

## ESL STUDENTS COMMUNICATION APPREHENSION AND THEIR CHOICE OF COMMUNICATIVE ACTIVITIES

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### Abstract

In order to examine the English communication apprehension (CA) of ESL students at the tertiary level, this study surveyed and analysed 50 students in their final year of the Bachelor in Business Administration (BBA) programme at UiTM Johor. The study looked at the types of English language activities preferred by the students, as well as those they perceived as helpful. The results indicate that the students have a comparatively high level of communication apprehension. The study also reveals that the students prefer group discussion as a way of reducing their communicative anxiety.

**Keywords:** communication apprehension, ESL students, communicative activities

### INTRODUCTION

Anxiety has been regarded as one of the most important affective factors influencing second language acquisition. Horwitz (1986) and Young (1991) discovered the relationship between anxiety and achievement in the learning of foreign languages, while Horwitz (1986) and MacIntyre and Gardner (1994) arrived at the conclusion that anxiety and achievement are correlated. In Malaysia, similar research has been conducted with ESL students, though mostly secondary school students. However, many students at the tertiary level are believed to still have difficulty communicating in English (Zhao Na, 2007). This phenomenon needs careful analysis in order to identify viable measures that will address the problem. This paper will address this issue among students at the tertiary level at a public university. Using an instrument to identify the level of communication apprehension among undergraduate students, the results of this study suggest some communicative activities that can be carried out to reduce students' communication apprehension.

### PROBLEM STATEMENT

Despite the fact that the English language is the medium of instruction at the university level, many students (including final year graduates) still struggle to communicate in English for academic purposes. One of the primary reasons is that they lack the confidence and skills needed to successfully speak in English. As a result, they become apprehensive when asked to speak in public. This feeling of apprehension or fear when speaking in English has become a serious matter because it affects their employability and their self-esteem. Many students admit that they are unable to secure their dream jobs after they have graduated. This is likely due to their high levels of apprehension and their lack of confidence when asked to communicate in English during job interviews.

## OBJECTIVES

The main objectives of the study are to:

1. Identify the level of communication apprehension (CA) in English among BBA students at UiTM Johor.
2. Identify students' perceptions of the types of speaking activities they prefer.  
Suggest possible communicative activities that can be carried out to reduce students' CA.

## Significance of the Project

Inevitably, most language teachers and instructors agree that many students in Malaysia face problems communicating in English, as it is not their native language. Even at the university level, students feel apprehensive, awkward, shy, and insecure when asked to speak English in the classroom, let alone in public. This even includes those who scored well in writing and managed to obtain good grades in SPM, or the Malaysian national certificate examination for secondary school students. This is because speaking skills are totally different from writing skills. In order to feel confident when speaking English, students need constant motivation and encouragement from many sources, including their parents, teachers, and peers. If they feel inhibited when practicing speaking, they will never be able to improve. Therefore, this study is important as it seeks to:

1. Identify the level of the students' communication apprehension in English.
2. Help the students overcome their communication apprehension.

Hence, this study will help ESL lecturers to uncover the real level of CA among tertiary students, particularly at UiTM Johor. Only by knowing the actual level of CA can the lecturers find viable measures that will help to reduce problems pertaining to CA. In addition, we sought to determine whether they were prepared to face the challenges of communicating with confidence after graduation.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

According to McCroskey (1984), many students -- even at higher levels of study -- experience some level of fear and anxiety when asked to communicate, especially in public. This feeling of discomfort when communicating is called *communication apprehension*. Communication apprehension has been linked to both cognitive processes (Ayres, 1990) and psychological perceptions (Ayres, 1986). Furthermore, CA occurs in a variety of settings and often results in negative outcomes for both speakers and listeners. Consequently, communication apprehension must be addressed by language teachers, especially those teaching second or foreign languages. This is because students who already have some level of CA in their native language will face more anxiety when communicating in a foreign or second language, such as English (Schlenker & Leary, 1982).

ESL teachers at the tertiary level therefore need to create conducive and authentic learning environments for students to be able to practice speaking in order to reduce their apprehension. An individual who has good cognitive skills and can utilise those skills effectively in communication will face fewer barriers in delivering his or her thoughts and ideas at the workplace.

Many prevailing speech CA studies have been carried out, mainly on oral and written CA. These studies aim to determine the causes, effects, and treatments related to CA. The negative effects associated with communication apprehension have encouraged researchers to pursue

appropriate and viable reduction methods to address this issue. Ayres (1990) maintains that students who have difficulty with communication often have problems related to fear or anxiety when delivering a speech. They may also have fear and anxiety associated with anticipating the delivery of a speech.

There are a number of possible factors related to the occurrence of speaking anxiety among tertiary students. Identifying the causes and factors related to communication apprehension are important in the search for appropriate reduction techniques (Porter, 1974). Reduction techniques are necessary because of the negative effects associated with public speaking anxiety in the classroom. Negative thoughts and poor preparation have been identified as some of the negative effects associated with communication apprehension (Ayres, 1992). As a result, individuals experiencing communication apprehension often have fewer task-relevant thoughts and retain less information from lectures given before a speaking assignment. Ayres also found that "High CA, regardless of speech anticipation, reported more negative and fewer task relevant thoughts than low CA. The lack of task relevant thoughts and a decrease in the retention of information often result in lower grades" (Preiss, 1989). Consequently, communicative apprehension negatively effects students' academic success.

In addition, students with high CA spend less time on the communicative aspect of speech preparation and more time in the library and in preparing notes. It was found that students with high public speaking anxiety receive lower grades due to poor preparation and delivery techniques rather than a lack of preparation. The poor preparation may be the result of negative thoughts associated with the anticipated speech. Clearly, students with high CA are at a disadvantage in the classroom (Zhao Na, 2007).

## **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

### **Population & Sampling Technique**

The subjects in this study were 50 Bachelor of Business and Marketing students (Part 6) from the November 2006 through March 2007 semester. This sample comprises almost 100 percent of the population. These students were chosen because they had been exposed to communication classes and were expected to graduate soon. Therefore, it was important to examine their levels of communication apprehension and to find out whether they possessed the necessary speaking skills. In addition, we sought to determine whether they were prepared to face the challenges of communicating with confidence after graduation.

### **Research Design**

The first set of questionnaires is adapted from McCroskey (1982), known as **PRCA-24**, to determine the level of CA. The PRCA-24 is currently the most widely-established instrument available for the measurement of CA. This version is preferable above all other instruments, including its earlier versions (PRCA, PRCA10, etc.). It has a very high predictive validity and reliability (alpha regularly  $>.90$ ). In addition, it also permits one to obtain sub-scores for the contexts of public speaking, dyadic interaction, small groups, and large groups (McCroskey, 1982). This instrument is composed of 24 statements concerning feelings about communicating with others. According to Mc Croskey (1982), 13 statements concern the student's uncomfortable feelings about communication in English, while another 11 statements focus on the student's enjoyment when communicating in English.

The second set of questionnaires is used to identify the speaking activities that the students prefer. The students' preparation for communication includes activities such as rehearsing, researching, and organising their resources before the final presentation. Respondents were

asked to rate each item using a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly agree) to 5 (strongly disagree).

## Procedures

Students were asked to answer two sets of questionnaires, namely:

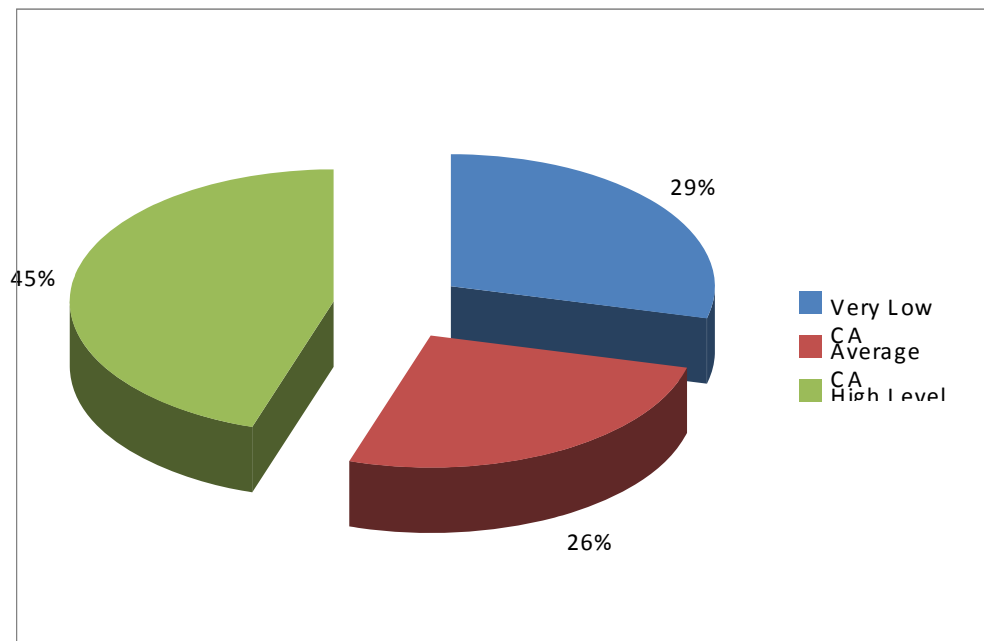
- a) Set 1: PRCA-24 to identify their level of CA
- b) Set 2: to identify the speaking activities that the students prefer

## Data Analysis

Data were analysed using SPSS (Statistical Product and Service Solutions) 13.0. A descriptive analysis was performed to compute the means and standard deviations for each item. These analyses were intended to assess the general situation of final year BBA students regarding their level of English communication and the communicative activities that they prefer.

## RESULTS AND FINDINGS

**CHART 1:** Level of CA among the students



As the pie chart demonstrates, the level of CA among the final year BBA students was very high. It shows that 45% of students obtained scores above 80, representing those with high levels of trait CA. Several factors may contribute to the large number of students with high CA. For example, many students disliked participating in public speaking (3%). They reported feeling tense and nervous when engaging with new people in group discussions.

Secondly, the findings indicate that 29% of the students experienced very low CA. Those obtaining scores below 51 were comfortable when communicating in English. These students may have very low CA because of factors such as comfort when using English during class discussion (Daly & Friedrich, 1981).

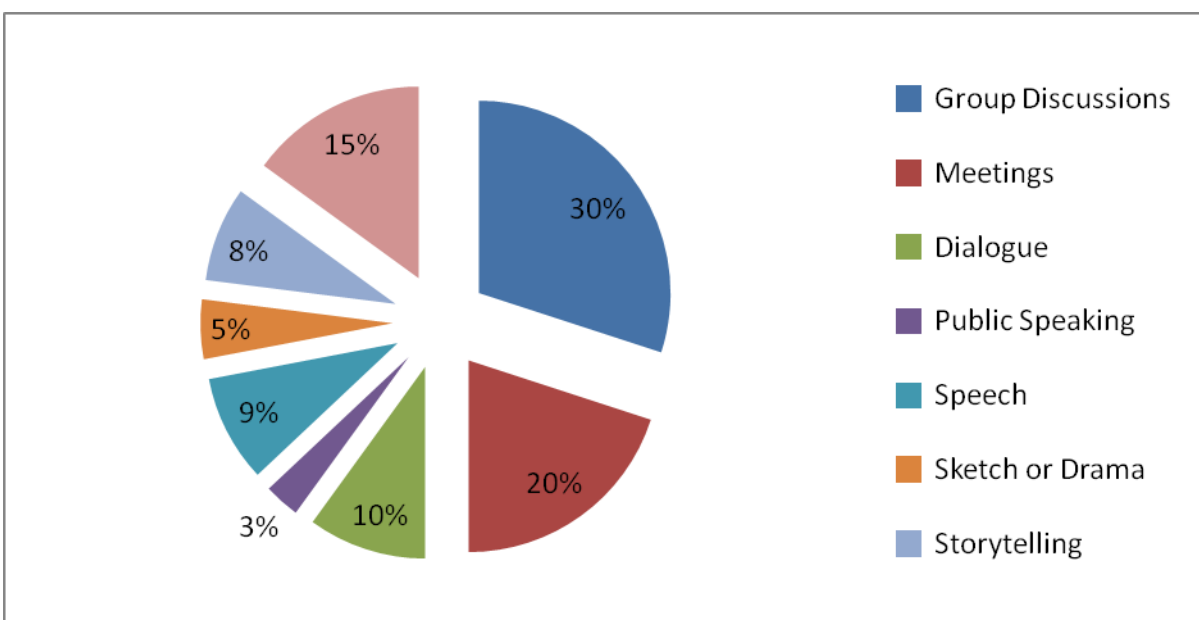
Apart from these findings, the study also suggests that students with very low CA are not afraid to express themselves in meetings, even when conversing in English with new acquaintances.

Ordinarily, this group of students has no fear when engaging in conversations, and they feel very relaxed when giving speeches.

However, the students with high communication apprehension will attempt to avoid as much communication as possible, to the extent that they will avoid meeting with peers or teachers to talk about the subject matter (McCroskey, 1984).

Lastly, the findings show that 26% of students experience an average level of CA. This is represented by scores between 51 and 80, comprising a total of 12 students. These students are undecided about whether or not they would prefer to speak in English. They tend to have indecisive perceptions regarding their feelings when they are asked to express their opinions regarding communicating in English meetings. Furthermore, they often cannot give any responses when attending meetings (Scott *et al.*, 1977).

**CHART 2:** Types of speaking activities



Based on the above pie chart, we can conclude that the activity most preferred by the students is group discussion (with 30% reporting it as their favourite activity). The reason for this preference is simply that group discussion is usually attended by familiar group members who motivate other participants to express their opinions.

The pie chart also reveals that 20% of students preferred meetings as an interesting activity to improve their English speaking skills. This may be due to the fact that students can prepare what to say before attending the meeting. In addition, meeting's agenda is often distributed before it begins (Friedman, 1982; Richmond, 1984). On the other hand, some students did not like meetings because they may have generated nervousness and were not as interesting compared to the other activities.

Presentation is the third activity most preferred by the students, with 15% choosing it. The students who chose this activity enjoy it because they are well prepared before making their presentations in class. Students often conduct studies regarding specific topics, provide some interesting visuals, and add information to attract the audience's attention. Students preferring this activity often know the organisation or flow of the conversation. They know how to start and end their presentations to make them more interesting (McCroskey, 1982).

Next, 10% of students preferred dialogue as an interesting activity to improve their English communication skills. These students likely preferred dialogue because the types of the topics given are interesting enough to elicit their responses. This is supported by Scott *et al.* (1977), who mentioned that dialogue can stimulate students' conversations. The other activities preferred by the students are speech (9%), storytelling (8%), and sketches or drama (5%). The smaller number of students who prefer to participate in these three activities can be attributed to the creativity, talent, and preparation required to participate in them (Alpert & Haber, 1960).

Finally, public speaking was not preferred by the students as a method of improving their English. This is proven by the findings of this study, which show that only 3% of the students chose it as interesting activity. This is because public speaking usually requires students to deliver a speech in front of an audience of different genders and in a new environment. These aspects are viewed as undesirable and fearful (Scott *et al.*, 1977). Speaking in public causes anxiety and fear, which then leads to stage fright.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSION**

This paper has presented some findings regarding the English communication apprehension (CA) of students at tertiary level. This study was conducted among BBA graduating students at UiTM Johor. The results allow us to conclude that the majority of students had a high level of CA. The activity most preferred to ease anxiety in communication was group discussion. Secondly, the study indicates the best way to improve communication apprehension is through early preparation, preparing well for any presentation, knowing the aspects involved in meetings, and knowing the organisation of a presentation.

The findings also reveal that most students experience anxiety in the classroom, which is especially due to fear of negative evaluation. Students mostly fear speaking in English when they must take part in public speaking. Moreover, anxiety can also debilitate language learning. Given the situation in English classrooms, lecturers must pay more attention to this anxiety. Lecturers should take the affective factors of the students into consideration in order to ensure effective communication (Zhao Na, 2007).

Lecturers can attempt to improve learning environments by creating relaxed atmospheres for students, which can make them feel safe to speak or express their views (Opal Dunn, 2008). Secondly, lecturers should avoid giving negative evaluations and should instead comment on students' behaviours with more encouragement (MacIntyre and Gardner, 1994). Thirdly, lecturers and their students should take some measures to relax and pay attention on examinations, such as eliminating the ranking of students by their test scores (Horwitz, 1986).

Finally, lecturers can also explicitly inform students about the inevitable existence of anxiety in English learning. They can advise students that anxiety can be reduced through the self-regulation of their thinking and studying. Although lecturers can make use of the above-mentioned means to help students overcome their anxiety in English classrooms, lecturers should not try to help students avoid anxiety completely (Daly *et al.*, 1981). Many prevailing studies indicate that adequate anxiety plays a positive role and can motivate students to maintain their efforts on learning. Therefore, the lecturer's real job is to help students find an adequate level of anxiety that is neither too high nor too low. However, more research is needed to support the findings and to discover more about anxiety in English classrooms (Opal, 2008).

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