

Factors Influencing Verbal Communication Skills Among Undergraduate Students: A Case Study of the University of Malakand

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Abstract

The focus of this study is to investigate the factors influencing verbal communication skills among undergraduate students at the University of Malakand, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan. Data were collected through a structured questionnaire, and responses were analyzed using both descriptive statistics and ordinal logistic regression. The analysis revealed that self-confidence, language proficiency, class participation, peer encouragement, and psychological factors significantly influence students' verbal communication skills. Among these, self-confidence and language proficiency were the strongest predictors, while a supportive learning environment further enhanced communicative proficiency. These findings highlight key areas for intervention that can help educators and policymakers design strategies to strengthen students' verbal communication skills and contribute to their overall academic and social development. The study not only contributes to the existing literature on communication and education but also provides practical insights for curriculum developers. Future research may extend this work by exploring the impact of digital learning tools and cross-cultural factors on communication skills.

Keywords: Verbal Communication Skills, Self-Confidence, Language Proficiency, Class Participation, Undergraduate Students.

Introduction

Being able to communicate effectively is crucial for undergraduate students, as it plays a key role in their academic success and social growth. It is the foundation for participating in class, working in groups, and preparing for a professional life. However, many factors can affect how well students express themselves with clarity and confidence. One significant hurdle is communication apprehension, especially during oral presentations or when speaking spontaneously.

Verbal communication skills are widely regarded as a cornerstone of academic and professional success. For undergraduate students, the ability to convey ideas effectively through oral communication not only enhances their classroom participation but also prepares them for the demands of the workplace. Over the past two decades, researchers have explored various factors that influence these skills, including individual characteristics, institutional practices, and pedagogical approaches. One of the most frequently studied factors is communication

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apprehension (CA), which refers to the anxiety or fear associated with speaking in public, groups, or dyadic settings. High levels of CA have been shown to reduce students' willingness to participate in discussions, negatively impacting their oral performance and overall cognitive engagement. Studies have consistently highlighted that undergraduate students with higher CA report lower self-perceived competence and demonstrate weaker performance in structured speaking tasks (Tahir et al., 2017). Moreover, recent findings suggest that communication apprehension directly diminishes cognitive engagement in learning activities, thereby creating a dual barrier to both participation and knowledge acquisition (Schulenberg et al., 2024). Closely related to apprehension is self-efficacy, which refers to students' confidence in their communication abilities. Evidence suggests that students with higher communication self-efficacy perform better in terms of fluency, vocabulary use, and clarity (Remacle et al., 2023). Conversely, low confidence can intensify anxiety and discourage students from taking opportunities to practice their verbal skills. For example, in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts, undergraduate students often exhibit lower self-efficacy due to limited exposure, which results in hesitation and restricted vocabulary usage when interacting with peers or instructors (Ulfah et al., 2024). This underscores the intertwined role of language proficiency and confidence in shaping verbal performance.

Another dimension involves nonverbal and paraverbal elements such as tone, gesture, and active listening, which complement spoken words. Mahadevan et al. (2024) demonstrated that practical communication training incorporating these components significantly improves students' overall communicative competence. Such findings suggest that verbal skills cannot be understood in isolation but are part of a broader system of expressive abilities. The learning environment and teaching methodology also play vital roles. Active learning approaches, including debates, simulations, and group discussions, have been found to reduce anxiety while enhancing engagement. Remacle et al. (2023) demonstrated, through a randomized controlled trial, that simulation-based teaching significantly improved undergraduate students' oral skills and confidence. Similarly, systematic reviews on soft-skill interventions in higher education reveal that structured opportunities for speaking and receiving feedback are among the most effective strategies for building lasting competence (Orih et al., 2024).

In contrast, traditional lecture-based pedagogy, which often involves limited student interaction, tends to underdevelop communication skills (Asemanyi, 2015). The digital learning context, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic, has further complicated the development of verbal communication skills. Online classes reduced opportunities for spontaneous interactions and often increased anxiety due to the unfamiliarity of virtual platforms. Agrawal et al. (2021) reported that students' verbal participation in online classrooms was influenced not only by technological barriers but also by mental well-being, emphasizing the need for supportive and interactive digital learning environments. Demographic and contextual factors such as program of study, year level, and cultural background also shape verbal communication. Some studies found that senior students demonstrate higher competence due to accumulated exposure, while others identified gender and disciplinary differences in speaking confidence and participation patterns (Factors Affecting Oral Communication Skills, 2025). However, these findings remain mixed, highlighting the importance of considering contextual variables in future research.

Verbal communication is the means by which students ask questions, debate ideas, collaborate on knowledge, and demonstrate their understanding during discussions, seminars, and presentations. A wealth of research indicates that the way students engage in conversation in class is influenced by a mix of emotional (like communication anxiety and language worries), cognitive (such as how competent they feel and their willingness to engage), sociocultural (including communication

norms from different cultures), instructional (like the classroom atmosphere and structure), and technological factors (for instance, the dynamics of videoconferencing) (Horwitz et al., 1986; MacIntyre et al., 1998; McCroskey, 1977; Weaver & Qi, 2005; see also Bailenson, 2021).

Communication apprehension is essentially the anxiety that accompanies real or expected communication, often leading to students being hesitant to speak up in class (McCroskey, 1977). Additionally, how students perceive their own communication skills (self-perceived communication competence, or SPCC) and their willingness to engage in conversation (WTC) can help clarify why some capable students choose to participate while others do not (McCroskey & McCroskey, 1988; MacIntyre et al., 1998). In multilingual settings, anxiety related to speaking a foreign language can be a significant barrier to verbal participation, with research showing a connection to lower academic performance (Botes et al., 2020; Horwitz et al., 1986). When it comes to sociocultural factors, the norms surrounding communication in different cultures (like high-context versus low-context styles) can affect how comfortable and appropriate students feel about speaking up. This helps explain the differences in participation levels among international students (Hall, 1976; Liu, 2016). In second language (L2) environments, a learner's "international posture" and confidence are linked to their willingness to communicate, which in turn leads to more frequent and spontaneous classroom discussions (Yashima, 2002; MacIntyre et al., 1998).

The way instructors behave and how a course is organized play a significant role in shaping the atmosphere for participation. Research from traditional classrooms indicates that when students feel supported by their instructors, have clear expectations, and participate in structured discussions, they tend to contribute more frequently. On the flip side, unclear norms and the fear of being judged can lead to silence (Fassinger, 1995; Weaver & Qi, 2005). Comprehensive reviews also highlight that participation is influenced by a combination of factors, including students' attitudes, the approachability of instructors, grading systems, and class sizes (Rocca, 2010). When discussions shift to an online format, the platform itself can significantly impact the outcome. Early studies on computer-mediated communication suggest that the absence of nonverbal cues can alter how people interact, the timing of responses, and overall perceptions (Walther, 1996). With videoconferencing, there are additional challenges, such as constantly seeing oneself, heightened eye contact, and limited movement, which can make students less willing to speak due to what is known as "nonverbal overload" and fatigue (Bailenson, 2021). Job-related stress and work satisfaction have been widely recognized as critical issues in the field of education, influencing both the performance of teachers and the learning outcomes of students. Teaching, particularly in the context of physical education, is considered a highly demanding profession that often exposes teachers to multiple stressors, including heavy workload, role conflict, lack of recognition, limited career advancement opportunities, and inadequate institutional support (Kyriacou, 2001; Ismail et al., 2024).

Ismail et al. (2024) conducted a study on private school teachers in Tehsil Talash, District Dir Lower, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, to explore the determinants of job satisfaction. Using cluster random sampling and a logistic regression framework, the study revealed that salary, job security, and workload are the most significant factors shaping teachers' satisfaction. The findings emphasize that improving job stability, offering competitive salaries, providing opportunities for professional growth, and managing workload effectively can enhance teacher satisfaction, thereby contributing to better educational quality and teacher retention. Similarly, Ismail et al. (2024) further highlighted that addressing these challenges through supportive policies—such as ensuring timely promotions, reducing class sizes, and recruiting well-trained staff—plays a pivotal role in not only improving teacher satisfaction but also in fostering a more positive learning environment for

students. This paper examines the primary contributors, such as psychological, linguistic, sociocultural, and paralinguistic influences, that shape the verbal communication experiences of undergraduates at the University of Malakand.

Methodology

Experts validated the instrument, and a pilot study confirmed its reliability, achieving a Cronbach's alpha of 0.86. The data were collected from each education department by stratified random sampling. Each education department is considered a stratum. The five-point Likert scale is used in each question. Data Collection was carried out ethically, with informed consent obtained from participants. For data analysis, SPSS 26 was utilized, where descriptive statistics summarized the responses, and logistic regression was employed to identify predictors of verbal communication.

Descriptive Statistics

The analysis revealed that students rated psychological factors (M = 3.64, SD = 1.11) and paralinguistic factors (M = 3.65, SD = 1.16) as the highest, followed by linguistic factors (M = 3.52, SD = 1.12). In contrast, sociocultural factors (M = 2.91, SD = 1.40) were perceived as having a lesser impact.

Figure 1: Descriptive statistics of factors affecting verbal communication (N=300)

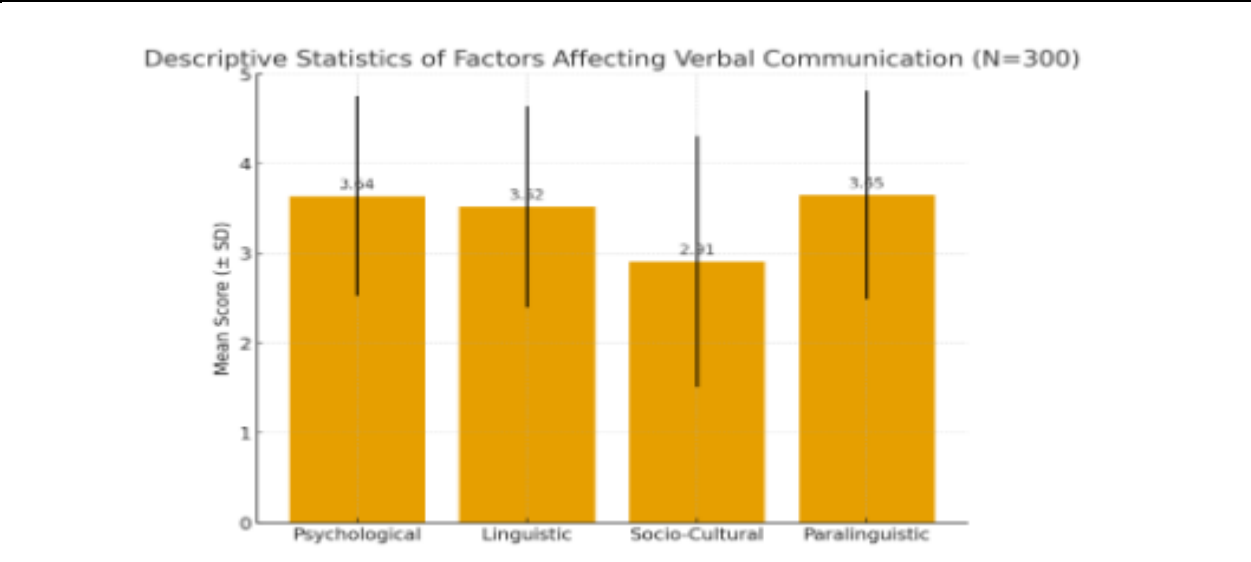


Table 1: Descriptive Statistics of Factors Affecting Verbal Communication (N = 300)

Factor	Mean	SD
Psychological Factors	3.64	1.11
Linguistic Factors	3.52	1.12
Socio-Cultural Factors	2.91	1.40
Paralinguistic Factors	3.65	1.16

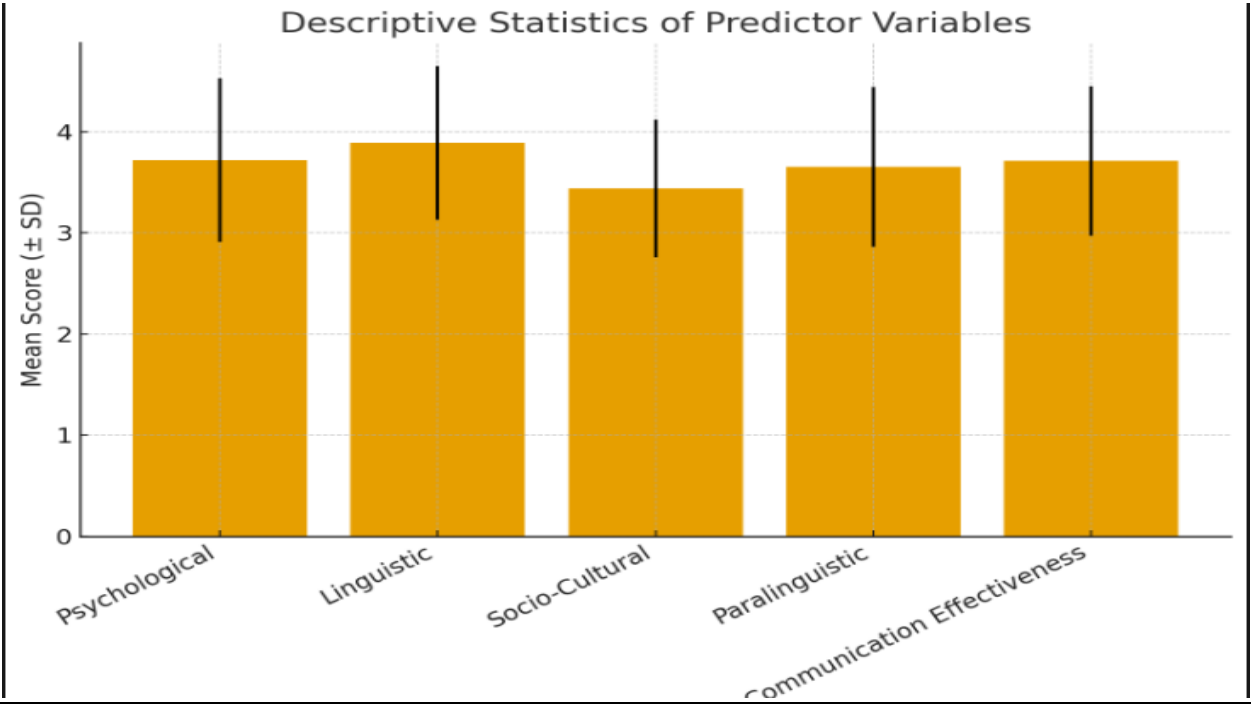
The descriptive analysis was viewed as less influential. To dig deeper into what drives communication effectiveness, we applied an Ordinal Logistic Regression (OLR) model, since the

dependent variable (verbal communication effectiveness) was assessed on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from very ineffective (1) to very effective (5).

Table 2: Result of Ordinal Logistic Regression Model					
Predictor Variable	B (Estimate)	Std. Error	Wald χ^2	p-value	Odds Ratio (Exp(B))
Psychological	0.78	0.21	13.81	0.000	2.18
Linguistic	0.91	0.25	14.04	0.000	2.48
Socio-Cultural	-0.19	0.20	0.90	0.342	0.83
Paralinguistic	0.85	0.22	14.92	0.000	2.34

Table 2 shows that psychological factors ($B = 0.78$, $OR = 2.18$, $p < 0.001$) significantly boosted the chances of better communication effectiveness, indicating that lower anxiety and higher confidence can enhance verbal skills. Further, the Table reveals that linguistic abilities ($B = 0.91$, $OR = 2.48$, $p < 0.001$) were also key predictors, emphasizing the value of a rich vocabulary and fluency. Paralinguistic elements ($B = 0.85$, $OR = 2.34$, $p < 0.001$), like tone and body language, played a significant role in improving communication effectiveness. Socio-cultural factors ($B = -0.19$, $p = 0.342$) didn't show statistical significance, suggesting that cultural or peer influences are less impactful compared to psychological and linguistic factors. The model showed solid fit statistics ($\chi^2 = 42.73$, $p < 0.001$), indicating that the predictors accounted for a significant amount of variance in students' verbal communication. Detailed Explanation of Ordinal Logistic Regression Results We opted for the ordinal logistic regression model because the outcome variable, verbal communication effectiveness, was assessed using a 5-point Likert.

Figure 2: Descriptive statistics of predictor variables



The overall model yielded a statistically significant result ($\chi^2 = 42.73$, $p < 0.001$), indicating that the psychological, linguistic, socio-cultural, and paralinguistic factors examined effectively distinguished between different levels of communication effectiveness. In simpler terms, these predictors helped explain a big chunk of the differences in how students perceive their communication skills. Now, let us break down what each predictor means: Psychological Factors ($B = 0.78$, $OR = 2.18$, $p < 0.001$) has a positive and significant coefficient, indicating that when students feel more psychologically prepared, such as being confident and less anxious, they tend to communicate better. The odds ratio of 2.18 suggests that for every one-point increase in their psychological factor score, students are 2.18 times more likely to improve in their communication effectiveness (i.e., moving from "moderate" to "effective"). Linguistic Factors ($B = 0.91$, $OR = 2.48$, $p < 0.001$), including linguistic skills such as vocabulary, grammar, and fluency, proved to be the strongest predictor of effective communication. With an odds ratio of 2.48, a one-point boost in linguistic skills means students are 148% more likely to communicate effectively. This highlights the importance of mastering language for undergraduates in achieving effective communication. Paralinguistic Factors ($B = 0.85$, $OR = 2.34$, $p < 0.001$) encompass aspects such as tone, pitch, pauses, gestures, and facial expressions. An odds ratio of 2.34 indicates that students who improved their paralinguistic skills were more than twice as likely to report better communication effectiveness. This shows how what we say can be just as important as how we say things. Socio-Cultural Factors ($B = -0.19$, $OR = 0.83$, $p = 0.342$) did not show statistical significance. -The negative coefficient hints at a slight (but not significant) drop in communication effectiveness when socio-cultural barriers are more substantial. It suggests that while culture Cut Points) The model also identified specific thresholds (α values) that distinguish different categories of the outcome variable, like the line between "ineffective" and "moderately effective." While we do not interpret these thresholds directly, they help the model assign probabilities to each category of communication effectiveness based on the predictor values.

Practical Implications

The results of this study provide valuable guidance for educators, curriculum planners, and policymakers at the University of Malakand and similar institutions. Since psychological readiness, language proficiency, and paralinguistic skills were found to be the strongest predictors of verbal communication, focused interventions are needed in these areas. Universities can organize targeted training sessions and workshops designed to build students' confidence, enhance their language abilities, and refine nonverbal communication techniques, including body language, eye contact, and vocal clarity. In addition, classroom practices such as group discussions, debates, role-plays, and presentations should be systematically integrated into the curriculum to ensure students receive continuous exposure and practice. Furthermore, cultivating a supportive learning environment where teachers encourage participation, provide constructive feedback, and peers offer positive reinforcement can significantly enhance communication performance. Technology can also play a vital role in improving communication skills. Digital platforms, language labs, and interactive applications may be incorporated to provide students with opportunities to practice beyond the classroom. Training and capacity-building programs for teachers should also be prioritized, as instructors with strong facilitation skills are better positioned to guide students in developing effective communication habits. Moreover, assessment methods should be diversified to include not only written examinations but also oral presentations, interviews, and group projects that directly evaluate communication proficiency. Embedding these strategies within both academic and co-curricular activities will not only improve communicative competence but also

foster teamwork, critical thinking, creativity, and leadership skills. Universities that prioritize these initiatives will better equip their graduates with the interpersonal and professional communication abilities required for academic achievement, career advancement, and meaningful participation in a globalized society. In the long term, such initiatives will also contribute to producing more confident, articulate, and socially responsible individuals who can have a positive impact on their communities and workplaces.

Conclusion

This study examined the factors influencing verbal communication among undergraduate students, focusing on psychological, linguistic, socio-cultural, and paralinguistic aspects. The findings revealed that psychological, linguistic, and paralinguistic factors are strong predictors of students' communication success, while socio-cultural influences appeared less significant. These results underscore the importance of fostering self-confidence, enhancing language proficiency, and refining delivery skills in achieving effective communication. Although socio-cultural factors played a minor role, they should not be disregarded, as they may indirectly affect students' attitudes and comfort levels in academic and social contexts. Overall, the study highlights the importance of supportive learning environments and targeted educational strategies in developing comprehensive communicative competence among undergraduates.

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