



## RESEARCH ARTICLE

Section: *Literature, Linguistics & Criticism***Exploring oral communication anxiety among translators at the Saif Bin Zayed Academy: case study of newly recruited translator**Ibtihal Hassan Mussa<sup>1</sup>, Rashad F. Alhasan<sup>2</sup>, Emad A. Alwreikat<sup>2</sup> & Marwan Harb Alqaryouti<sup>2\*</sup><sup>1</sup>The Ministry of Education, Iraq<sup>2</sup>Department of English Language, Literature and Translation, Faculty of Arts, Zarqa University, Jordan\*Correspondence: [ibtihal.hassan@ymail.com](mailto:ibtihal.hassan@ymail.com)**ABSTRACT**

This qualitative study investigates the psychological processes and mechanisms of Oral Communication Apprehension (OCA) in English used by translators at the Saif Bin Zayed Academy for Police and Security Sciences (SBZA) in the UAE. A purposive sample of five translators working in different departments at SBZA, where English is an important medium of communication, was selected. Interviews were held to understand their apprehensive actions in oral communication situations. The results showed that the apprehensive actions were a result of fear of negative evaluation, avoidance of professional engagement, speaking anxiety, lack of confidence in English proficiency, and self-criticism. Strategies to overcome these psychological hurdles to ensure smooth communication and increased speaking fluency in professional settings are proposed.

**KEYWORDS:** oral communication apprehension, newly recruited translators, interpretation, anxiety, technical terminology, sudden tasks, unclear accents, cognitive load, professional development

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## **Introduction**

Oral communication apprehension (OCA) is a common problem for many professionals, including translators. Translators working in SBZA are often subjected to high-pressure situations that demand efficient oral communication skills in English. Such situations can cause OCA, which has physical symptoms such as a pounding heart, sweating, and difficulty concentrating (Irving, Dobkin, & Park, 2009; Morgan, 2020). Contributing causes include fear of negative evaluation, perfectionism, lack of confidence, and negative experiences (Clark & Wells, 1995; Hofmann & DiBartolo, 2000; Stewart & Shamdasani, 2014). Studies on foreign language anxiety (FLA) emphasize the effects of apprehension on language learners and professionals (Horwitz, 2008; Jin, Zhang, & MacIntyre, 2020). Translators working in SBZA are also often subjected to similar situations, with OCA influencing their performance in professional settings, training, and public speaking.

## **Problem Statement**

Communication apprehension may impair the translators' effectiveness in their professional environment. In the context of SBZA, where English is a critical component of communication and success, the apprehensive behavior of translators may cause a lack of confidence, avoidance of critical communication, and ineffective performance. Although the increasing relevance of effective oral communication skills has been noted, there is a lack of research on the effects of OCA on translators in a critical context such as SBZA.

## **Related Studies**

Previous studies emphasize the existence of OCA among professionals. For example, Alkataba, Abdul-Hamid, and Bashir (2019) established a relationship between speaking anxiety and performance among Saudi Arabian learners. Additionally, Alsaleh (2018) established a relationship between reading anxiety and oral communication problems. Alghazo and Al-Wadi (2019) investigated the role of fear of judgment and a lack of confidence in intensifying OCA among EFL students. Translators at SBZA may also face similar anxiety regarding high performance standards and the need to deal with intricate linguistic and cultural contexts.

## **Research Method**

### **Research Design**

For this qualitative research, a phenomenological approach was used to investigate the psychological processes that lead to OCA among translators at SBZA. The approach allowed for a comprehensive investigation of the psychological processes among the participants, as suggested by Moustakas (1994). The data was gathered using semi-structured interviews to determine the perceptions of the translators on their communication difficulties.

### **Participants**

Nine translators (9 females), aged 23 to 32 years, were selected using purposive sampling. The participants were selected from different departments at SBZA, allowing for a diverse range of tasks and communication contexts. The selection was based on anxiety shown during verbal communication, and anonymity and withdrawal rights were guaranteed.

### **Data Collection Tools**

The interviews were structured in a manner that would enable the exploration of the psychological processes involved in OCA among translators. The questions were designed to target the experiences of the translators in English communication during meetings, presentations, and training sessions.

### **Data Analysis**

Thematic analysis was employed to look for patterns in the data as suggested by Miles and Huberman (1984). The themes that emerged included fear of negative evaluation, avoidance of participation, speech anxiety, lack of confidence, and self-criticism.

## **Results and Discussion**

### **Fear of Negative Evaluation**

The translators were more afraid of being negatively judged by their peers and superiors, which was often due to the high professional standards that were expected in SBZA, where accuracy and confidence are of utmost importance. Additionally, the cultural ideal of excellence and the fear of mistakes could also be a reason for such feelings, resulting in more pressure while carrying out the task of oral communication. This fear led to less participation in meetings and a reluctance to express ideas. A participant said:

“I always worry about making mistakes during presentations. I fear that my colleagues will think I’m not proficient enough in English.” (Participant 5)

### **Avoidance of Engagement**

The translators often admitted to having avoided situations that require oral communication, especially in critical situations such as meetings with high-ranking officials, presentations, and teamwork. This avoidance impacts their professional responsibilities because they will not be able to attend critical decision-making meetings, and they will not be visible as effective communicators in the organization. The fear of this avoidance was fear of failure and negative feedback. A participant said:

“I prefer written communication because speaking puts me in a vulnerable position. It’s easier to avoid than to risk embarrassment.” (Participant 9)

### **Speaking Anxiety**

Examples of physical symptoms that were prevalent among the participants during public speaking include sweating and a racing heart. Such symptoms affected the participants’ ability to express their ideas clearly. One of the participants stated:

“I feel my heart racing whenever I’m asked to speak during meetings. It’s overwhelming and hard to focus.” (Participant 9)

### **Lack of Confidence in English Skills**

Though very competent in translation skills, the participants identified areas for improvement in speaking skills, especially in dealing with anxiety and increasing confidence in speaking in a professional setting. This lack of confidence resulted in self-doubt. A translator said:

“I’m confident in my translation skills, but speaking is different. I’m always second-guessing myself.” (Participant 1)

### **Self-Criticism**

They also reported self-criticism as a result of communication failures. This self-criticism resulted in a lack of confidence and reluctance to participate in future communication tasks. For instance, some of the translators reported a tendency to overanalyze their mistakes. This made it difficult for them to concentrate on their strengths and accomplishments. Some of the strategies that can be used to cope with anxiety include developing a growth mindset, looking for constructive feedback, and taking part in training programs.

“After a presentation, I dwell on every mistake I made. It’s exhausting and makes me dread the next opportunity.” (Participant 7)

### **Confusion with Difficult, Uncommon, or Technical Terms**

A unique finding in this research was the struggle that the interns faced when dealing with difficult, less common, or technical terms. This was particularly evident when the participants were asked to talk about difficult topics or translate technical terms. Research has indicated that the complexity of language can

increase anxiety levels and impact effective communication (Kassem & Al-Harthy, 2022; Zhang & Liu, 2021). One of the participants stated:

“Some terms are so hard to pronounce or even understand in context, especially when I have to translate on the spot. This makes me anxious and impacts my ability to communicate effectively.” (Participant 6)

This was further exacerbated by the fear of being misunderstood or misunderstanding the terms, which further heightened the OCA. Some of the participants mentioned that they were particularly anxious when speaking in technical meetings or when translating for senior officials. One of the interns stated:

“I get so anxious when I hear some of the terms used in technical meetings, and I worry that I’ll mispronounce or misuse them.” (Participant 4)

## **Challenges in Translation and Interpretation Tasks**

### **Translation Anxiety**

Although many interns were capable of dealing with written translation assignments, the anxiety related to oral translation or translation under time pressure was a common issue. The stress level was higher among the participants when they were required to perform oral translation tasks, especially when the translation involved complex or technical texts. A study on translation anxiety indicates that the stress of producing a correct and coherent translation under time pressure can increase anxiety levels (Ting & Wong, 2021). A participant explained:

“When I translate orally, especially during meetings or interpreting for an important person, I feel this overwhelming pressure to get it right. One mistake could impact the outcome.” (Participant 1)

Likewise, some interns experienced anxiety during real-time translation tasks during police briefings or when interpreting legal conversations. This anxiety resulted in mistakes or pauses, which could have adverse effects on their professional reputation. According to a study by Martínez-Ávila (2022), oral translation tasks are anxiety-provoking due to the need for immediacy and accuracy.

### **Interpretation Stress**

Interpretation tasks, especially simultaneous interpretation, were found to be one of the most stressful tasks for the interns. The task of interpreting the message of the speaker immediately and accurately added to the stress. As Zhang and Liu (2021) explained, interpreters experience stress in high-pressure situations, where the need for immediate and accurate communication is of utmost importance. One of the interns explained:

“Simultaneous interpretation is the most stressful task for me. I have to interpret the information quickly and translate it immediately, and I am afraid that I might miss something or say the wrong thing.” (Participant 3)

Some of the participants felt that during police debriefing or legal interpretation tasks, the fast-paced setting contributed to their stress. This was especially true when they were asked to interpret difficult legal or security-related terms, which made the task even more challenging.

### **Cognitive Load in Translation and Interpretation**

Apart from the emotional obstacles, the participants also experienced a high level of cognitive overload when translating or interpreting complex texts or speeches. The cognitive overload was further heightened by the need to process the information quickly and accurately. According to the cognitive load theory (Sweller, 2011), translation and interpretation activities are mentally demanding, and when anxiety is a factor, it can negatively affect cognitive functions. One of the participants stated:

“When I translate a difficult piece of text, I find myself overwhelmed by the information I have to retain. I’m afraid of losing information or making errors.” (Participant 2)

The cognitive overload and performance anxiety acted as an obstacle to effective communication and translation. The interns reported that some activities, such as the interpretation of high-level technical or security information, caused them more anxiety due to the high level of mental effort involved.

### **Preparation and Practice as Coping Mechanisms**

Some of the interns also shared that preparation and practice before a speech can reduce the interns’ anxiety. Being exposed to speaking translation tasks and having the opportunity to receive feedback were found to be effective in overcoming the interns’ communication apprehension. A recent study carried out by González (2023) showed that training and practice can help reduce the anxiety levels of translation and interpretation tasks. One of the participants shared:

“Preparing in advance and practicing with my colleagues really helps. I feel more confident when I know what to expect and have practiced beforehand.” (Participant 2)

### **Challenges with Complex Terminology**

The internship students at SBZA felt a certain degree of anxiety when confronted with complex or technical vocabulary, which is also prevalent in translation and interpretation tasks. The students felt that some technical vocabulary related to security, law enforcement, and police technical terms was particularly challenging. This sometimes led to the students being reluctant and afraid of making errors. Research has indicated that the treatment of technical vocabulary increases the degree of cognitive complexity and is one of the contributing factors to increased communication anxiety (Zhang & Liu, 2021). One of the participants said:

“Some vocabulary is so difficult to translate or interpret correctly. I feel anxious because I don’t want to get a key term wrong and mess up the message.” (Participant 3)

The anxiety caused by technical vocabulary was further compounded when the internship students were asked to interpret or translate under timed conditions, when they had limited time to verify the correctness of their work.

### **Time Pressure in Real-Time Interpretation**

Time pressure was also identified as one of the factors causing stress in translation and interpretation. In the case of simultaneous interpretation, where the interpreter has to interpret the message as soon as it is received, the interns felt more stressed. The interns felt that they might be missing some crucial information or even misinterpret the message, which might result in misunderstandings or professional consequences. Recent studies have also shown that the tremendous pressure of real-time interpretation has been contributing to the rising levels of anxiety, which in turn has been affecting performance (Ting & Wong, 2021). An intern commented:

“Real-time interpretation is very stressful. You have to process everything at the same time and ensure that nothing is lost in the process, which is very difficult.” (Participant 8)

This has resulted in cognitive overload, where the intern has experienced mental fatigue due to the simultaneous processing and production of language.

### **Cognitive Load and Mental Fatigue in Translation**

Another important observation made was the mental fatigue that the interns underwent because of the high cognitive load involved in the translation process, especially when it came to longer or more complex translation tasks. The interns felt mentally fatigued after completing the translation or interpretation tasks for longer periods of time, which affected their concentration levels and ability to translate correctly. As Zhang and Liu

(2021) wrote, “When interns are asked to translate or interpret complex or lengthy texts, the high cognitive load may cause mental fatigue and errors. One of the interns said:

“After translating a long passage, I feel mentally exhausted. It’s difficult to maintain the quality, and I find myself making errors because of fatigue.” (Participant 6)

The mental fatigue was observed to be more in the case of legal or security-related translation tasks, where accuracy is of utmost importance.

### **Fear of Miscommunication in Legal and Security Contexts**

The participants were particularly nervous when they were asked to translate or interpret legal or security-related texts. The participants were worried that they might miscommunicate the information or that they might not include important information in the translation. Legal translation involves the interpretation of abstract ideas that have very specific meanings, and the participant was aware that the implications of errors would be very serious. Recent studies have shown that the anxiety of legal translation is prevalent, and interpreters and translators are often afraid of the professional implications of errors in such specialized fields (Ting & Wong, 2021). One of the interns said:

“Legal translation is particularly stressful. If I get something wrong, it could affect the outcome of an important case or situation.” (Participant 10)

### **Stress from Interpreting for Senior Officials**

One of the distinct sources of stress that was identified by the participants was the task of interpreting for senior police officers or high-ranking officials. In this particular scenario, the interns not only felt stressed due to the complexity of the issue that was being discussed but also due to the presence of the high-ranking officials whom they were interpreting for. This particular situation led to the interns feeling more anxious, which made it difficult for them to focus and provide a correct translation or interpretation. Recent studies have identified that interpreters who work with high-status individuals are more likely to feel high levels of stress and communication apprehension (Perez & Gutierrez, 2021). One of the interns stated:

“When I’m interpreting for senior officials, I feel a lot of pressure. There’s so much at stake, and I don’t want to make a mistake in front of them.” (Participant 12)

The interns felt that they were under a lot of pressure, which made it difficult for them to perform at their best.

### **Real-Time Translation and Self-Doubt**

Self-doubt was also cited as another factor that led to translation anxiety. Many of the interns who took part in the study reported that they have often doubted themselves during live translation exercises, especially when translating to a large gathering or for a high-ranking government official. This self-doubt led the interns to hesitate, stutter, and make mistakes during the translation exercises. According to Martínez-Ávila (2022), self-doubt can cause interpreters to doubt themselves during critical translation exercises, which in turn affects their translation performance. One of the participants said:

“When I am doing a live translation, I often question myself about the words that I choose to translate. I feel that I am not translating the message correctly, and that makes me even more nervous.” (Participant 4)

The self-doubt that the interns experienced during the live translation exercises may also impact the success of the translation or interpretation.

### **Coping Mechanisms for Translation Anxiety**

Some of the interns highlighted the application of coping strategies in dealing with anxiety when carrying out translation and interpretation. The interns used coping strategies such as deep breathing exercises, preparing mentally before undertaking tasks, and peer feedback. Frequent practice, especially in a simulated setting, was also cited as an effective means of overcoming anxiety and increasing confidence. Current research highlights the significance of preparation and practice in lowering anxiety levels among translators and interpreters (González, 2023). One of the interns said:

“I have learned to do deep breathing exercises before a major task. It helps to calm my nerves. Practicing more also gives me confidence that I can cope with the pressure.” (Participant 2)

Feedback from peers and superiors was also identified as a critical factor in enhancing performance and alleviating anxiety. The interns indicated that receiving feedback helped them in understanding their areas of improvement and reinforced their confidence in their capacities.

### **Conclusion**

The results of this study also bring to the fore that Oral Communication Apprehension (OCA) and anxiety are major hurdles to efficient translation and interpretation work by internship students at SBZA. The issues of fear of negative evaluation, speaking apprehension, lack of confidence, self-criticism, confusion with technical terms, and mental overload when translating and interpreting are major issues that impact the performance of these students. It is important to adopt approaches that will address these anxieties, such as practice, exposure to real-life situations, and professional feedback. This will enable these students to perform their work efficiently as translation interns at SBZA.

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