

The Perspectives of Students on the Role of Instructors' Facemasks in Hindering the Oral Communication Skills of Students Learning English at PYD, PSAU in the KSA

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Abstract—The present study aims to find out the impact of instructors' facemasks in hindering oral communication skills among students by investigating the factors that lead to such a hindrance in language learning and suggesting suitable solutions for reducing the negative effects of wearing facemasks and bettering communication skills. Findings indicate that, though wearing a facemask is mandatory for personal health and prevention against COVID-19, it hinders the students from developing their oral communication skills and prevents them from observing the facial expressions of English instructors that are hidden behind those facemasks. Tone and pitch are very essential in the process of oral communication and the changing of speech sounds is helpful to maintain oral communication speech channels. Nonetheless, it was observed that transparent facemask solves the problems of hiding facial and verbal expressions of the lips, and the video lessons compensate for the oral communication weaknesses of students. In view of the findings, it was therefore recommended that wearing a transparent facemask along with providing students with extra video lessons can be effective in helping students improve their oral communication skills.

Index Terms—COVID-19, facemask, learning English, oral communication skills

I. INTRODUCTION

Preparatory year university students recently witnessed many changes in how they learn due to the quarantine and social distancing imposed by the health authorities during the COVID-19 pandemic. Some students faced complete lockdown and studied online while others continued to study face-to-face in the classroom but they adhered to social distancing and other health requirements for instructors and students, such as wearing facemasks. According to Yi et al. (2021, p. 1), “The coronavirus pandemic has resulted in the recommended/required use of facemasks in public”. Indeed, during the COVID-19 pandemic, wearing a mask became mandatory in both open and closed areas in all public and private health, social and educational institutions. As a result, the learning of oral communication skills was notably affected by this practice of wearing facemasks.

It is sometimes difficult to understand the message conveyed by the speaker because of the mask which, in most cases, hinders vocal tone, facial expressions, gestures, and sometimes even direct and focused eye contact. In fact, Spitzer (2020) states that “covering the lower half of the face reduces the ability to communicate, interpret, and mimic the expressions of those with whom we interact” (p. 1). Young and Travis (2012), assert that “In the two-way communication process, people share meaning, verbally and nonverbally” (p. 2). For that reason, the present study seeks to reveal the role of instructors' facemasks in hindering the learning of oral communication skills both verbally and nonverbally among students. It also seeks to discover the resulting difficulties of learning oral communication skills and suggests possible solutions to help students learn them more effectively while both they and their instructors are wearing facemasks.

Communication is essential to conveying a message to its recipients. According to Young and Travis (2012), “Communication is a two-way process” (p. 2). Wearing facemasks became an obligation during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, when English language instructors wear masks, it can affect the students understanding while learning. These effects are many. As a result, the present study also attempts to clarify the role instructors' facemasks play in hindering oral communication skills according to Saudi Arabian English language students at the tertiary level.

Oral communication is defined as “the exchange of thought, notions, information and knowledge between speaker and listener” (Dimpleby & Burton, 1998, p. 26). It has also been defined as “either the exchange of thoughts or information by speech, signals, knowledge, awareness, conduct or as an interpersonal rapport between individuals” (Rai, 2010, p. 6). Kotzman and Kotzman (2008) believe that “Communication is a simultaneous, two-part process involving

speaking and listening—even when you are talking to yourself” (p. 18). Indeed, in order to communicate you need to exchange a message; this message can be in the form of thought information, knowledge, signals, speech, writing, or behavior. Therefore, communication is extremely vital for building relationships, enabling people to share their experiences and connect with others. When people communicate they tend “to initiate or improve relationships, get things we want, negotiate the best price, conduct business, meet people, function in teams and learn new things” (Young & Travis, 2012, p. 3).

The communication process includes “communicators, messages, a channel, circumstances, feedback, and, in some instances, noise” (Young & Travis, 2012, p. 4). According to Rickheit and Strohner (2008), in communication situations, two partners use the following five links: “information transmission and feedback; informational medium; referential knowledge; partner knowledge and mindreading; and physical and social situation” (p. 20). The researchers think that the above-mentioned five links enhance the realization of efficient communication which yields fruitful and successful understanding between partners.

The message can be verbal and nonverbal; nonverbal messages are actions without words. Nonverbals can be gestures, the way the voice is used (whether it is loud, soft, high, or low), and the clothes people wear. The way the message is replicated can enhance or hinder the effective decoding of a verbal message. Moreover, when someone speaks, the characteristics of delivery include the tone, pitch, rate, and projection, and all of these vocal characteristics of a verbal message help emphasize or de-emphasize key thoughts. “If messages are not delivered properly, then their meaning may be distorted and decoded incorrectly” (Young & Travis, 2012, p. 6). The above-mentioned use of verbal and nonverbal messages helps to better the communication link between two or more people. Incomplete practices of communication will produce unclear understanding and any ideas conveyed may be misinterpreted. Coleman presents actionable body language tips to compliment verbal skills such as “stimulate positive feelings by smiling, keep your voice down to appear authoritative, improve the speech by using gestures, maintaining eye contact and managing facial expressions” (2018, p. 21). Harmer (2001, p. 64) asserts that the teacher “is a teaching aid and a part of the roles adopted in the classroom.” He further ensures that “we are a kind of teaching aids ourselves so that we are useful when using mime and gestures, as language models and as providers of comprehensible input” (Harmer, 2001, p. 64). Mimes and gestures are strong mediums to convey meaning and make the learning atmosphere fruitful. Meaningful and clear messages are a good attempt at providing a better and more productive understanding for language learners in the process of communication.

Spitzer’s (2020) comment about masking the face partially makes it obvious that facemasks render it difficult to converse, elucidate, and show actual facial expressions which are very important to communicating meaning in a language classroom. This clearly shows that facemasks are actual barriers to communication and interpretation and hinder interaction between communicating partners.

Speaking is the medium that language learners use to interact verbally to realize specific goals or to express their viewpoints. This can also be referred to as talking. Widdowson (1978) holds the view that “We can then say that talking involves the use of both aural and visual media since it is the activity which makes use of gesture and other paralinguistic phenomena” (p. 59). Speaking is a crucial skill to develop because it is the most common way people communicate globally.

Factors that impact speaking performance include motivation, personality type (introversion or extroversion), self-confidence, anxiety, and class size (Ying et al, 2021; Mohammed & Abdallah, 2020). The other factor, added by the researchers of the present study, is the wearing of facemasks which decreases the abilities of efficient communication between instructors and learners of English.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Eight previous studies relevant to the present work were examined. Alrowayeh (2017) stated that the importance of his study arose from the importance of oral communication in EFL learning. It had been noticed, in general, that not much emphasis was given to the teaching of spoken communication skills in English classes while there was a great stress put upon the other skills like reading and writing. In his research conducted in 2017, Alrowayeh focused on students from various grade levels at the Higher Institute of Telecommunication and Navigation (HITN) in Kuwait. Employing a questionnaire as the primary data collection tool, his study revealed several factors influencing oral communication in the EFL classroom. These factors included teachers’ attitudes towards student errors, classroom atmosphere, student anxiety and fear of making mistakes, reluctance to communicate in English inside and outside the classroom, challenges in speaking English, excessive emphasis on grammar in the curriculum, and limited utilization of recordings for listening exercises.

Palpanadan and Ahmed (2018) explored the crucial challenges faced by graduates when they tried to converse in English. A survey technique was used to collect data from 150 Civil Engineering graduates from a Malaysian university. Data was analyzed using Descriptive Statistics and Factor Analysis which showed that there were four prime factors responsible for poor language skills: lack of practice, poor reading habits, poor vocabulary and poor study habits.

Roy (2020) conducted his study in Australian secondary school classrooms where masks were used when teaching Drama. Roy used observation followed by interviews with students as tools of the study. The results indicated that masks could potentially benefit students academically, emotionally, and in their self-awareness development.

Specifically, masks may offer a more inclusive approach to assisting students with Special Education Needs (SEN), enhancing their confidence and overall educational journey.

In his examination of the influence of facemasks on language instruction, Spitzer (2020) suggests that wearing facemasks could play a role in curbing the transmission of the SARS-CoV-2 virus, particularly given the potential for transmission by asymptomatic individuals. However, his investigation also revealed that covering the lower part of the face hindered the ability to communicate, interpret, and mirror the facial expressions of others during interactions. This resulted in decreased recognition of positive emotions and heightened amplification of negative emotions. Consequently, emotional mimicry, contagion, and overall emotional expression were diminished, adversely affecting the rapport between educators and students and undermining group cohesion and learning outcomes. The benefits and burdens of facemasks in educational institutions, therefore, should be seriously considered and made clear to both teachers and students.

Yi et al. (2021) asserted that the onset of the coronavirus pandemic led to the widespread recommendation or requirement of wearing facemasks in public settings. Their findings revealed that the use of facemasks posed challenges to communication, particularly in environments with competing background noise. Therefore, it was imperative to assess the potential impact of wearing facemasks on speech clarity in noisy surroundings, where excessive background noise could hinder effective communication.

In their study, Yi et al. (2021) investigated the effects of wearing transparent facemasks and employing clear speech techniques to enhance verbal communication. The researchers evaluated listener word identification accuracy across four conditions: (1) different types of masks (i.e., no mask, transparent mask, and disposable facemask), (2) presentation modes (i.e., auditory and audiovisual), (3) speaking styles (i.e., conversational speech and clear speech), and (4) with two types of background noise (i.e., speech-shaped noise and four-talker babble at a -5 signal-to-noise ratio).

The results indicated that, in noisy environments, listeners' word identification performance was inferior when speakers wore disposable facemasks or transparent masks compared to no masks. Listeners exhibited better word identification accuracy in the audiovisual presentation condition when clear speech was utilized. Moreover, the combination of facemasks and background noise had a detrimental effect on speech intelligibility for listeners. Furthermore, transparent masks were found to enhance the comprehension of target sentences by providing visual cues. Lastly, clear speech was demonstrated to mitigate challenging communication scenarios, compensating for the lack of visual information and diminished acoustic signals.

Truong et al. (2021) investigated the effect of facemasks on listeners' recall of spoken sentences where 32 native German listeners watched video recordings of a native speaker producing German sentences with and without facemasks. Afterward, they completed a cued-recall task. The results showed that listeners recalled significantly fewer words when the sentences had been spoken with facemasks. This could imply that wearing facemasks raised cognitive processing requirements, potentially reducing the capacity to encode spoken language into memory. This finding holds significance for policymakers navigating the effects of facemasks on verbal communication amidst the COVID-19 pandemic.

Botalico et al. (2020) examined the impact of facemask usage on classroom communication, assessing three types of facemasks - fabric, surgical, and N95 - on the Speech Intelligibility (SI) of college students in simulated classroom settings. The study involved presenting speech stimuli amidst speech-shaped noise, with a signal-to-noise ratio of $+3$ dB, and varying reverberation times (0.4 s and 3.1 s) to replicate realistic classroom conditions. Results indicated that fabric masks led to a notably greater decrease in SI compared to the other masks, suggesting that surgical masks or N95 masks are preferable in educational settings.

Porschmann et al. (2020) asserted that the global mandate for wearing facemasks during the COVID-19 pandemic has become widespread. Their study delved into how typical facemasks affect voice projection. To assess the transmission loss induced by masks and their impact on voice directionality, the research evaluated the full-spherical voice directionality of a dummy head equipped with a mouth simulator, each covered with various masks: medical masks, filtering facepiece respirator masks, and cloth face coverings. Findings revealed a substantial frequency-dependent transmission loss, particularly above 2 kHz, albeit varying across different masks. Additionally, the two facepiece respirator masks notably altered speech directionality, as evidenced by the Directivity Index (DI). In comparison to measurements conducted without a mask, the DI showed deviations of up to 7 dB at frequencies exceeding 3 kHz. Conversely, deviations for all other masks remained below 2 dB across all third-octave frequency bands.

III. METHODOLOGY

This study aims to find out the role played by instructors' facemasks in hindering oral communication skills among students. It investigates how wearing facemasks hampers the learning of English and suggests suitable solutions for better communication skills to combat the effects of wearing facemasks.

It is hypothesized that the instructors' facemasks affect the learning of oral communication skills by English students in the Preparatory Year Deanship program. Hence, the findings from this research hold value for curriculum developers

and syllabus designers of English language programs in Saudi Arabia and similar educational institutions worldwide. Additionally, language instructors across various settings stand to benefit from the insights offered by this study.

Furthermore, the study is limited to the effects of wearing facemasks by instructors of English at the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia’s Prince Sattam Bin Abdulaziz University in the Preparatory Year Deanship program during the 2021/2022 academic year.

A qualitative and descriptive research method was used with data being collected through a questionnaire where 40 students responded to the questionnaire statements. Moreover, the method adopted was descriptive and analytical where the researcher used 18 items for the questionnaire which were modified by experts in the field of applied linguistics.

Tools & Procedures

The questionnaire was distributed to 40 Engineering students in their second semester of the Preparatory Year Deanship program. It is structured to be answered by ticking “Agree”, “Not sure”, or “Disagree”. The questionnaires were then analyzed by SPSS. The analysis of the questionnaire given to the study participants is presented in Table 1, and the validity and reliability of the data in Table 2.

TABLE 1
ANALYSIS OF THE QUESTIONNAIRE DATA

Statement	Category	Frequency	Percentage
1. Wearing a facemask is very important to my health.	Agree	38	95.0%
	Not sure	1	2.5%
	Disagree	1	2.5%
2. Oral interaction between the instructor of English and us is very important.	Agree	35	87.5%
	Not sure	3	7.5%
	Disagree	2	5.0%
3. It is hard sometimes to communicate with a facemask.	Agree	29	72.5%
	Not sure	4	10.0%
	Disagree	7	17.5%
4. Wearing a facemask sometimes does not help me listen well to the English instructor's voice.	Agree	30	75.0%
	Not sure	4	10.0%
	Disagree	6	15.0%
5. Wearing a facemask affects my oral speech to the English instructor.	Agree	29	72.5%
	Not sure	7	17.5%
	Disagree	4	10.0%
6. Wearing a facemask affects my oral speech to my classmates.	Agree	28	70.0%
	Not sure	6	15.0%
	Disagree	6	15.0%
7. Sometimes, I cannot concentrate well with the instructor while he is talking to us because of the facemask.	Agree	31	77.5%
	Not sure	4	10.0%
	Disagree	5	12.5%
8. In order to enhance better understanding, I have to see the instructor's facial expressions.	Agree	34	85.0%
	Not sure	2	5.0%
	Disagree	4	10.0%
9. I cannot notice if the instructor of English is upset while he is wearing a facemask.	Agree	27	67.5%
	Not sure	5	12.5%
	Disagree	8	20.0%
10. I cannot see the instructor's smile when he is wearing a facemask.	Agree	35	87.5%
	Not sure	2	5.0%
	Disagree	3	7.5%
11. Seeing the lips while speaking with the English instructor is very helpful in communication.	Agree	34	85.0%
	Not sure	3	7.5%
	Disagree	3	7.5%
12. I sometimes do not notice the instructor when he is looking at me to answer a question.	Agree	29	72.5%
	Not sure	7	17.5%
	Disagree	4	10.0%
13. The English instructor's tone of voice must be clear.	Agree	28	70.0%
	Not sure	8	20.0%
	Disagree	4	10.0%
14. Altering of speech sounds while the English instructor is talking is very helpful to understand his words.	Agree	32	80.0%
	Not sure	6	15.0%
	Disagree	2	5.0%
15. I do not understand the instructor's speech while he is wearing a facemask and when there is a little noise inside the classroom	Agree	33	82.5%
	Not sure	3	7.5%
	Disagree	4	10.0%
16. It is important to make the mask transparent.	Agree	29	72.5%
	Not sure	6	15.0%
	Disagree	5	12.5%
17. It is important to wear a transparent mask to see the lips and all facial expressions of the instructor while he is speaking.	Agree	31	77.5%
	Not sure	5	12.5%
	Disagree	4	10.0%
18. It is sometimes a very good idea to use video lessons in English to help me communicate instead of real lessons taught by the instructor who is wearing a facemask.	Agree	34	85.0%
	Not sure	4	10.0%
	Disagree	2	5.0%

TABLE 2
VALIDITY AND RELIABILITY OF THE QUESTIONNAIRE

Cronbach's Alpha	No. of Items	
0.986	18	
	Reliability	Validity
S 1	0.577	0.760
S 2	0.863	0.929
S 3	0.942	0.971
S 4	0.961	0.980
S 5	0.963	0.981
S 6	0.949	0.974
S 7	0.967	0.983
S 8	0.924	0.961
S 9	0.894	0.946
S 10	0.444	0.666
S 11	0.909	0.953
S 12	0.963	0.981
S 13	0.945	0.972
S 14	0.929	0.964
S 15	0.945	0.972
S 16	0.968	0.984
S 17	0.966	0.983
S 18	0.904	0.951
P Value	0.04	

IV. DISCUSSIONS AND INTERPRETATION OF THE QUESTIONNAIRE DATA

The opinions of 38 respondents out of 40 agreed with the first statement “Wearing a facemask is very important to my health” which clearly declared the importance of wearing facemasks to protect their health. Spitzer’s (2020) assertion coincided with the first statement which stated that facemasks could prevent the spread of the virus SARS-CoV-2 in particular as it could spread from people who present no symptoms.

Thirty-five respondents agreed that “Oral interaction between the instructor of English and us is very important” - the second statement of the questionnaire, while 29 respondents agreed with the third statement which presented the idea that “It is hard sometimes to communicate with a facemask.” This coincides with 30 respondents who agree with statement four: “Wearing a facemask sometimes does not help me listen well to the English instructor’s voice.” Moreover, 29 of the respondents agreed that “Wearing a facemask affects my oral speech to the English instructor.” - the fifth statement - and 28 participants agreed with the sixth statement: “Wearing a facemask affects my oral speech to my classmates.” This leads to the seventh statement which was “Sometimes, I cannot concentrate well with the instructor while he is talking to us because of the facemask.” to which 31 respondents agreed.

It was apparent from the questionnaire that, despite the positive use of facemasks, they hampered effective oral communication skills between the instructors and the students. It was stated earlier by Alrowayeh (2017) that the facemask was one of the factors that affected oral communication skills in EFL classrooms. Moreover, Palpanadan and Ahmed (2018) found four primary factors as barriers to effective communication skills: lack of practice, poor reading habits, poor vocabulary and poor study habits. Indeed, these factors can occur when wearing a facemask. The results of the study conducted by Bottalico et al. (2020) postulated that the fabric mask yielded a significantly greater reduction in speech intelligibility compared to other masks, which jibes with the present research. They further recommended surgical masks or N95 masks in teaching environments.

Continuing with the questionnaire statements, 34 out of 40 respondents, agreed that “In order to enhance better understanding, I have to see the instructor’s facial expressions”. In the four statements that followed, the majority of the respondents agreed that they could not see if the instructor was “upset”, “smiling”, moving his lips or even looking at the student while wearing a facemask and answering a question.

Respondents agreed at a frequency of 28, 32, and 33, respectively, with statements 13, 14, and 15 (“The English instructor’s tone of voice must be clear”, “Altering of speech sounds while the English instructor is talking is very helpful to understand his words”, and “I do not understand the instructor’s speech while he is wearing a facemask and when there is a little noise inside the classroom”, respectively).

As a result, certain body parts as a whole including lip movement, smiling, eye contact and even the feelings conveyed take part in reaching the goal of communication to yield fruitful interaction in learning English which in the presence of the facemasks is missed or not realized.

In statements 16 (“It is important to make the mask transparent.”) and 17 (“It is important to wear a transparent mask to see the lips and all facial expressions of the instructor while he is speaking.”), 29 and 31 respondents, respectively, agreed that the facemask should be transparent to see the lips and facial expressions of the instructor while speaking.

A study by Yi et al. (2021) concurred with the above findings and asserted that transparent masks facilitated the ability to understand target sentences by providing visual information.

In the final statement of the questionnaire – “It is sometimes a very good idea to use video lessons in English to help me communicate instead of real lessons taught by the instructor who is wearing a facemask.” - 34 respondents agreed with the idea of video lessons to compensate for handicaps caused by the lack of direct communication because of the facemasks barrier.

As a result of the questionnaire, there must be some suitable suggestions and solutions to such problems in interactive communication in the presence of facemask use. It is very wise to adapt to the present situation and coexist with the problems of facemask use. The focus on using transparent masks makes students familiar with additional sources of virtual oral communication for the sake of vivid interaction which is represented in video lessons. In the study carried out by Porschmann et al. (2020), the results showed a significant frequency-dependent transmission loss which varied depending on the mask.

V. FINDINGS

The researchers found that wearing a facemask is a mandatory procedure for personal health against COVID-19; however, the use of facemasks hampers the students from enhancing their oral communication skills because facemasks hide or partially or fully obscure the facial expressions of English instructors. The tone and pitch of voice are very essential in the process of oral communication and changing speech sounds helps maintain oral communication speech channels. Therefore, a transparent facemask solves the problem of the masks hiding facial and verbal expressions. In addition, video lessons compensate for the oral communication weaknesses of students to a large extent.

VI. CONCLUSION

The assumption on which this paper is based clearly states that the instructors' facemasks affected the oral communication skills of students in learning English at the Preparatory Year Deanship. Moreover, the results obtained in the present paper indicate that the majority of the students regard the importance of the facemask as something vital to keep them safe and healthy. However, oral interaction is also essential, and it is hard to communicate with a facemask because wearing a facemask does not help students hear properly, and to that end, it affects their acquisition of fluent oral communication. Furthermore, facial expressions enhance the understanding of the students, but when the students cannot see the instructors' expressions, they fail to find out whether the instructor is upset or happy. The masks on their instructor's faces conceal their lip movements, and even when the instructor seeks an answer from a student, the mask poses hindrance to oral communication. The instructor's tone of voice must be clear because the alteration of speech sound is very efficient in oral communication. Students and teachers are therefore encouraged to use transparent facemasks so as to enable them to see the lip movement and facial expressions for vivid oral communication skills. Students can also be compensated by watching extra lessons of video in teaching English to enable them to have direct oral communication skills enhancement. Answers from respondents are in favor of the hypothesis assumption. Hence, the analysis of the hypothesis proved that it has been achieved and confirmed by the questionnaire statements. It is, however, recommended to wear a transparent facemask which can be effective in oral communication. It is also necessary to provide students with extra video lessons to help them reinforce their oral communication skills.

APPENDIX

TABLE 3
THE QUESTIONNAIRE

Statement	Category	Frequency	Percentage
1. Wearing a facemask is very important to my health.	Agree		
	Not sure		
	Disagree		
2. Oral interaction between the instructor of English and us is very important.	Agree		
	Not sure		
	Disagree		
3. It is hard sometimes to communicate with a facemask.	Agree		
	Not sure		
	Disagree		
4. Wearing a facemask sometimes does not help me listen well to the English instructor's voice.	Agree		
	Not sure		
	Disagree		
5. Wearing a facemask affects my oral speech to the English instructor.	Agree		
	Not sure		
	Disagree		
6. Wearing a facemask affects my oral speech to my classmates.	Agree		
	Not sure		
	Disagree		
7. Sometimes, I cannot concentrate well with the instructor while he is talking to us because of the facemask.	Agree		
	Not sure		
	Disagree		
8. In order to enhance better understanding, I have to see the instructor's facial expressions.	Agree		
	Not sure		
	Disagree		
9. I cannot notice if the instructor of English is upset while he is wearing a facemask.	Agree		
	Not sure		
	Disagree		
10. I cannot see the instructor's smile when he is wearing a facemask.	Agree		
	Not sure		
	Disagree		
11. Seeing the lips while speaking with the English instructor is very helpful in communication.	Agree		
	Not sure		
	Disagree		
12. I sometimes do not notice the instructor when he is looking at me to answer a question.	Agree		
	Not sure		
	Disagree		
13. The English instructor's tone of voice must be clear.	Agree		
	Not sure		
	Disagree		
14. Altering of speech sounds while the English instructor is talking is very helpful to understand his words.	Agree		
	Not sure		
	Disagree		
15. I do not understand the instructor's speech while he is wearing a facemask and when there is a little noise inside the classroom	Agree		
	Not sure		
	Disagree		
16. It is important to make the mask transparent.	Agree		
	Not sure		
	Disagree		
17. It is important to wear a transparent mask to see the lips and all facial expressions of the instructor while he is speaking.	Agree		
	Not sure		
	Disagree		
18. It is sometimes a very good idea to use video lessons in English to help me communicate instead of real lessons taught by the instructor who is wearing a facemask.	Agree		
	Not sure		
	Disagree		

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