

Oral Communication Apprehension and MUET Speaking Performance of Engineering Undergraduates in a Technical University

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ABSTRACT

Fear of speaking especially in the English language is a hindrance to most local graduates during their job – seeking ventures. This study attempts to identify the level of oral communication apprehension (OCA) among the UTeM Mechanical Engineering undergraduates. It also aims to determine if there is a possible correlation between the undergraduates' OCA level and their performance in the MUET Speaking assessment. Results indicate that the undergraduates had a higher level of OCA in public speaking activities. There is a negative correlation between the undergraduates' OCA and their MUET Speaking scores. Hence, English language instructors play an important role in lowering their students' OCA during their lessons.

Keywords: *Oral communication apprehension; speaking performance; engineering undergraduates*

1. INTRODUCTION

Despite the fact that the Malaysian education system provides a compulsory 11-13 years of English language learning in the formal classrooms, many students if not most, still lack the ability to speak the language competently without displaying any signs of speaking fears. These fears of speaking in the English language often hinder their performance at the tertiary level. This is more so as the medium of instruction in the Engineering programmes in the local universities are in English. When these students leave the universities to look for jobs, again the same problem arises during their job interviews. Mastery of the English language is utmost important nowadays. Competitions are very stiff and only the best graduates will be hired by the ever competing multinational companies in the country. Thus being skillful in communicating in the English language is no longer a preference but rather a must for all Engineering undergraduates .

Communication apprehension (CA) is defined as “the fear or anxiety associated with real or anticipated communication with others” [1]. CA occurs in a variety of settings and often results in negative outcomes for both speakers and listeners. McCroskey [2] further defines CA as more of a way an individual feels about communication and less about how they communicate. This feeling of anxiety could come from the lack of proficiency in the language, the feeling of insecurity when communicating in the language and the lack of practice to use the language. Even individuals who are highly proficient in a language can have a high CA level.

Researchers [3,4,5], claim that students showed a significant level of CA which negatively affected their language learning outcomes. Similarly, Mustapha et al. [6] observed a high level of CA in most EFL students while Noor Raha and Kaur [7] found a moderate level of CA in most of the students in a classroom communication course. The same was reported by, Pitt et al. [8] that CA had a significant negative effect on sales students' performance. However, Devi and Feroz [9] discovered that CA did not show any linear relationship with students' oral presentation performance.

This study aims to find out the level of oral communication apprehension among the Mechanical Engineering undergraduates of UTeM. It looks into the four specific communication contexts which these undergraduates often engage in namely group discussion, meeting, interpersonal communication and public speaking. It also aims to determine if the level of oral communication apprehension among the Mechanical Engineering undergraduates of UTeM has any impacts on their

performance in the MUET Speaking assessment.

2. METHODOLOGY

2.1 Procedures

The 50 participants consisting of 33 males and 17 females selected for the study were all 3rd year students pursuing the Bachelor of Mechanical Engineering at Universiti Teknikal Malaysia Melaka (UTeM). All these participants were in the same class attending the English for Professional Communication (EPC) subject.

The Personal Report of Communication (PRCA-24) questionnaire developed by McCroskey [2] was used to measure the students' oral communication apprehension level. The questionnaire contains 24 items which are aimed at measuring students' level of apprehension while communicating in the English language in various situations. The instrument is most widely used in college classes and measures overall anxiety as well as anxiety in four communication contexts: interpersonal or dyadic, small group, meeting or large group and public speaking. The PRCA-24 questionnaire requires the participants to rate each item by using the scale based on the rubrics stated. The instrument states that the individual scores should range between 24 and 120. Individuals with scores below 55 are considered to have a low level of communication apprehension. Those with scores between 55 and 83 are considered having a moderate level of communication apprehension while scores above 83 indicate a high level of communication apprehension.

Another instrument used was the students' MUET speaking assessment score. The maximum score for the MUET Speaking assessment is 45. The MUET speaking assessment score was used to determine the relationship between the students' communication apprehension level and their speaking performance.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Measure of students' oral communication apprehension

Table 1 indicates the overall communication apprehension of the 50 students who completed the PRCA-24. The maximum score was 98 and the minimum was 40. The mean value of communication apprehension among them was 70.54 and standard deviation was 14.11.

Table 1: Analysis of 50 students' Personal Report of Communication Apprehension

Mean	70.54
Std. Deviation	14.11
Minimum	40
Maximum	98

Table 2 shows the details of PRCA scores of the students. It is pertinent to note that on the whole, 84% of the total respondents of this survey indicated that they are affected by problems of communication apprehension while communicating in the four types of settings such as group discussions, meetings, interpersonal communication and public speaking.

Table 2: Communication Apprehension score of 50 students

CA level	Frequency	Percent
Low	8	16.0
Moderate	32	64.0
High	10	20.0

Total	50	100.0
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Table 3 shows the 50 students' sub scores for four communication contexts which are group discussions, meetings, interpersonal communications and public speaking. The data reveals that the students were most apprehensive in public speaking situations and were least apprehensive in communicating in group discussions.

Table 3: Descriptive statistics for students' level of communication apprehension in four contexts of communication

Contexts	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Group Discussion	50	14.64	3.83
Meeting	50	17.84	4.62
Interpersonal Communication	50	17.36	4.59
Public Speaking	50	20.68	4.55
Overall CA level	50	70.54	14.11

These findings agree with the findings in Pitt et al.'s [8] study which claimed the public speaking having the highest level of communication apprehension. Charlesworth [10] too found that the highest level of OCA was contributed by the public speaking task.

4. CONCLUSIONS

The results indicate the presence of CA among the Mechanical Engineering students albeit at a moderate level. English language instructors need to design their lessons in such a way which will lower the effect of communication apprehension in the students. With minimal communication apprehension, chances are great that our Engineering undergraduates will be able to upgrade their English communication skills.

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