

## INVESTIGATION INTO NON-ACADEMIC STAFF COMMUNICATION APPREHENSION IN USING ENGLISH LANGUAGE



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### ABSTRACT

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The ability to communicate confidently in the English language is highly demanded of administrative officers in an organisation dealing with international clientele. However, the ability could be impeded due to high apprehension level. The study was conducted to investigate the communication apprehension among the administrative officers in a public university in Malaysia. To measure the level of apprehension in various settings, an instrument - PRCA 24 (McCroskey and JcCroskey, 1988) was distributed to 150 officers holding various positions in different departments. The findings indicate that the officers experience a moderate level of apprehension. Additionally, females were reported to be more apprehensive in all communication settings. Another finding is, with regards to the types of communication, public speaking was found to have caused the highest apprehension while interpersonal communication the least. A conclusion that can be drawn is apprehension level is influenced by the nature of the communication. The more formal the communication is, the higher the apprehension level will be. An important implication is the need to develop (introduce) continuous in house training to lessen the level of anxiety among the staff should be considered.

**Contribution/ Originality:** This study is one of very few studies which have investigated the phenomenon of communication apprehension among administrative staff at a university. Besides, this paper's primary contribution is finding the areas where most of communication apprehension in using English occurs, namely in the context of meeting and public speaking.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Oral communication takes place where there is speech. It is almost impossible to communicate with one another without speech. Hence the importance of speaking skills to learners of a language is without doubt enormous. Despite speaking being considered one of the most important skills in second language learning, much research

(Horwitz *et al.*, 1986; Aida, 1994) has proven that it is also the most challenging skill for the majority of learners. This is because speaking entails risking the person's image in front of others thus, tarnishing their language ego (Brown, 2001). Owing to this, learners tend to get apprehensive whenever they need to communicate in the language orally.

Communication apprehension, according to McCroskey and JcCroskey (1988) is a term used to describe "fear or anxiety associated with either real or anticipated communication with another person or persons" (p.40). Communication apprehension or anxiety is a psychological state of mind and it is common in all human beings, be they are actors, or even politicians (Lucas, 2012). A certain degree of apprehension can be facilitative to learning process. However, excessive amount of apprehension can be debilitating.

The feeling of apprehension is contributed by a number of factors. One such factor could be the level of language proficiency an individual is at. However, studies on the influence of language proficiency on apprehension have produced inconclusive results. Although studies have shown that there is a relationship between foreign language anxiety and proficiency, the direction of the relationship is not clear.

The role of gender on apprehension has also been investigated. However, similar to previous variable, studies on the relationship between apprehension and gender have produced mixed and inconsistent findings. Krohne *et al.* (2001) have found that gender does contribute as a possible source of anxiety. Their study reported that female respondents were more conscious of their attitude but men exhibited more avoidance behavior in anxiety. Conversely, Campbell & Shaw (1994 in Campbell (1999)) found contradicting results where men were shown to be more apprehensive than women after a period of time. Other studies such as Aida (1994) however, found no significant difference in the anxiety level between the genders.

Although the results of these studies have indicated that the influence of proficiency level and gender on apprehension level is not clear, the studies were mostly conducted on students at various levels of education; university (Chan *et al.*, 2012) secondary (Suleimenova, 2012) and elementary (Alshahrani and Alandal, 2015). However, once these students leave school to enter workforce, not much has been done to investigate their apprehension level when communicating in English while at work. The need to conduct a study on administrative staff in universities arises as universities especially in Malaysia are becoming more open to international students whose only medium of communication is English. The administrative staff have to deal directly with international students for non-academic matters. Therefore, their (in) ability to communicate confidently in English influences the quality of the service delivered by the university. For this reason, the study was thus conducted.

## 2. REVIEWS OF PAST STUDIES

Some past studies have shown the phenomena of communication apprehension in the use of English language in many contexts and setting, both experienced by working people and students alike. A study by Ahmad (2014) based on an observation in an intensive course called English for non-academic staff conducted at a public university in Malaysia for the period of 30 hours where the researcher is one of the instructors of the programme. The methodology used in the research was quantitative approach and applied an instrument called Personal Report of Communication Apprehension (PRCA-24) developed by McCroskey and JcCroskey (1988) in order to assess the level of anxiety in using English language. The findings reveal that most of the non-academic officers experienced average levels of communication apprehension. Only a few officers recorded a low level of communication apprehension and one officer who experienced a high level of communication apprehension. Work commitments at office by the officers is one of the factors that impedes their time in learning English. It also reveals that the officers enjoy themselves when the lessons are related to their daily duties.

The notion of average communication apprehension here is that, an officer could still manage to execute or converse in a well-accepted way to make other people understand although the officer himself or herself still feels a bit apprehensive when communicating, be it during group discussions, meetings, dyadic interactions or even public

speaking. On a high note, it was also prevailed that there were 4 UniSZA staff who had a very low level of communication apprehension be it during group discussions, meetings, dyadic interactions or even public speaking. These types of officers, if given ample exposure, could become good assets to the university since they hardly had any problem in relation to speaking or conversing in English language. However, there was 1 respondent whose score fell under the category of experiencing high level of communication apprehension. This type of officer was suspected to undergo some difficulties in making a successful communication be it during group discussions, meetings, dyadic interactions or even public speaking.

Another research conducted by [Zumusni and Deepak \(2010\)](#) when examining the English communication apprehension of ESL students at the tertiary level. The study surveyed and analysed 50 students in their final year of the Bachelor in Business Administration (BBA) programme at UiTM Johor, Malaysia. The study looked at the types of English language activities preferred by the students. As well as those they perceived as helpful. The study shows that the students have a comparatively high level of communication apprehension. The study also shows that the students prefer group discussion as a way of reducing their communicative anxiety.

A study on English oral communication apprehension in students of Indonesian maritime was conducted by [Aeni and Jabu \(2017\)](#) in Indonesia. The study was aimed at identifying the level of oral communication apprehension of nautical students of Akademi Maritim Indonesia (Indonesian maritime Academy), AIPI, Makassar, Indonesia. The data was gathered through questionnaires adapted from Foreign language Classroom Anxiety Class Scale (FLCAS). The findings show that students were generally experienced apprehension in English foreign language (EFL) oral communication. The students showed the highest apprehension for public speaking. The level of nautical students' apprehension based on observation and supported by the modified FLCAS were 20% in the low category, 60% in the moderate category, and 20% in the high category. Students in the high apprehension category showed more symptoms than students in the moderate and low apprehension categories.

Another study involving students from Jordan was conducted in Universiti Utara Malaysia. The study was conducted by a PhD candidate, [Ibrahim and Noor \(n.d\)](#). The study investigated oral communication apprehension among the Jordanian postgraduate students in Universiti Utara Malaysia, one of the public universities in Malaysia. The results of the study showed that the Jordanian postgraduate students experienced high level of communication apprehension.

A study conducted by [Amogne and Yigzaw \(2013\)](#) in Ethiopia on oral communication apprehension, competence and performance among maritime engineering trainees showed that the students were generally apprehensive in EFL oral communication. The participants showed the highest apprehension to public speaking.

### 2.1. Research Questions

The following research questions were formulated:

RQ 1: What is the level of communication apprehension among the administrative officers in a public university in Malaysia?

RQ2: Of the four categories of oral communication apprehension (group discussion, meeting, interpersonal and public speaking), which produces the least and the most apprehension?

RQ 3: Do the levels of apprehension as reported by PRCA differ by gender?

RQ 4: Do the levels of apprehension as reported by PRCA differ by length of service?

## 3. METHODOLOGY

### 3.1. Instrumentation

The primary instrument used in data collection was the Personal Report of Communication Apprehension (PRCA 24), [McCroskey and JcCroskey \(1988\)](#). The instrument was used to measure respondents' level of apprehension under four different communication settings namely interpersonal (6 items), discussion (6 items),

meeting (6 items) and public speaking (6 items). The calculation of apprehension level was based on the guidelines provided by McCroskey and JcCroskey (1988). Table 1 describes the categories of apprehension based on the scores obtained in PRCA.

Table-1. Descriptors of PRCA scores

PRCA score	Description
1-50	Low communication apprehension
51-80	Average communication apprehension
81-124	High communication apprehension

Source: McCroskey and JcCroskey (1988)

### 3.2. Data Analysis

#### 3.2.1. Demographic Background of the Respondents

150 copies of questionnaires were distributed to administrative officers at a public university in the east coast of Malaysia but only 139 were duly returned. Nonetheless, 13 questionnaires had to be removed from the analysis because of incomplete response. Information regarding the background of the respondents is presented in Table 2. There were approximately equal number of male and female respondents whose age ranges from 24 to 59 (mean = 30.1 years). In terms of length of service in UniSZA, a great majority (44%) has served between 6 and 10 years.

Table-2. Demographic information of the respondents

Variables		N	%
Gender	Male	58	46.0
	Female	68	54.0
Age	Below 30 years	33	26.2
	31-40 years	62	49.2
	41-50 years	20	15.9
	51 years and above	10	7.9
	Missing	1	0.8
Length of service	Less than 1 year	4	3.2
	1-5 years	41	32.5
	6-10 years	56	44.4
	11-15 years	13	10.3
	More than 15 years	9	7.1
	Missing	3	2.4

Source: Questionnaire data

#### 3.3. Reliability of PRCA

Reliability test was run to examine the internal validity of PRCA in measuring apprehension level. In the current study, the Cronbach alpha coefficient was .94 which according to DeVellis (2003) indicates that the instrument has a high reliability.

## 4. RESULTS OF DATA ANALYSIS

### RQ 1: What is the level of apprehension of the respondents?

In answering the first research question, descriptive analysis using percentage was conducted.

Table 3 presents the analysis based on the descriptors of PRCA. The results show that the majority of the respondents (71%) reported having average level of communication apprehension. Meanwhile a small percentage (8%) admitted experiencing high level of apprehension when speaking in English.

**Table-3.** Descriptive analysis of PRCA scores

Description	N	%
Low communication apprehension	26	21
Average communication apprehension	90	71
High communication apprehension	10	8

Source: Questionnaire data

**RQ2: Which category of communication produces the least and the most apprehension?**

Similar to the first research question, descriptive analysis using mean, and standard deviation was conducted in responding to RQ2.

**Table-4.** Descriptive statistics for apprehension level by category of communication

Category	Mean	SD
Interpersonal	14.11	3.77
Group Discussion	14.57	4.31
Meeting	15.18	4.15
Public Speaking	16.49	4.37

Source: Questionnaire data

Table 4 presents descriptive statistics for apprehension level based on the category of communication. In general, the respondents reported that the communication setting that produces the lowest apprehension was interpersonal ( $M= 14.11$ ,  $SD=3.77$ ), followed by group discussion ( $M= 14.57$ ,  $SD=4.31$ ). Meanwhile the communication category that produces the highest apprehension was meeting ( $M= 15.18$ ,  $SD=4.15$ ), followed by public speaking ( $M= 16.49$ ,  $SD=4.37$ ).

**RQ 3: Do the levels of PRCA differ significantly by gender?**

In responding to this research question, an analysis using independent sample t test was performed. The results are presented in Table 5 and 6.

Table 5 Descriptive statistics for apprehension level by category of communication by gender

**Table-5.** Descriptive statistics of PRCA based on gender.

CATEGORY	MALE (n= 58)		FEMALE (n= 68)	
	MEAN	SD	MEAN	SD
Interpersonal	13.81	3.84	14.37	3.71
Group Discussion	14.31	4.69	14.79	3.98
Meeting	14.62	4.10	15.66	4.16
Public Speaking	15.71	4.54	17.16	4.12

Source: Questionnaire data

Table 5 presents descriptive statistics of PRCA based on gender. Across gender, females consistently reported higher apprehension level in all categories of communication. Nonetheless, both male and female groups indicated similar pattern of responses to the survey instrument. Both groups indicate that they were most apprehensive in public speaking (male: [ $M= 15.71$ ,  $SD= 4.54$ ]; female: [ $M= 17.16$ ,  $SD=4.12$ ]) and least apprehensive in interpersonal communication (male: [ $M= 13.81$ ,  $SD= 3.84$ ]; female: [ $M= 14.37$ ,  $SD=3.71$ ]).

**Table-6.** T-test for PRCA by gender.

Gender	N	Mean	SD	Mean difference	t value	df	p value
Male	58	58.45	14.95	-3.537	-1.38	124	.170
Female	68	61.99	13.81				

Note:  $p < 0.05$ 

The result presented in Table 6 indicates that there is no significant difference in the level of apprehension between the genders. Although female officers reported higher total apprehension score ( $M= 61.99$ ,  $SD = 13.81$ ) than male officers ( $M=58.45$ ,  $SD =14.95$ ), both groups reported the same moderate apprehension level.

**RQ 4: Do the levels of PRCA differ significantly by the length of service?**

The third research question was analysed using a one-way ANOVA. However, before the analysis was performed, the categories were collapsed into three (from five) as there were uneven distribution of respondents in each category. The three categories are; less than 5 years, 6-10 years, and more than 10 years. Table 7 and 8 present the results of the analysis. The results in Table 8 showed no significant difference in the level of apprehension among the staff. However, it can be seen that those serving less than 5 years reported the lowest apprehension level ( $M= 58.33$ ,  $SD = 12.99$ ) while those in 6-10 year category reported the highest apprehension level ( $M= 62.09$ ,  $SD = 15.22$ ).

**Table-7.** Descriptive analysis of apprehension scores based on length of service

Category	N	Mean	SD
less than 5 years	45	58.33	12.99
6-10 years	56	62.09	15.22
more than 10 years	22	60.68	15.60

Source: Questionnaire data

**Table-8.** ANOVA for communication apprehension by length of service.

	Sum of squares	df	Mean square	F value	p value
Between groups	353.26	2	176.63	.838	.435
Within groups	25291.33	120	210.76		
Total	25644.59	122			

p &lt; 0.05

**5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION**

The study was primarily interested in investigating speaking apprehension level among the administrative staff at a public university in Malaysia. The findings indicate that the staff were moderately apprehensive as far as communication in English is concerned. This is in line with similar studies conducted by *Jafar et al. (2016)* which found that most people with tertiary education experience moderate level of apprehension. An explanation that can be offered is that since all the officers held university qualification, they have had more exposure to the English language during their university time as students, hence they experienced the moderate apprehension level. Although the level of apprehension among the staff was not worrying and "reasonable", perhaps the situation could be further improved.

Additionally, the officers share similar views with regards to the communication categories that cause them to be apprehensive. Among the four categories of communication, they were less apprehensive in interpersonal and group discussion but more apprehensive in meeting and public speaking. Based on the findings, we can conclude that the apprehension level is dependent on the nature of the communication they are involved in. If the communication is less formal, the apprehension level is lower. Conversely more formal communication such as public speaking creates more apprehension among the staff. These findings resonate the findings in other studies (*McCroskey, 1992*) who found that public speaking is the most challenging form of communication among most people regardless of the medium used (L1 or L2).

Another interesting finding is that although the difference in the level of apprehension between the genders is not significant, similar to what has been discovered by *Jafar et al. (2016)* female staff consistently reported higher apprehension level in all communication categories. This finding concurs with *Occhipinti (2009)* and *Horwitz et al. (1986)* whose studies showed that females generally were more anxious than male. What this means is that female staff are slightly more anxious speaking in English although they were found to be more proficient in English compared to male staff.

Finally, it was found that length of service does not matter when it comes to measuring the level of communication apprehension. However, it is noted that those serving less than 5 years were least apprehensive.

This suggests that new staff was more confident with their ability to speak in English than other groups. This is perhaps due to the fact, the university has just started emphasising on the importance of proficiency in the English language for staff recruitment. Thus newer staff were found to have better ability to use English, hence making them more confident and less apprehensive.

The study has shed some lights on the areas of communications that create high apprehension level among the administrative staff in UniSZA in using the English language, namely with the settings of meeting and public speaking. Since more formal discourse tends to cause them to be more apprehensive, the employer should conduct training programmes to enhance their English proficiency and to alleviate their worries in speaking in public. Hopefully, through continuous training, they will be more confident in communicating in English.

This research also resonates the realization of a dire need for university administrative staff to master good English language both in writing and speaking for the smooth-running of their daily duties, especially when dealing with foreign staff or students. Besides, it indirectly has become a wake-up call or reminder for the university management to seriously think of conducting an English course for the staff to improve their skills in English both in written and spoken forms. And finally, by looking at the findings, the newer staff who have been serving less than 5 years who happen to be less apprehensive in using the English language can become buddies to help the longer serving staff to improve their skills and confidence in using the English language, especially in speaking be it in public speaking or meeting. This buddy system will make the process of learning easier, fun and enjoyable.

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**Appendix:**

**Output of SPSS**

**Descriptive  
PRCA**

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error	95% Confidence Interval for Mean		Minimum	Maximum
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound		
1	45	58.33	12.998	1.938	54.43	62.24	27	97
2	56	62.09	15.220	2.034	58.01	66.17	24	91
3	22	60.68	15.609	3.328	53.76	67.60	32	87
Total	123	60.46	14.498	1.307	57.88	63.05	24	97

**Anova  
PRCA**

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	353.259	2	176.630	.838	.435
Within Groups	25291.326	120	210.761		
Total	25644.585	122			

**Multiple Comparisons**

Dependent Variable: PRCA

(I) length of service	(J) length of service	Mean Difference (I-J)	Std. Error	Sig.	95% Confidence Interval	
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound
1	2	-3.756	2.906	.436	-10.96	3.45
	3	-2.348	3.777	.824	-11.71	7.01
2	1	3.756	2.906	.436	-3.45	10.96
	3	1.407	3.653	.929	-7.65	10.46
3	1	2.348	3.777	.824	-7.01	11.71
	2	-1.407	3.653	.929	-10.46	7.65



(Pearson correlation)

1. Relationship between age and PRCA?

**Correlations**

		PRCA	Age
PRCA	Pearson Correlation	1	.068
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.449
	N	126	125
Age	Pearson Correlation	.068	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.449	
	N	125	125

2. Relationship between years of service and PRCA

**Correlations**

		Year_service_level	PRCA
Year_service_level	Pearson Correlation	1	.084
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.354
	N	123	123
PRCA	Pearson Correlation	.084	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.354	
	N	123	126

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