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Research Article

UNSPOKEN THOUGHTS: LIVED EXPERIENCES OF STUDENTS WITH POOR ORAL COMMUNICATION SKILLS

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ABSTRACT

Poor oral communication skills remain a significant concern among students particularly in junior high school. This issue negatively affects students' classroom participation, academic performance and social interaction. Learners with limited speaking ability experienced anxiety, lack of confidence, and fear of negative judgment. These experiences hinder their willingness to express their ideas during class discussions and oral tasks. These challenges encountered may be intensified by language challenges, inadequate practice, and unsupportive learning environments. This qualitative study explored the lived experiences of junior high school students with poor oral communication skills. It examined the experiences, challenges encountered, and coping strategies they used to manage their difficulty in expressing their ideas. Data were gathered through in-depth, semi-structured interviews with the selected junior high school students. Results showed that anxiety, fear of negative evaluation, low self-confidence, and language barriers, as well as classroom environment, significantly limit students' oral participation. Despite these challenges, students demonstrated resilience by using preparation strategies, emotional regulation techniques, and seeking support. The study highlights the importance of supportive instructional practices to enhance students' confidence and skill in oral communications.

Keywords: anxiety, communication skills, fear of negative evaluation, language barrier, phenomenological study

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Introduction

Oral communication is a fundamental means through which individuals express ideas, share experiences, and construct meaning in social and academic contexts. It takes various forms, such as everyday conversations, classroom discussions, and oral presentations, and plays a vital role in the development of learners' communication skills, critical thinking, and self-confidence. Through oral communication, students demonstrate their understanding of lessons, articulate their thoughts, and engage meaningfully with teachers and peers. The ability to speak with clarity, accuracy, and confidence is therefore an essential indicator of effective learning.

Merriam-Webster Dictionary (n.d.) defines oral as something “uttered by the mouth or in words,” while public speaking is described as “the art of effective oral communication with an audience.” These definitions highlight the central role of spoken language in communication and learning. Supporting this view, Sumaiya et al. (2022) emphasized that students with strong communication skills are more capable of engaging in smooth interactions, accomplishing academic tasks effectively, and achieving success in school-related activities. Thus, oral communication is not merely a classroom requirement but a crucial life skill that supports academic performance and personal growth.

In the Philippine educational context, both English and Filipino serve as media of instruction, making oral communication a key component in developing learners' proficiency and confidence in both languages. Despite its importance, many Filipino students continue to struggle with oral performance, particularly during recitations, impromptu speaking tasks, and classroom interactions. Several studies have identified factors that negatively affect students' willingness to speak, including anxiety, fear of negative evaluation, and lack of preparation. Empuerto et al. (2025) revealed that fear of negative judgment and communication anxiety are among the primary reasons for students' reluctance to participate orally in class. Similarly, Moneva et al. (2020) found that anxiety significantly affects students' productivity, performance, and overall academic outcomes.

Further studies have shown that emotional responses play a major role in students' oral communication difficulties. Humaera and Pramustiara (2022) reported that students commonly experience nervousness and worry when asked to speak impromptu during classroom discussions. Lack of preparation also contributes to students' hesitation to participate. Indrianty (2016), as cited by Pradestina et al. (2020), noted that insufficient preparation before class is one of the main reasons students feel reluctant to engage in oral activities. In response to this concern, Abdurahman and Rizqi (2020) suggested that students should be encouraged to prepare consistently in advance to reduce anxiety and improve speaking performance.

Aside from learner-related factors, teachers' attitudes and classroom practices also significantly influence students' oral participation. Studies by Nair et al. (2014) and Qasha in Al-Khairiy (2013), as cited by Pradestina et al. (2020), revealed that when teachers correct students' mistakes in a humiliating or overly critical manner, learners become discouraged and less willing to speak. Conversely, a supportive classroom environment can foster confidence and active participation. Teachers that emphasize encouragement, use of humor, and provision of positive feedback strongly enhance students' confidence, while peer teasing and language-related anxiety tend to reduce classroom participation.

In line with these findings, a preliminary observation and survey conducted among junior high school students at Libertad Bajo Integrated School revealed low levels of confidence and limited engagement during oral communication activities. Many students expressed feelings of nervousness, fear, and hesitation when asked to speak in class, which noticeably affected their performance. These observations suggest that emotional and psychological factors—such as anxiety, fear of negative evaluation, low self-confidence, inadequate preparation, language difficulties, and teachers' attitudes—play a significant role in shaping students' oral communication experiences.

Despite the growing body of literature on oral communication difficulties, a notable gap remains. Most existing studies have focused on learners at the tertiary level, with limited attention given to junior high school students. Junior high school is a critical stage for the development of communication skills, as students are expected to transition from basic expression to more complex and confident oral communication. Understanding their lived experiences during this formative period is essential for designing early and effective interventions. Although

some students participate to a certain extent, many continue to experience anxiety, hesitation, and inconsistent performance, indicating the need for deeper exploration.

This study aims to explore the lived experiences of junior high school students who exhibit poor oral communication skills. Specifically, it seeks to understand their emotional states, the challenges they encounter, and the strategies they use to cope with difficulties related to anxiety and fear of negative evaluation, self-confidence, lack of preparation, language challenges, and teachers' attitudes. The findings of this study are expected to benefit various stakeholders. Students may gain insights that help them overcome oral communication difficulties, strengthen their confidence, and improve their speaking skills for better academic outcomes. Teachers, on the other hand, may be guided in developing supportive classroom practices and effective strategies that foster a safe, encouraging, and inclusive environment for oral communication.

Methods

This study utilized a transcendental phenomenological qualitative design based on the framework of Moustakas (1994) to explore the lived experiences of junior high school students with poor oral communication skills at Libertad Bajo Integrated School in the Division of Misamis Occidental during School Year 2025–2026. A total of twelve participants, selected through purposive sampling, participated in semi-structured interviews that allowed them to openly share their experiences, challenges, and coping strategies related to oral communication in English. The researcher employed bracketing to minimize personal biases and ensure that participants' voices were authentically represented. Data were gathered using a validated researcher-made interview guide and analyzed through thematic coding and categorization following the transcendental phenomenological approach. Ethical standards, including informed consent, confidentiality, anonymity, voluntary participation, and compliance with the Data Privacy Act of 2012, were strictly observed throughout the study. The findings aimed to provide a deeper understanding of the factors influencing students' oral communication performance and to offer insights that may help improve communication development and classroom participation among junior high school learners.

Results and Discussions

Communication Anxiety and Language Barriers in Oral Participation

The findings of the study revealed that students with poor oral communication skills experience significant communication anxiety and fear of speaking during classroom participation. Many participants described feelings of nervousness, fear of making mistakes, trembling, mental blocks, and hesitation whenever they were asked to answer questions, participate in recitations, or speak in front of their classmates. Fear of negative evaluation, especially being laughed at, judged, or criticized by peers, strongly affected their confidence and willingness to communicate. Alongside these emotional challenges, students also struggled with language-related difficulties such as limited vocabulary, incorrect grammar usage, pronunciation problems, and difficulty translating ideas from their mother tongue into English. These barriers often caused students to remain silent, avoid oral activities, and participate only when necessary. The findings emphasize that oral communication difficulties are not only linguistic concerns but are also deeply connected to emotional and psychological experiences that affect students' academic engagement and classroom performance.

Classroom Environment, Emotional Responses, and Academic Impact

The study further showed that the classroom environment and peer influence significantly shape students' oral communication experiences. Participants shared that unsupportive peer reactions, teasing, ridicule, and fear of judgment created an atmosphere that discouraged them from expressing their ideas confidently. Although many students perceived their teachers as supportive and encouraging, negative peer behavior remained a major source of anxiety and self-doubt. As a result, students experienced various emotional responses such as nervousness, embarrassment, disappointment, fear, and mixed emotions before and after oral participation. These emotional struggles influenced their classroom behavior, often leading to reduced participation, avoidance of oral tasks, and decreased confidence in their speaking abilities. Moreover, students believed that their poor oral communication skills negatively affected their academic performance, particularly in oral recitations, reporting activities, and participation-based assessments. The findings suggest that creating a supportive, respectful, and non-threatening classroom environment is essential in helping students develop confidence and improve their oral communication

skills.

Coping Strategies and Adaptive Responses of Students

Despite the communication difficulties they encountered, the participants demonstrated various coping strategies to manage their anxiety and improve their oral communication performance. Students engaged in preparation and self-directed learning practices such as studying lessons in advance, practicing English sentences, reviewing notes, and using online resources for guidance and pronunciation improvement. They also sought academic and social support from teachers, classmates, friends, and digital platforms to clarify lessons, gain encouragement, and strengthen their confidence. In addition, participants practiced emotional regulation and anxiety-reduction strategies by calming themselves, using positive self-talk, accepting mistakes as part of learning, and gradually exposing themselves to speaking activities. Positive cognitive reframing and adaptive participation strategies also emerged, as students tried to view oral tasks as opportunities for growth rather than sources of fear. These findings demonstrate that although students face substantial communication barriers, they actively develop personal and social strategies to cope with challenges and gradually build confidence in oral participation. The study highlights the importance of continuous support, encouragement, and learner-centered interventions in promoting students' oral communication development and overall academic success.

Conclusions

The study concludes that students with poor oral communication skills are experiencing high levels of anxiety, fear of judgment and low confidence, which significantly affects their classroom participation. Language barriers serve as a major hindrance in students' oral expression. The classroom environment, including peer influence, plays a role in alleviating or intensifying communication difficulties with supportive teachers and classmates and establishes confidence and participation. Emotional responses also have a strong effect on students' engagement and perceptions of their academic performance, and perceived impact on their academic performance. Despite these challenges, students demonstrate resilience by using different coping strategies to better improve their oral communication skills. Collaboration of students, parents, teachers and stakeholders

Recommendations

Based on the findings and conclusions of the study, learners are encouraged to continuously improve their oral communication skills through self-directed learning, regular practice, emotional regulation, and seeking academic and social support from teachers, peers, and online resources. Teachers are recommended to create supportive and non-threatening classroom environments by providing constructive feedback and using strategies that strengthen students' vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation, and confidence in speaking. School leaders and curriculum planners should implement structured oral communication programs, integrate speaking activities and performance-based tasks across subjects, and utilize digital tools to provide meaningful opportunities for communication practice. Parents and stakeholders are likewise encouraged to provide emotional, academic, and financial support that promotes students' language development and confidence. Furthermore, future researchers are advised to conduct related studies in different educational contexts and examine effective interventions and strategies that can reduce communication anxiety and enhance students' oral communication proficiency.

Conflict of Interests

The author declares that they have no conflicts of interest

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