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# THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN GENDER AND COMMUNICATION APPREHENSION AMONG ADMINISTRATIVE STAFF IN UNIVERSITI UTARA MALAYSIA (UUM)

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**ABSTRACT**

This research addresses issues on communication apprehension in using English language among administrative staff (grade 19) at Universiti Utara Malaysia (UUM). The notion of communication apprehension in this context is their anxiety in executing language tasks in terms of: group discussion, meeting, interpersonal and public speaking by using English language as medium. The objectives of this research are to identify the level of anxiety in using English language among the administrative staff and to find the correlation of communication apprehension with academic background and also gender. The methodology used in this research is using a quantitative approach and applying an instrument called Personal Report of Communication Apprehension (PRCA-24) developed by James C. McCroskey (1982) in order to assess the level of anxiety in using English language. The findings revealed that have female experience lower CA than the male participants.
**Keywords**: Communication Apprehension, English, PRCA-24, Administrative Staff, Gender.

## A. INTRODUCTION

According to James C. McCroskey, communication apprehension is a broad term that refers to an "individual's fear or anxiety associated with either real or anticipated communication with another person or persons". There are many factors that could contribute to the level of anxiety when it comes to language learning, especially to those who are acquiring it as Second Language. Factors contributing to language learning are complex and the factors of anxiety in the learning process is a particularly interesting question that deserves to be studied and investigated.

Currently in Malaysia, communication skills play significant roles in workplace situations. Staff are expected to communicate effectively to meet the demand of organisations which most companies nowadays are extending their business at a larger and global scale. Thus, the significance and importance of equipping workers with good ability to communicate in English has grown rapidly. As mentioned by Ali & Noor (2012), in the workplace contexts, employees need oral communication skills in English language to be successful in their jobs as they must carry out different communicative tasks such as presentations, meetings and negotiations.

Previous investigations reported that many staff including those who are performing tasks as administrative staff encountered difficulties in communicating well in English and they also experienced problems speaking eloquently in meetings, delivering speech and giving spoken presentations in front of an audience. One of the prominent factors that has led to this problem is anxiety. Therefore, this paper will investigate communication apprehension focusing on the level of anxiety among administrative staff and the relationship between gender and communication apprehension in Universiti Utara Malaysia (UUM).

**Background of Study**

At UUM, N19 is an officer who usually started the career by having at least Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia (SPM) at secondary level of education. These administrative staff usually are assigned in different posts such as front desk officer, clerk, finance officer and many other posts. Apart from catering the needs of their clients at the office, these staff also deal with local and international students that require them to use English. In this case, a staff with good competency and proficiency in English language will have the edge over those who are handicap of the language where they have low confidence and low self-esteem due to their lack of command in English. This matter will indirectly affect their self-confidence and their future career.

This study is set to investigate the anxiety level among these administrative staff to ensure that they are equipped with adequate level of English proficiency. We also would like to see if there is any correlation between communication apprehension and gender.

The findings of this research would hopefully give an insight to the management to determine ways on how to assist staff who might need to enhance their English proficiency level.

**COMMUNICATION APPREHENSION (CA)**

One of the most obvious problems in using the language is a phenomenon known as communication apprehension. Communication apprehension or CA is defined as an individual's level of fear of anxiety associated with either real or anticipated communication with another person or persons (McCroskey, 1977). The definition given by McCroskey shows that this phenomenon exists in society, especially among speakers. Most people actually tend to be anxious about doing anything important in public. Actors are nervous before a play, politicians are nervous before a campaign speech, athletes are nervous before a big game (Lucas, 1992). It is a common truth that everyone cannot avoid being nervous or anxious in their life.

It is believed that communication apprehension (CA) exists as a phenomenon among all individuals (Blume, Baldwin, & Ryan, 2013; Byrne, Flood, & Shanahan, 2012). The fear of speaking publicly or interpersonally is an experience all individuals encounter to some degree and with this fear comes the accompanying feelings of reticence, nervousness, and anxiety (Bodie, 2010).

Communication apprehension is also known as speech anxiety and the latter refers to fear of speaking in front of an audience. Before, during, and after giving a speech, speakers experience a wide range of sensations and behaviours that spring from the internal causes of nervousness. These may include quavering voice, shaky hands, changes in body temperature, itchy skin, dry mouth, the mind going blank, increased heart rate, shortness of breath, increased rate of speech, trembling legs, sweaty palms or cold hands and feet (Coopman & Lull, 2012).

In addition, Horwitz et al. (1986) state that anxiety is a subjective feeling of tension, apprehension, nervousness, and wrong associates with an arousal of the autonomic nervous. It means that when learners are trying to explore their language, there is a feeling, known as anxiety, which makes them not confident in doing it. Sometimes, that feeling affects their readiness to speak up, even making them make some mistakes in grammar, spelling, and pronouncing some English words.

People with high communication apprehension will experience a high level of apprehension in almost all communication situations; both threatening (public speaking) and common communication setting (McCroskey, 1970).

**COMMUNICATION APPREHENSION AND GENDER**

According to Rosenfeld &Berko (1990) in Mahfuzah et al (2013), different gender does not affect the communication apprehension as they claimed that 'gender is not significant in communication anxiety' (p.125). Although males tend to be shyer while females tend to have more public speaking anxiety, there seem to be a few consistent differences between the genders.

However, in a study by Wicks-Nelson & Israel (2006) in Mahfuzah et al (2013), it is found that naturally, females feel more anxious than male. This is due to many factors such as confidence, proficiency (Bruce et. al, 2005), security, and superiority. Under certain circumstances, females tend to feel easily vulnerable and therefore lead to the feeling of anxiety and worry while male on the other hand do obtain more self-control and ability to detach themselves from unpleasant feelings.

Daly and Miller (1995) in Ali and Shahla (2015) observed that females had slightly higher rates of CA than males. They studied 122 teacher-students by administering the PRCA-24. The apprehension levels of women were greater than the apprehension levels of men. Likewise, Elias (1999) in the same research also investigated the level of oral communication apprehension between male and female accounting students. He found that female accounting students were significantly more apprehensive than their male counterparts.

The same result was found in Frantz, Marlow & Wathen (2005) as their research examined communication apprehension and its relationship to gender on college students found that women had a higher communication apprehension level than men.

**B. METHOD**

This research is carried out for administrative staff which is conducted at Universiti Utara Malaysia (UUM). There are 32 samples comprising administrative staff holding different posts from all over UUM with grade 19. The methodology used in this research is using a quantitative approach by administering questionnaires to the respondents via online questionnaire applying an instrument called Personal Report of Communication Apprehension (PRCA-24) developed by James C. McCroskey (1982) 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.

The PRCA-24 is the instrument which is most widely used to measure communication apprehension. It permits one to obtain sub-scores in the contexts of public speaking, dyadic interaction, small groups, and large groups. This instrument is composed of twenty-four statements concerning feelings about communicating with others where the respondents will indicate the degree to which each statement applies to them by marking whether you:

Strongly Disagree = 1; Disagree = 2; are Neutral = 3; Agree = 4; Strongly Agree = 5

The complete statements are as follows:

1. I dislike participating in group discussions.
2. Generally, I am comfortable while participating in group discussions.
3. I am tense and nervous while participating in group discussions.
4. I like to get involved in group discussions.
5. Engaging in a group discussion with new people makes me tense and nervous.
6. I am calm and relaxed while participating in group discussions.
7. Generally, I am nervous when I have to participate in a meeting.
8. Usually, I am comfortable when I have to participate in a meeting.
9. I am very calm and relaxed when I am called upon to express an opinion at a meeting.
10. I am afraid to express myself at meetings.
11. Communicating at meetings usually makes me uncomfortable.
12. I am very relaxed when answering questions at a meeting.
13. While participating in a conversation with a new acquaintance, I feel very nervous.
14. I have no fear of speaking up in conversations.
15. Ordinarily I am very tense and nervous in conversations.
16. Ordinarily I am very calm and relaxed in conversations.
17. While conversing with a new acquaintance, I feel very relaxed.
18. I'm afraid to speak up in conversations.
19. I have no fear of giving a speech.
20. Certain parts of my body feel very tense and rigid while giving a speech.
21. I feel relaxed while giving a speech.
22. My thoughts become confused and jumbled when I am giving a speech.
23. I face the prospect of giving a speech with confidence.
24. While giving a speech, I get so nervous I forget facts I really know.

Group discussion : 18 - (scores for items 2, 4, & 6) + (scores for items 1, 3, & 5)
Meetings : 18 - (scores for items 8, 9, & 12) + (scores for items 7, 10, & 11)
Interpersonal : 18 - (scores for items 14, 16, & 17) + (scores for items 13, 15, & 18)
Public Speaking : 18 - (scores for items 19, 21, & 23) + (scores for items 20, 22, &24)
To obtain a total score for the PRCA, simply add the sub-scores together.

Scores can range from 24 - 120. Scores below 51 represent people who have very low CA. Scores between 51 - 80 represent people with average CA. Scores above 80 represent people who have high levels of trait CA (McCroskey, J. C., 1982). An introduction to rhetorical communication (4th Ed). Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall. The questionnaire and PRCA-24 were then analysed using Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS) version 20 by applying descriptive analysis.

## C. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

### Level of Communication Apprehension

| Participants | Score | Level of CA |
|---|---|---|
| 1 | 74 | Average |
| 2 | 81 | High |
| 3 | 75 | Average |
| 4 | 74 | Average |
| 5 | 72 | Average |
| 6 | 78 | Average |
| 7 | 72 | Average |
| 8 | 68 | Average |
| 9 | 75 | Average |
| 10 | 68 | Average |
| 11 | 70 | Average |
| 12 | 68 | Average |
| 13 | 72 | Average |
| 14 | 72 | Average |
| 15 | 72 | Average |
| 16 | 80 | Average |
| 17 | 68 | Average |
| 18 | 96 | High |
| 19 | 67 | Average |
| 20 | 24 | Low |
| 21 | 83 | High |
| 22 | 74 | Average |
| 23 | 84 | High |
| 24 | 67 | Average |
| 25 | 62 | Average |
| 26 | 74 | Average |
| 27 | 72 | Average |
| 28 | 78 | Average |
| 29 | 74 | Average |
| 30 | 40 | Low |
| 31 | 88 | High |
| 32 | 79 | Average |

**Table 1**. Exact Score of PRCA-24

The above table shows that 2 participants experience a low level of communication apprehension (24-40), 25 participants experience an average level of communication apprehension (67-78) while only 5 participants show a high level of communication apprehension (81-96).

**Communication Apprehension and Gender**

**Correlations**

| | | Score_level | Gender |
|---|---|---|---|
| Score_level | Pearson Correlation | 1 | -.475** |
| | Sig. (2-tailed) | | .006 |
| | N | 32 | 32 |
| Gender | Pearson Correlation | -.475** | 1 |
| | Sig. (2-tailed) | .006 | |
| | N | 32 | 32 |

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

**Table 2**. Correlation of CA and Gender

Table 2 shows Pearson Correlation of -0.475 which indicates a strong negative relationship between communication apprehension and gender. This means that it has a correlation where female participants have lower CA than the male participants.

**D. CONCLUSION**

From the data shown above, it can be derived from a statement that the level of communication apprehension among Universiti Utara Malaysia administrative staff grade 19 was average to high. The notion of average to high communication apprehension here is that, an officer could still manage to respond or converse in an accepted way to make others understand although the staff himself or herself still feels a bit apprehensive when communicating, be it during group discussions, meetings, dyadic interactions or even public speaking. Few of them feel a high level of communication apprehension which could lead to a problem in workplace communication when using English as a medium.

To answer the research question; is there any correlation between communication apprehension with gender? This research found out that female participants have lower communication apprehension compared to male participants. This is in-line with the findings of Borzi and Mills (2001) which found that male have a higher level of communication apprehension than female.

**Suggestions**

The researchers highly recommend and suggest that the English enhancement courses for Universiti Utara Malaysia administrative staff be continued in the future by taking into account the specific job descriptions as they are different from one department to another. Some amendments or modifications are needed to revamp and rejuvenate the programmes especially in tailoring with the schedule or timetable that can suit the time of most of the staff. The researchers also recommend

that some routines or activities in the office such as official meetings, discussions or even chit-chat activities in the pantry can be conducted by using English language as a medium of communication.

**Limitations**

This study focused only on PRCA-24 as the analysis of communicative apprehension. The participants of this study are limited as the researchers only managed to receive 10% participants out of 300 plus samples due to pandemic Covid-19. Even though the questionnaires were distributed via Google Form, due to most of the staff were working from home, the number of questionnaires returned is quite low. We hope that further research done in the future can provide a more meticulous breakdown of details to allow for a meaningful comparison across years of working, age, gender and the department of the staff.

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