ cognitive recognition of the value of group communication and their affective responses. In other words, although students may acknowledge the importance of participation, their underlying anxiety inhibits actual engagement.

Furthermore, Item 3 (M = 2.59) indicates a degree of ambivalence among participants. While some students reported nervousness, a substantial proportion selected neutral responses, suggesting uncertainty about their emotional state. This finding implies that apprehension may not always manifest as overt physiological tension but rather as subtle avoidance behaviours. This interpretation aligns with the high scores observed in Item 1, reinforcing the idea that avoidance, rather than explicit anxiety, may be the dominant expression of OCA in group communication contexts.

Table 4.4 Percentage, Mean And Standard Deviation For Oral Communication In Meetings

	Items	Strongly Disagree		Disagree		Undecided		Agree		Strongly Agree	
		1	2	3	4	5					
		<i>f</i>	%	<i>f</i>	%	<i>f</i>	%	<i>f</i>	%	<i>f</i>	%
1	“Generally, I am nervous when I have to participate in a meeting” Mean= 3.86 Sd= 1.13	4	6	6	9	11	16	25	36	24	34
2	“Usually I am calm and relaxed while participating in a meeting” Mean= 2.76 Sd= 1.41	17	24	19	27	7	10	18	25	8	18
3	“I am very calm and relaxed when I am called upon to express an opinion at a meeting” Mean= 2.99 Sd= 1.31	11	16	20	29	8	11	23	33	8	11
4	“I am afraid to express myself at meetings” Mean= 3.94 Sd= 1.19	4	6	9	13	6	9	23	33	28	40
5	“Communicating at a meeting usually makes me uncomfortable” Mean= 3.82 Sd= 1.37	5	7	12	17	3	4	17	24	32	46
6	“I am very relaxed when answering questions in a meeting” Mean= 3.07 Sd= 1.58	16	23	16	23	5	7	12	17	20	29
	Meetings Mean= 3.41 Sd= 0.54	1.0 – 2.4		2.5 – 3.4		3.5 – 5.0					
		0		0		51	73			19	27

Concerning the quantitative data presented in Table 4.4, meetings appear to be associated with relatively high levels of Oral Communication Apprehension (OCA), as indicated by a mean score of 3.41 (SD = 0.54). While 73% of the participants fall within the moderate apprehension range (2.5–3.4), a notable 27% are classified within the high anxiety range (3.5–5.0). Importantly, none of the respondents reported low levels of apprehension in this communicative context, underscoring the inherently anxiety-inducing nature of meetings for the sample.

A closer examination of individual item means reveals a generalised fear of active participation and self-expression. Item 4 recorded the highest mean score (M = 3.94), with 73% of respondents indicating strong agreement, suggesting a pronounced discomfort with expressing opinions in meetings. Similarly, Item 1 (M = 3.86) shows that 70% of participants reported reluctance to speak, while Item 5 (M = 3.82) indicates that an equal proportion felt uncomfortable during meetings. These findings suggest that the evaluative and high-pressure nature of meeting contexts contributes significantly to learners’ anxiety.

In contrast, items reflecting positive affect reveal a clear lack of confidence and perceived control. Items 2 and 3 yielded relatively low mean scores (M = 2.76 and M = 2.99, respectively), with more than half of the respondents indicating disagreement with statements related to feeling calm or relaxed. Notably, Item 6 demonstrated a high standard deviation (SD = 1.58), indicating considerable variability in responses. While nearly half of the participants reported feeling comfortable when answering questions, a comparable proportion expressed the opposite. This divergence suggests that structured interaction, such as responding to direct questions, may be more manageable for some learners. However, less structured communicative acts—such as expressing opinions or engaging in spontaneous participation—remain significant sources of apprehension.

Table 4.5 Percentage, Mean And Standard Deviation For Oral Communication In Dyads

	Items	Strongly Disagree		Disagree		Undecided		Agree		Strongly Agree	
		1	2	3	4	5					
		<i>f</i>	%	<i>f</i>	%	<i>f</i>	%	<i>f</i>	%	<i>f</i>	%
1	“While participating in a conversation with a new acquaintance, I feel very nervous” Mean= 3.71 Sd= 1.26	3	4	15	21	4	6	23	33	24	34
2	“I have no fear of speaking up in conversations” Mean= 3.11 Sd= 1.56	15	21	16	23	4	6	16	23	18	26

3	“Usually, I am very tense and nervous in conversations” Mean= 3.77 Sd= 1.33	8 11	6 9	5 7	25 36	24 34
4	“Usually, I am very calm and relaxed in conversations” Mean= 3.21 Sd= 1.51	14 20	12 17	8 11	17 24	17 24
5	“While conversing with a new acquaintance, I feel very relaxed” Mean= 3.27 Sd= 1.39	9 13	14 20	15 21	12 17	19 27
6	“I’m afraid to speak up in conversations” Mean= 3.66 Sd= 1.28	5 7	11 16	7 10	24 34	22 31

The quantitative results presented in Table 4.5 examine the level of Oral Communication Apprehension (OCA) in dyadic communication contexts. Overall, the findings indicate relatively high levels of anxiety, particularly in unfamiliar situations or when students are required to initiate interaction.

The strongest indicators of apprehension emerge from items measuring active nervousness. Item 3 recorded the highest mean score ($M = 3.77$, $SD = 1.33$), with 70% of respondents agreeing or strongly agreeing that they feel tense and nervous when speaking. A similar pattern is observed in Item 1 ($M = 3.71$), where 67% of participants reported feeling “very nervous” when interacting with unfamiliar individuals. Item 6 further reinforces this trend, as 65% of respondents indicated that speaking itself is a source of anxiety. These findings suggest that, even in one-to-one contexts, verbal production remains a significant barrier to communication.

In contrast, responses to items measuring positive affect—such as feeling calm, relaxed, or fearless—display greater variability. Items 4 ($M = 3.21$) and 5 ($M = 3.27$) indicate that while a substantial proportion of participants experience difficulty remaining relaxed, approximately 44%–48% report feeling relatively comfortable in dyadic interactions. This variability is most evident in Item 2, which yielded the highest standard deviation ($SD = 1.56$), reflecting a near-even distribution of responses: 44% of participants reported fear of speaking, whereas 49% indicated the opposite.

Overall, these findings suggest that although dyadic communication often elicits nervousness among learners, the intensity of this anxiety varies considerably. This variation appears to be influenced by individual differences in confidence as well as the degree of familiarity and rapport with the interlocutor.

Table 4.6 Percentage, Mean, and Standard Deviation of Oral Communication in Public Speaking

	Items	Strongly Disagree		Disagree		Undecided		Agree		Strongly Agree	
		1	2	3	4	5					
		<i>f</i>	%	<i>f</i>	%	<i>f</i>	%	<i>f</i>	%	<i>f</i>	%
1	“I have no fear of giving a speech” Mean=3.10 Sd= 1.37	10	14	17	24	11	16	17	24	14	20
2	“Certain parts of my body feel very tense and nervous while giving a speech” Mean= 3.84 Sd= 1.25	7	10	8	11	6	9	24	34	25	36
3	“I feel relaxed while giving a speech” Mean= 2.94 Sd= 1.54	19	27	12	17	5	7	19	27	14	20
4	“My thoughts become confused and jumbled when I am giving a speech” Mean=3.54 Sd= 1.14	6	9	8	11	11	16	33	47	12	17
5	“I face the prospect of giving a speech with confidence” Mean=3.90 Sd= 1.04	3	4	4	6	11	16	30	43	21	30
6	“While giving a speech I get so nervous, I forget facts I really know” Mean=3.60 Sd= 1.27	7	10	6	9	9	13	28	40	19	27
	Public speaking Mean= 3.50 Sd= 0.61	1.0 – 2.4		2.5 – 3.4		3.5 – 5.0					
		7		10		21		30		42	60

According to Table 4.6, the quantitative results indicate that public speaking represents the highest source of Oral Communication Apprehension (OCA) among the participants, with an overall mean score of 3.50 (SD = 0.61). The data show that 60% of the respondents fall within the high apprehension category, while only 10% report low levels of anxiety in this communicative context. These findings suggest that the formality and evaluative nature of public speaking constitute a significant psychological stressor for the majority of the sample.

The item-level analysis further reveals pronounced physiological and cognitive manifestations of anxiety during public speaking. Item 2 recorded a high mean score ($M = 3.84$), with 70% of participants reporting noticeable physical tension and nervousness while speaking. This physiological arousal is accompanied by clear evidence of cognitive disruption, as reflected in Item 4 ($M = 3.54$) and Item 6 ($M = 3.60$), where 64% and 67% of respondents, respectively, indicated that their thoughts become disorganised or that they forget simple points during speaking. Additionally, Item 3 ($M = 2.94$) suggests emotional instability, as 44% of participants disagreed with the statement that they feel relaxed when speaking in public.

Despite these elevated levels of anxiety and cognitive interference, Item 5 yielded the highest mean score ($M = 3.90$), with 73% of respondents indicating that they can anticipate delivering a speech with confidence. This pattern suggests a potential “confidence–performance gap,” whereby learners may express willingness or perceived readiness to speak, yet struggle to regulate the physiological and cognitive symptoms that emerge during actual performance. This duality is further supported by Item 1 ($M = 3.10$), which reflects a divided perception among participants regarding their overall fear of public speaking.

5. Findings and Discussion

This section integrates the findings in relation to the research objectives and research questions. The study sought to answer two main questions: (1) *What is the level of communication apprehension (CA) among EFL learners at the University of Derna when speaking English?* and (2) *What is the correlation between learners’ English proficiency and their Oral Communication Apprehension (OCA)?* To address these questions, McCroskey’s (1981) PRCA-24 was employed to measure communication apprehension, and the data were subsequently analysed using SPSS.

Regarding the first research question, OCA was examined across four communicative contexts: group discussions, meetings, dyadic interaction, and public speaking. The findings indicate that participants experience generally high levels of anxiety across all four domains. The mean scores reveal an increasing pattern of apprehension from group communication ($M = 3.24$), to meetings ($M = 3.41$), dyadic interaction ($M = 3.46$), and reaching the highest level in public speaking ($M = 3.50$). This progression suggests that anxiety intensifies as communicative situations become more formal, evaluative, and publicly visible.

A closer analysis of dominant stressors further highlights the specific nature of anxiety in each context. In public speaking, the most significant concerns were nervousness when facing speaking opportunities ($M = 3.90$), physical tension ($M = 3.84$), and cognitive disruption such as forgetting ideas while speaking ($M = 3.60$). In meetings, anxiety was primarily associated with fear of expressing opinions ($M = 3.94$), reluctance to speak ($M = 3.86$), and feelings of discomfort or awkwardness ($M = 3.82$). In dyadic communication, the highest levels of anxiety were reported in overall conversational tension ($M = 3.77$), interaction with unfamiliar interlocutors ($M = 3.71$), and reluctance to express personal opinions ($M = 3.66$). Finally, in group communication, the main inhibiting factors included avoidance of participation ($M = 4.07$), anxiety when interacting with unfamiliar peers ($M = 3.67$), and general nervousness during interaction ($M = 2.59$).

Overall, these findings suggest that high levels of OCA significantly hinder EFL learners’ communicative performance. This phenomenon may be partly explained by the Libyan EFL context, where English is taught as a foreign language with limited opportunities for authentic communicative use. The absence of real-life interaction reduces learners’ exposure to meaningful communication, thereby restricting their confidence and reinforcing anxiety in oral performance.

To address the second research question, the results revealed a statistically significant negative correlation between English language proficiency and OCA ($r = -0.443$, $p < 0.001$). This moderate inverse relationship indicates that higher levels of language proficiency are associated with lower levels of communication apprehension. Conversely, learners with lower proficiency tend to experience greater anxiety when speaking English. These findings confirm the hypothesis that linguistic competence plays a significant role in shaping learners’ communicative confidence and emotional responses in oral interaction.

6. Conclusion

The present study aimed to examine the level of speaking anxiety among EFL learners at the University of Derna and to explore the relationship between language proficiency and oral communication apprehension. The findings provide important insights into the communicative challenges faced by Libyan university students in English language learning contexts.

The results demonstrate that learners experience moderate to high levels of speaking anxiety across all communicative situations, including group discussions, meetings, dyadic interaction, and public speaking. Among

these, public speaking emerged as the most anxiety-inducing context, followed by dyadic communication and meetings, while group discussion showed relatively lower levels of anxiety. These findings suggest that OCA increases in relation to the level of formality, social exposure, and perceived evaluation. This pattern is consistent with previous research identifying public speaking as the most stressful communicative activity for language learners.

One of the most significant findings of the study is the existence of a moderate negative correlation between English proficiency and communication apprehension. This indicates that learners with lower proficiency levels tend to experience higher levels of anxiety, while increased proficiency is associated with greater confidence and reduced apprehension. This relationship highlights the strong interaction between linguistic competence and affective factors in foreign language learning, suggesting that improvement in language skills contributes directly to reducing communication anxiety.

The findings also reflect key characteristics of the Libyan EFL context. Limited exposure to English outside the classroom and a strong reliance on traditional, grammar-focused teaching approaches contribute to learners' low communicative confidence. The lack of authentic communicative opportunities creates a cycle in which limited speaking practice leads to low proficiency, which in turn reinforces anxiety and avoidance behaviour.

From a pedagogical perspective, the study highlights the importance of adopting communicative and learner-centred instructional approaches that address both linguistic and psychological dimensions of language learning. Teachers should encourage interactive activities such as pair work, group discussions, role-play, and gradual exposure to speaking tasks to reduce fear of negative evaluation and promote confidence. Additionally, integrating structured speaking practice into the curriculum and providing constructive feedback can further support learners' oral development.

In conclusion, speaking anxiety remains a significant barrier for Libyan EFL learners. Addressing this challenge requires a balanced approach that targets both linguistic development and affective support. By combining these dimensions, educators can reduce communication apprehension, enhance learners' confidence, and ultimately improve their overall communicative competence in English.

Compliance with ethical standards

Disclosure of conflict of interest

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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