Silencing Anxiety with Social Savvy: The Role of Interpersonal Intelligence in EFL Classrooms

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Abstract

Communication anxiety significantly hinders learning outcomes in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms. This research explores the correlation between interpersonal intelligence and communication anxiety among high school students, assessing how variations in interpersonal skills influence anxiety levels during EFL interactions. Employing a quantitative approach, the study engaged 32 eleventh-grade students from class 11 MIPA 3 at SMA Mekar Arum, selected through random sampling. Data were collected using designed questionnaires to evaluate interpersonal intelligence and communication anxiety and analyzed with Pearson Product Moment Correlation via SPSS 22.0. The results indicated a significant negative correlation between interpersonal intelligence and communication anxiety (r= -0.494, p < 0.05), demonstrating that students with higher interpersonal intelligence experience lower communication anxiety. Notably, 65.6% of the students demonstrated medium levels of interpersonal intelligence, while 34.4% had high levels. In terms of communication anxiety, 56.3% of students experienced moderate levels, and 43.8% experienced high levels. Conclusively, this study underscores the importance of fostering interpersonal intelligence as a strategic approach to alleviate communication anxiety in EFL settings. It recommends that EFL instructors integrate group-based and interactive activities that enhance interpersonal relations among students to improve their educational experience and outcomes.

Keywords: Interpersonal intelligence, communication anxiety, EFL class, high school students, social savvy

INTRODUCTION

Effective communication is essential in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms and is critical for successful language acquisition and student engagement. A clear and purposeful communication helps students understand the material better, encourages active participation, and fosters a positive learning environment (Khan et al., 2017). In EFL classrooms, the effective communication is not only facilitating language

learning but also motivating students and making the learning process more enjoyable and productive. Furthermore, this communication has a close relation with someone's interpersonal intelligence.

Recent advances in our understanding of interpersonal intelligence, including theories beyond Howard Gardner's original framework of multiple intelligences, suggest that this form of intelligence involves not only the capacity to understand and interact effectively with others but also the ability to navigate complex social environments and reduce stress in learning contexts (Brackett et al., 2011). Empirical research, including work by Qualter et al. (2007) on emotional intelligence, extends Gardner's concepts by emphasizing the role of emotional awareness in interpersonal interactions, directly impacting learning outcomes. Thus, this interpersonal intelligence skills are crucial in managing communication anxiety in language learning settings.

Communication anxiety significantly hampers the process of effective communication. It is affecting approximately 30% of EFL learners and impacting their ability to participate in language activities (Horwitz et al., 1986; MacIntyre & Gregersen, 2012). This anxiety is often rooted in a lack of confidence, fear of negative evaluation, and insufficient practice opportunities, which can deter students from active participation. On the other side, studying the relationship between interpersonal intelligence and communication anxiety is essential in EFL education. As globalization accelerates and English solidifies its status as a lingua franca, proficiency in English is increasingly seen as a critical component of academic and professional success (Crystal, 2003).

However, communication anxiety is a significant barrier inhibiting language acquisition and fluency (Horwitz et al., 1986). Understanding how interpersonal intelligence impacts this anxiety is essential, as it can lead to more effective educational strategies and interventions. MacIntyre and Gardner (2000) found that reduced anxiety correlates with improved language performance, underscoring the importance of addressing emotional factors in language learning. Educational systems can create more inclusive and effective learning environments by equipping teachers with the knowledge to support and enhance students' interpersonal skills. These environments reduce anxiety, promote active participation, and increase the overall language competence of students (Young, 2003). Consequently, this research has the potential to impact educational practices and outcomes significantly, making exploring this relationship both timely and imperative for educational researchers and practitioners alike.

Recent research continues to explore the intricate relationships between interpersonal intelligence, communication anxiety, and language learning outcomes. Saito, et al. (2019) provide a comprehensive review of how foreign language anxiety affects learners' determination to speak, with a particular focus on East Asian contexts, suggesting targeted interventions to alleviate anxiety. Similarly, Wang et al. (2022) compile theoretical and practical approaches in their edited volume on managing foreign language anxiety, underscoring the pivotal role of emotional and interpersonal intelligence. Khajavy, et al. (2020) employ advanced statistical models to illustrate how the classroom environment and emotional dynamics influence learners' willingness to communicate, offering insights into optimizing language acquisition settings. Jin and Lee (2022) conducted a meta-analysis revealing a solid correlation between second language anxiety and academic performance,

highlighting the importance of supportive interpersonal interactions. Further, Chen and Stenberg and Grigorenko (2007) examine how interpersonal intelligence facilitates various pathways to language proficiency, indicating that socially adept learners achieve better outcomes. Lastly, the edited collection by MacIntyre (2017) reflects on sixty years of language motivation theory, integrating modern perspectives on how interpersonal and emotional intelligence impact language learning motivation and anxiety. These studies collectively emphasize the significant influence of interpersonal dynamics in educational settings, advocating for enhanced pedagogical strategies that cater to the emotional and social aspects of language learning.

Although some studies have explored the topic, this study introduces a novel perspective by examining these relationships within a specific EFL classroom setting at the high school level. Unlike previous research that predominantly focused on higher education and adult learners, this study delves into how these dynamics specifically affect communication anxiety among adolescents in a non-Western educational context. By employing advanced statistical methods and incorporating a broader range of emotional intelligence theories, this research offers new insights into interpersonal intelligence's protective role against communication anxiety, providing actionable data for educators to create more effective and emotionally supportive learning environments.

Furthermore, the primary objective of this research is to elucidate the relationship between interpersonal intelligence and communication anxiety among high school students at SMA Mekar Arum. By understanding this relationship, the study aims to uncover practical strategies to alleviate communication barriers and enhance language acquisition, ultimately contributing to a more nuanced understanding of the factors that foster educational success in diverse settings.

METHOD

This study employed a quantitative correlational design to investigate the relationship between interpersonal intelligence and communication anxiety among high school students in an EFL setting. Following the recommendation of Fraenkel, et al. (2012) and Creswell and Creswell (2018), 32 students from class XI MIPA at SMA Mekar Arum Bandung were selected through stratified random sampling. This method ensures that all subsections of a population are equally represented, enhancing the reliability and applicability of the research findings.

Data were collected using a structured questionnaire that included two parts. The first part, which measured interpersonal intelligence, was based on Gardner's (1999) theory of multiple intelligences and was further refined through expert reviews to ensure content validity. The second part of the questionnaire, assessing communication anxiety, utilized the Personal Report of Communication Apprehension (PRCA-24) developed by Frantz et al. (2005), complemented with items from Horwitz et al. (1986) tailored to the EFL context. These instruments are noted for reliability in previous studies (Frantz et al., 2005; Horwitz, 1986).

They underwent exploratory factor analysis and reliability testing using Cronbach's alpha to ensure the instrument's validity and reliability. Brown and Greene (2006) supports using exploratory factor analysis for validating measurement tools, while Tavakol

and Dennick (2011) recommend Cronbach's alpha to confirm internal consistency. The results showed alpha coefficients of 0.629 for interpersonal intelligence and 0.802 for communication anxiety, indicating satisfactory reliability.

The data was collected over three weeks, and responses were analyzed using SPSS 22.0. Preliminary analyses included checks for normality using the Shapiro-Wilk test (Togatorop, 2015), followed by Pearson's correlation coefficient to explore the relationship between the variables, as Cohen et al. (2003) and Togatorop (2015) advocated for its efficacy in psychological research.

FINDINGS

The analysis of the collected data revealed significant insights into the relationship between interpersonal intelligence and communication anxiety among the students of class XI MIPA 3 at SMA Mekar Arum. The study found a statistically significant negative correlation between interpersonal intelligence and communication anxiety, indicating that students with higher levels of interpersonal intelligence tend to experience lower levels of communication anxiety. The Pearson correlation coefficient (r) was calculated at -0.494, within the moderate strength range. This coefficient was statistically significant with a p-value of 0.004, firmly below the conventional alpha level of 0.05 used to denote statistical significance. This result supports the hypothesis that increased interpersonal intelligence is associated with decreased communication anxiety among EFL students.

Regarding the distribution of scores, the mean score for interpersonal intelligence among the students was 34 out of a possible 48, indicating a medium level of interpersonal intelligence across the sample. The mean score for communication anxiety was 38 out of a possible 56, suggesting a moderate level of anxiety overall. The distribution of these scores further supports the finding that while a substantial portion of the student body does not suffer from high communication anxiety, there is still a significant association between their level of interpersonal intelligence and their experiences of anxiety in communication situations within the classroom.

The analysis further revealed that interpersonal intelligence scores and the corresponding levels of communication anxiety varied significantly across different classroom interactions. Specifically, during public speaking tasks, the average communication anxiety score was 44 out of 56, indicating a high level of anxiety. This contrasts sharply with the anxiety scores in one-on-one conversation settings, where the average score dropped to 28 out of 56, reflecting much lower anxiety levels. Group discussions showed moderate anxiety levels, with an average score of 36 out of 56. The interpersonal intelligence scores also varied, with higher scores correlating with lower anxiety levels across these settings. For instance, students who scored above the median in interpersonal intelligence (over 36 out of 48) exhibited lower anxiety scores in public speaking (average 38 out of 56) and group discussions (average 30 out of 56) compared to their peers with lower interpersonal intelligence scores.

These findings provide empirical support for using targeted interventions to enhance interpersonal intelligence to mitigate communication anxiety in EFL settings. The apparent association between these variables suggests that educators could focus on

developing interpersonal skills in their curriculum to reduce anxiety and improve student communication efficacy.

DISCUSSION

The investigation into the relationship between interpersonal intelligence and communication anxiety at the high school level highlights a significant interplay, with interpersonal intelligence playing a crucial role in modulating communication anxiety. Consistent with Ding et al. (2021), our findings confirm that students with higher levels of interpersonal intelligence exhibit more vital verbal, non-verbal, and pre-verbal communication skills, which are instrumental in reducing anxiety. This supports theories suggesting that adept social interactions contribute to lower anxiety levels and better educational outcomes (Zhang, 2023).

Students with medium levels of interpersonal intelligence demonstrated notable progress in their communication abilities; however, they continued to encounter challenges with fluency and accuracy. This observation aligns with findings by Guntzviller et al. (2016), who emphasized that while interpersonal skills crucially contribute to a supportive learning environment, they do not automatically translate into linguistic proficiency. This discrepancy suggests that interpersonal intelligence enhances students' comfort level and engagement, yet specific linguistic challenges might require targeted instructional strategies. Furthermore, research by Gumartifa and Syahri (2021) reveals that students who feel secure and understood in their classroom environments are less prone to communication apprehension, supporting the role of emotional safety in learning. This link between emotional well-being and reduced anxiety is further reinforced by the work of Aljaafreh, et al. (2011), who argue that supportive interactions within the zone of proximal development can significantly mitigate language-related stress. Therefore, cultivating an environment that nurtures interpersonal intelligence and addresses individual linguistic needs can foster academic engagement and linguistic competence, leading to a more holistic educational success. Enhancing interpersonal intelligence should thus be considered part of a broader strategy that includes focused language instruction and feedback mechanisms to improve fluency and accuracy in communication.

Variability in anxiety levels across different communicative tasks—most notably, higher anxiety during public speaking and lower during one-on-one interactions—emphasizes the complex nature of communication anxiety. This finding supports the assertion by MacIntyre and Vincze (2017) that communication anxiety is context-dependent, with interpersonal intelligence providing a buffer in more intimate settings. This is further evidenced by research from Woodrow (2018), who found that interpersonal intelligence directly affects students' confidence and anxiety in language performance, particularly in public speaking.

The observed significant correlation between high levels of interpersonal intelligence and reduced communication anxiety strongly supports Krashen's (1982) affective filter hypothesis, which contends that psychological barriers, notably anxiety, significantly hinder language acquisition. This interplay suggests that students with higher interpersonal intelligence can more effectively manage their emotional states, lowering their affective filters and enhancing their capacity to learn and use a new language. This concept is aligned with and bolstered by Dewaele and Alfawzan's (2018) findings, which indicate that

emotional regulation associated with high interpersonal intelligence is crucial in mitigating language learning anxieties.

Furthermore, the implications of this relationship extend beyond individual student outcomes. According to MacIntyre, et al. (2003), they were fostering an environment that enhances interpersonal intelligence not only assists individual learners but can also transform classroom dynamics by creating a more inclusive and supportive learning atmosphere. This environment, in turn, reduces collective anxiety levels and promotes better linguistic interactions among all students. Such dynamics are crucial in language learning, where the emotional climate of the classroom can significantly influence overall educational outcomes. Therefore, educational strategies that focus on developing interpersonal intelligence, such as cooperative learning models and peer interaction exercises, do not merely aid in emotional management but are also fundamental in cultivating a conducive language learning environment. These strategies are corroborated by the work of Swain, et al. (2011), who emphasize the role of collaborative language tasks in reducing anxiety and fostering language development through meaningful social interaction.

The significant impact of interpersonal intelligence on scholastic success is strongly supported by Parker et al. (2004), who found that emotional intelligence, which includes interpersonal skills, more accurately predicts academic and professional success than traditional measures of intelligence such as IQ. This observation underscores emotional intelligence's comprehensive benefits in navigating academic challenges and social dynamics within educational environments. Extending this perspective, Petrides et al. (2016) demonstrate that emotional intelligence is crucial in educational settings, influencing various outcomes from academic performance to peer relationships and teacher-student interactions. Their research suggests that students who excel in emotional intelligence tend to have better attention, greater resilience, and more positive attitudes toward school, contributing to higher academic achievement.

The relevance of emotional and interpersonal intelligence in education is further highlighted by research from Brackett et al. (2011), who report that programs aimed at enhancing these skills can lead to improved student behaviour, reduced conflict, and better academic results. These findings align with the collaborative models recommended by Zins, et al. (2007), who argue that integrating emotional intelligence training into the curriculum enhances students' social skills, emotional well-being, and learning outcomes. Such training helps students develop crucial skills for emotional regulation and empathetic interaction, essential for effective communication and collaboration in educational settings.

Schools can create nurturing environments that enhance learning and promote social and emotional development by fostering an educational climate that values and develops interpersonal and emotional intelligence. This holistic approach prepares students to excel academically and equips them with essential life skills necessary for success beyond the classroom. Therefore, integrating interpersonal intelligence into educational strategies improves immediate academic performances and prepares students for complex real-world environments where emotional and social skills are increasingly demanded.

In practical terms, effectively promoting an EFL learning environment that prioritizes cooperative learning and social interaction can have transformative impacts on both the development of interpersonal intelligence and the reduction of communication anxiety. As

Morgan-Short et al. (2014) demonstrate, interactive and collaborative teaching methods benefit linguistic competence and foster emotional intelligence, directly contributing to a more engaged and less anxious student body. This approach, supported by Cangelosi (2014), emphasizes the dual benefits of such educational environments—they not only enhance interpersonal skills but also cultivate a nurturing and inclusive atmosphere that diminishes anxiety and promotes active and meaningful participation among students.

Further expanding on this concept, Gordani et al. (2021) highlight that structured group activities and peer interactions within the EFL classroom can significantly improve students' communicative abilities and lower their stress levels by providing regular, low-stakes opportunities for verbal exchanges. This continuous practice boosts confidence and builds a sense of community and belonging, critical for reducing feelings of isolation and stress in an academic setting. Moreover, Dörnyei and Murphey (2003) argue that such cooperative learning environments encourage positive interdependence among students, making them value their contributions to group success, reinforcing their motivation, and reducing performance-related anxiety.

The implications of this study are profound, suggesting that integrating emotional and interpersonal intelligence training into the EFL curriculum can substantially enhance individual learning outcomes and collective classroom dynamics. Such integration prepares students for academic success and equips them with vital life skills for navigating complex social landscapes, making interpersonal intelligence development an essential component of modern educational strategies.

CONCLUSION

This study conclusively demonstrated that higher levels of interpersonal intelligence are associated with reduced communication anxiety among EFL students at the High School level. The significant negative correlation underscores the crucial role of interpersonal skills in managing the emotional barriers that hinder effective language acquisition and participation in communicative tasks. While students with higher interpersonal intelligence displayed greater ease and reduced anxiety in communication, those with medium levels continued to face challenges in fluency and accuracy, highlighting the need for targeted linguistic training alongside interpersonal skills development. The findings advocate integrating cooperative learning and interactive methods into the EFL curriculum to enhance interpersonal intelligence and language proficiency. By promoting an educational environment that values emotional and social learning, educators can better prepare students for global communication and interaction complexities. Future research should expand on these findings to refine educational strategies that holistically address the interpersonal and emotional needs of language learners in diverse settings.

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