

Oral Communication Apprehension in Oral Presentation among Polytechnic Students

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Abstract

In the present study, factors were investigated that caused oral communication apprehension among polytechnic students when performing oral presentations. The specific objectives of the study were: (a) to compare the communication apprehension level associated with five factors and (b) to find out if there were relationships among the five factors, namely, personality traits, preparation level, audience factor, language proficiency, and confidence level. For this descriptive study, communication apprehension data was obtained from 373 students in a polytechnic college using a 23-item Likert-scale questionnaire. The results showed that the audience factor caused the greatest oral communication apprehension, as respondents reported being affected by negative expressions seen on the audience members' faces. The factors causing a moderate level of oral presentation apprehension were preparation, language ability, personality traits, and confidence. The findings suggest communication apprehension related to oral presentation can be reduced by giving skills to presenters in objectively analyzing the audience's reactions, practicing rehearsals, and using audience engagement strategies.

Keywords: *Oral communication, apprehension, polytechnic students, English subjects*

Introduction

Oral presentation is a common assessment tool at all levels of education in Malaysia, where students give oral presentations, sometimes with visual aids. Through oral presentations, students get to practise their speaking skills and develop confidence to speak to an audience. Students' communication competence is demonstrated by their ability to provide a particular audience, such as their industry and faculty supervisors, with a compelling oral presentation that prompts a response, understanding, appreciation, or critical inquiry (Yusoff, 2010). Good oral presentation skills are important to succeed in job interviews and to make convincing reports and arguments in meetings. In colleges and universities, good oral presentation skills are important to score in assessments and to exchange information with peers and instructors.

Students may face some challenges when giving oral presentations, such as the inability to articulate their thoughts, which may lead to mumbling (Soomro et al., 2019). Moreover, students might have a meek disposition and feel awkward in front of an audience (Raja, 2017). They may avoid their instructor's eyes, and forget what they want to say (Al-Nouh et al., 2015). A hesitant delivery and lack of eye contact results in a poor presentation performance and, if evaluated as a coursework assessment, may result in unsatisfactory grades. Besides public speaking, students might also feel uncomfortable in group discussions, meetings, as well as other interpersonal conversations (Bastida & Yap, 2019). McCroskey (1977, pp. 78–79) described this situation as oral communication apprehension, which is defined as the "the predisposition to avoid communication, if possible. Communication apprehension is an individual's level of fear or anxiety associated with either real or anticipated communication with another person or persons."

Studies in various settings have indicated that students often experience oral communication apprehension, particularly under assessment conditions (e.g., Kakepoto et al., 2012). McCroskey's (1984) early study in Japan indicated that three-fourths of the students were classified as having high levels of communication apprehension in both Japanese and English. In the United Kingdom, students

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were more nervous in oral assessments than in paper-based assessments (Huxham et al., 2012; Simper, 2010). In Mexico, students with poor English language ability reported having higher levels of anxiety (Pappamihel, 2002). In Malaysia, where English is taught as a second language in schools, Mustapha et al. (2010) found that a majority of university students experienced moderate to high levels of communication apprehension. In order for instructors to know how to help their students cope with communication apprehension, it is necessary to identify factors for greater apprehension. Furthermore, to help students develop fluency in a foreign language, it is necessary to understand potential reasons why students do not talk to reduce anxiety associated with speaking the foreign language (Lucas, 1984).

Researchers have identified some factors that cause communication apprehension. Kho and Leong (2015) found that the main cause of oral presentation difficulties, for polytechnic students in Sarawak, Malaysia, was lack of practice. In instructional settings, students have inadequate opportunities for oral practice and this makes it difficult for students to improve their oral communication skills (Soomro et al., 2019). Those who practice well before presenting in public are much more likely to be positive and give successful presentations (Raja, 2017).

In the present study, we investigated factors that caused oral communication apprehension among polytechnic students when performing oral presentations in English.

Literature Review

In the present study, the focus was on oral presentation, which is considered public speaking. Oral presentation has been reported to be challenging by various authors (Soomro et al., 2019; Kakepoto, 2012). In Malaysia, Mustapha et al. (2010) found that Malaysian students preferred group discussions as they were less apprehension-provoking than engaging in dialogues and speeches. These findings point to the need to further examine factors causing communication apprehension during oral presentations. An established framework used for studying communication apprehension is McCroskey's (1982) Personal Report of Communication Apprehension (PRCA-24) instrument. The PRCA-24 framework is composed of 24 statements that measures overall apprehension as well as apprehension in four specific communication contexts: interpersonal or dyadic, small group, meeting or large group, and public speaking.

McCroskey (1982) did not attribute communication apprehension to either trait or the situation (also referred to as state). It can be inferred that McCroskey (1982) did not subscribe to the notion that certain personality types were prone towards communication apprehension, as is evident in some of his later research on this subject. For example, Razawi et al. (2019) suggested five factors affected communication apprehension, one of them involved personality traits. The other four factors investigated in Razawi et al.'s (2019) study on oral presentation involved language ability, confidence, preparation level, and audience. Pitt et al. (2000) also were of the opinion that some people were more orally apprehensive than others. McCroskey's (1982) construct of communication apprehension was oriented towards comparing the apprehension levels associated with the four communication contexts, but, of late, researchers seemed to be more interested in factors that can predict communication apprehension levels.

Research data have shown that communication apprehension is caused by situation and trait factors, and the findings suggest the audience factor and shyness are the more discernible influences. In Pakistan, Soomro et al. (2019) showed that stress and nervousness affected 71% of engineering students' oral presentation performance, followed by lack of motivation (63%), while other factors affected only about half of the undergraduates (poor oral communication skills, fear and anxiety, shyness, and low self-confidence). Shyness can be considered a trait factor (see Cheek & Briggs, 1990). Shy people tend to have negative views of self and sometimes feel that interlocutors, particularly in unknown social settings, would make a negative evaluation of them (Marinho et al., 2020). In Mustapha et al.'s (2010) study, conducted in Malaysia on final year Bachelor of Business and Marketing students, it was found that students felt more apprehensive when engaging with unfamiliar groups of students. Almost half of the students (45%) reported a high level of communication

apprehension, while 26% and 29% reported average and low levels, respectively. A communication context with new acquaintances is more apprehension-provoking than an audience composed of familiar people. In fact, Razawi et al.'s (2019) study of diploma and degree students enrolled in English courses in a Malaysian university showed that the audience was the most apprehension-provoking factor, and they were particularly frightened by the audience reactions. Interestingly, over 60% of the students in Razawi et al.'s (2019) study reported having personality traits inclined towards low self-esteem and low self-confidence. They reported feeling worried during an oral presentation even though they had made adequate preparation. Their apprehension was exacerbated by the presence of a large audience, and the thought of their peers and lecturers laughing at their low English proficiency. Based on these results, there seemed to be an interaction involving trait and situational sources in communication apprehension.

In addition to the audience factor, researchers have also identified the lack of language ability as a factor that causes communication apprehension in oral presentations. Hashim and Isa (2012) reported that when their students spoke English, most of them were worried about how individuals around them could track their knowledge and output of English in evaluative situations. If students with poor English proficiency are asked to speak English in front of their peers, they may begin to feel self-aware and their confidence level consequently drops (Miskam & Saidalvi, 2019). Chuang (2010, as cited in Al-Nouh et al., 2015) mentioned that, despite being well-prepared, some students still felt anxious as they thought that their peers spoke English better than they did, and they were afraid that their lecturers would pay attention to their English mistakes. In another study in Johor, Malaysia, Rafik-Galea and Mohd Zain (2006) found that a majority of the Bachelor in Business Administration students were afraid of using English due to lack of proficiency in the language and they had high levels of communication apprehension when using the language to communicate. Abdul Rahman and Ahmad Mahir (2008) found that inability to pronounce English words correctly and personality traits were the major causes of communication apprehension. Inability to pronounce English words comes under the language ability factor in McCroskey's (1977) measure of oral communication apprehension. Razawi et al. (2019) used the term "language ability" and Kho (2014) used the term "linguistic factors" to refer to problems with fluency and pronunciation when speaking (see also Wilang & Singhasiri, 2017; Wilang & Vo, 2018).

Methodology of the Study

The descriptive study on communication apprehension involved 373 Diploma students in a polytechnic. These students enrolled in a 14-week semester long English subjects (Communicative English 2 and Communicative English 3), in which one of the coursework assessments was an oral presentation. The course presenters assessed speaking, grammar, writing, and reading skills, with speaking contributing to 35% of the total grade.

Table 1 shows students' background information. The students had poor English language proficiency, evident from their band scores in the Malaysian University English Test (MUET) 2020 results (Joseph, 2021). A majority of the students (59%) were in MUET band 3, meaning that they were social users of English. They demonstrated fairly appropriate use of language in social contexts but they may make grammatical errors. A total of 30% were in MUET band 2, described as limited users of English with a limited command of English and showing a lack of accuracy, expressiveness, fluency, and appropriateness in use. None of the students were academic users of English, as there were none in MUET bands 5 and 6.

In the present study, the questionnaire on communication apprehension in oral presentations contained 23 items. The questionnaire items can be seen in Tables 3–7 in the Results section. The term "communication apprehension" was not used in the questionnaire because it is a technical word that students might not understand. Instead, simple words such as "nervous," "worried," and "anxious" were used in the items. A five-point Likert was used for the items (1, *strongly agree*; 2, *agree*; 3, *undecided*; 4, *disagree*; 5, *strongly disagree*). Another section of the questionnaire elicited background

information. The questionnaire returned high internal consistency, shown by the Cronbach's alpha coefficient of .89.

Table 1 *Background Information on the Participants (N = 373)*

Independent Variables		No.	%
Gender	Male	210	56.3
	Female	163	43.7
Semester	Semester 1	6	1.6
	Semester 2	16	4.3
	Semester 3	272	72.9
	Semester 4	57	15.3
	Semester 5	16	4.3
	Semester 6	6	1.6
Department	Mechanical Engineering	107	28.7
	Civil Engineering	103	27.6
	Electrical Engineering	101	27.1
	Commerce	37	9.9
	Petrochemical Engineering	23	6.2
	IT & Communication	2	0.5
MUET	Band 6	0	0
	Band 5	0	0
	Band 4	18	7
	Band 3	153	59
	Band 2	77	30
	Band 1	3	1

The questionnaire was adapted from McCroskey (1982), Razawi et al. (2019), and Soomro et al. (2019). Nine items were adapted from McCroskey's (1982) communication apprehension framework (PRCA-24) and focused on oral presentations. Fourteen items were taken from Razawi et al.'s (2019) study that had another four items that were similar to PRCA-24 items. Following Razawi et al.'s (2019) investigation, the factors causing oral presentation apprehension were categorized into personality traits, self-confidence, preparation, language ability and the audience factor. We used the term "audience factor" to cover two aspects examined by Razawi et al. (2019), which were audience interest and audience reaction.

The questionnaires were distributed at the end of the June 2020 session at the polytechnic, after the students had completed their oral presentation assessments. For the data analysis, the means and standard deviations were calculated. As a five-point Likert scale was used, the mean scores were divided into thirds. Mean scores between 1 and 2.33 were categorized as low communication apprehension, and the mean scores for moderate and high communication apprehension levels were 2.34–3.66 and 3.67–5.00, respectively.

Results and Discussion

In this section the results are presented on the five factors influencing communication apprehension. Table 2 shows that the top factor causing communication apprehension when making oral presentations was audience interest ($M = 3.75$). The students' communication apprehension level for the other four factors was moderate, as indicated by mean scores between 2.34 and 3.66. Among these four factors, lack of preparation brought about more communication apprehension than the other three factors (language ability, personality traits, and confidence).

Table 2 Mean Scores for Factors Causing Communication Apprehension When Making Oral Presentations (*N* = 373)

No.	Factors	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
1.	Audience Factor	3.75	0.73
2.	Preparation	3.65	0.67
3.	Language Ability	3.44	0.66
4.	Personality Traits	3.22	0.54
5.	Confidence	3.08	0.72

The results given in Table 3 showed that, in oral presentations, the audience factor potentially caused communication apprehension. The mean score for the first three items was between 3.67 and 5, categorized as high levels in this study. The students felt nervous making oral presentations in the presence of a large unfamiliar audience ($M = 3.86$). Their nervousness increased with the size of the audience ($M = 3.84$). The fear of audience reactions also affected oral presentation performance. Audience reactions such as low interest in the presentation topic, lack of attention, and unresponsiveness might make them lose confidence and adversely affect their performance. Additionally, students were worried that the audience might laugh at them when they spoke English ($M = 3.54$), but the level of apprehension was moderate (between 2.34 and 3.66). Their English proficiency was sufficient for them to communicate in social situations and, to some extent, in academic contexts. However, the standard deviation for this item was higher than the other audience factor items showing variability among the students. Those with a better command of English might not feel as much communication apprehension as others with poorer proficiency. These results showed that the audience factor played an important role in determining the communication apprehension felt by the polytechnic students in oral presentation situations. Their communication apprehension was compounded by the fact that their lecturers were in the audience who were evaluating them and deciding their coursework marks. Their lecturers might not laugh at them but might display facial expressions that indicated that they said something incorrectly.

Table 3 Mean Scores on How Audience Factors Affected Communication Apprehension When Making Oral Presentations (*N* = 373)

No.	Statement	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
1.	I feel nervous when I make oral presentations to people I do not know.	3.86	0.90
2.	I feel nervous when many people are watching me when I am making an oral presentation.	3.84	0.93
3.	The audience's reactions affect my performance in the oral presentation.	3.76	0.84
4.	I worry that the audience will laugh at me when I speak English.	3.54	1.02
Average		3.75	0.73

Data in Table 4 indicated that lack of preparation was a factor that caused communication apprehension in oral presentations as shown by mean scores of above 3.67 for two out of five items. The polytechnic students reported that when they started their oral presentations, they got so nervous that they forgot what they wanted to say ($M = 3.85$). They also felt worried even if they had prepared well beforehand. Good preparation for an oral presentation includes preparing the PowerPoint slides ahead of time, revising the content until they express the intended meanings, and rehearsing for the presentation until smoothness in delivery is achieved. However, students may not make an elaborate preparation for their oral presentations, leading to high communication apprehension. During their presentation, they also found it difficult to organise their ideas logically ($M = 3.62$). It could be assumed that if students were well-prepared and had rehearsed beforehand, they would be able to organize their ideas. However, their communication apprehension can affect them to such an extent that, despite their preparation, they find themselves still disorganized. Our experience of teaching polytechnic and university students showed that students might consider the preparation of slides, the addition of graphics in the slides, and making notes counted as good

preparation. Few students rehearse and time themselves to ensure a smooth delivery, which could alleviate their communication apprehension when making oral presentations. This is evident from their responses to the question on whether they needed to read from their notes or slides during oral presentations (Item 4, $M = 3.57$). The item focused on the student's behaviour of reading from notes or slides during oral presentations. This contrasted with item 5 that was a precautionary behaviour to steady the nerves. Bringing notes with them made presenters feel confident in case they forgot ($M = 3.40$). The mean scores obtained showed that more students read from their notes or slides, but fewer needed notes if they were well-prepared.

Table 4 Mean Scores on How Preparation Affected Communication Apprehension When Making Oral Presentations ($N = 373$)

No.	Statement	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
1.	When I start my oral presentation, I get so nervous that I forget things I wanted to say.	3.85	0.88
2.	I feel worried even if I have prepared well beforehand.	3.78	0.83
3.	I find it difficult to organize my ideas logically during an oral presentation.	3.62	1.00
4.	I need to read from my notes or the slides during oral presentations.	3.57	0.83
5.	I bring notes with me during my oral presentation even if I am well prepared.	3.40	0.98
Average		3.65	0.67

Preparing oral presentations in English caused a moderate level of communication apprehension to the polytechnic students (mean scores of 2.34–3.66) and this was partly due to their low English proficiency. Data in Table 5 indicated that a majority of students agreed that they were worried when presenting due to their low English speaking ability ($M = 3.64$). The specific aspect of their English proficiency that was the most worrying to them was their word choice ($M = 3.54$). This was followed by grammar, fluency, and pronunciation (both with $M = 3.48$). In their view, grammatical competence was a problem. In addition, the polytechnic students also did not have many opportunities to speak English in their daily life and develop fluency in communicating in English. This was because their lectures were mostly in Malay and it was also the medium of instruction in school. Moreover, outside of the lecture context, they tended to communicate in Sarawakian Malay or their mother tongue. The mean scores of the other two items were closer to the mid-point of three, indicating that these issues were not particularly anxiety-causing, that is, thinking in their mother tongue and translating to English ($M = 3.37$), or memorising the script of the oral presentation without trying to understand it ($M = 3.13$).

Table 5 Mean Scores on How English Language Ability Affected Communication Apprehension When Making Oral Presentations ($N = 373$)

No.	Statement	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
1.	I am worried because of my low English speaking ability.	3.64	0.98
2.	I find it hard to find a suitable word to express my meaning when I am making an oral presentation.	3.54	0.87
3.	I care about my grammar more than fluency in the oral presentation.	3.48	0.90
4.	I have a problem with oral fluency and pronunciation during the oral presentation.	3.48	0.82
5.	During an oral presentation, I think in my mother tongue or Bahasa Malaysia (Malay) then translate it into English.	3.37	0.93
6.	I prefer to memorize the script of the speech/oral presentation rather than understand it.	3.13	0.98
Average		3.44	0.66

The items in Table 6 would have been categorized as personality traits by Razawi et al. (2019), but contains mostly items that directly focused on feelings associated with making oral presentations (Items 2–6). Item 1 is an indirect focus on students' preference for individual or group work, which is linked to their personality. Generally, most of the students preferred to do their oral presentation in

pairs or groups ($M = 3.83$). Based on the first researcher's observation of his students' conduct during an oral presentation, the students were able to share the burden and assist each other when presenting in pairs or groups. For example, when the students could not convey their ideas well, the group members could come to their assistance. While a large proportion of students reported feeling very anxious before an oral presentation, many others felt comfortable doing oral presentations ($M = 3.18$). The difference in the level of oral presentation anxiety could be attributed to their personality trait as in whether they were comfortable speaking in public and this may be linked to their introvert-extrovert personality. Next, the students reported feeling marginally embarrassed when making oral presentations in English ($M = 3.15$). While the students did not feel relaxed about presenting in English, they also did not dislike doing so. The students seemed to have accepted the fact that they had to make oral presentations in English for assessment purposes and doing so in groups alleviated their anxiety.

Table 6 Mean Scores on How Personality Traits Affected Communication Apprehension When Making Oral Presentations ($N = 373$)

No.	Statement	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
1.	I prefer to do an oral presentation in pairs or groups.	3.83	0.96
2.	I feel very anxious before an oral presentation.	3.55	0.88
3.	I am comfortable doing oral presentations.*	3.18*	0.76
4.	I feel embarrassed when I do an oral presentation in English.	3.15	0.97
5.	I feel relaxed when I do an oral presentation in English.*	2.89*	0.79
6.	I dislike doing oral presentations.	2.84	0.83
Average		3.22*	0.5

Note: *The scores for these two items were reversed for the calculation of the mean score (average) because, in this study, the higher scores indicate higher levels of communication apprehension on the five-point Likert scale of 1 to 5.

Finally, it was clear from the results shown in Table 7 that self-confidence did not have much influence on their communication apprehension when making oral presentations, compared to the other four factors. The mean scores for the avoidance of questions during presentation due to low self-confidence were close to the mid-point of three ($M = 3.10$). Similarly, the students marginally disagreed that they found oral presentations easy because of their confidence.

Table 7 Mean Scores on How Confidence Affected Communication Apprehension When Making Oral Presentations ($N = 373$)

No.	Statement	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
1.	I avoid answering questions during my presentation due to my low self-confidence.	3.10	0.95
2.	I find an oral presentation easy because I have confidence.	2.95	0.80
Average		3.08	0.72

This study led to the identification of the audience factor as the greatest contributor to a high level of communication apprehension. Interestingly, the audience factor was more apprehension-provoking than lack of preparation. Taking the items in the high apprehension mean score range, the factors that created the most apprehension were an unfamiliar audience, a large audience, and negative audience reactions. Students might also feel afraid of making mistakes during the presentation and of getting negative comments from their lecturers (Prastiwi, 2012). Fear of the audience is not surprising because Soomro et al. (2019) also found that students in their study were shy and hesitated to communicate their opinions during oral presentations due to unfamiliarity with the audience. Shy people seem to be more fearful of a negative evaluation by the audience (Marinho et al., 2020). The polytechnic students also seemed to be very affected by audience reactions, and read boredom and other negative evaluations into the non-verbal expressions and actions of their audience. It can be conjectured that having an affirmative audience who smiled and nodded at them

during their oral presentation would lower their apprehension level. Essentially, if the audience is unresponsive, the speaker would view them as saying, "You may be talking but I'm not listening to you," which can cause both stress and anxiety (Bassett et al., 1973, as cited in MacIntyre et al., 1997). Therefore, when it comes to assigning oral presentation tasks to students, lecturers should bear in mind that making students do "speaking-for-the-sake-of-speaking" exercises or performance-style presentations can generate little audience interest because they are often performed simply to gain public speaking experience (MacIntyre et al., 1997). Some ways that instructors can help their students is through audience analysis, and teaching their students to attract the audience's interest, and engage with their audience throughout the presentation.

Based on the study on polytechnic students, a significant factor causing communication apprehension during oral presentation was preparation. This is an area that instructors can work on, unlike the audience factor, which is beyond the control of the students. Students can be taught techniques to make good preparations for oral presentations and also be reminded to conduct repeated rehearsals to familiarise themselves with the presentation content. A study by Chou (2011) found that group presentations can help students develop effective communication techniques to improve their ability to communicate with audiences and to enable them not just to memorise vast pieces of text. Practice in oral presentations can minimise glossophobia, the fear of public speaking. A person with glossophobia is unable to control their nerves and, often to the point of a nervous breakdown, has an extremely strong fear of public speaking (Barnard, 2017). Kurniawan (2016) recommended that during preparation, the students could practice speaking in front of the mirror. This strategy also helps to reduce students' nervousness while doing the presentation. Tanveer (2007) stated that restricted exposure to the target language and lack of opportunities in certain settings to practice speaking inhibit students' communicative ability to develop fully.

Conclusions

The study on factors that cause communication apprehension among students, when performing oral presentations, showed that the top two factors causing high apprehension to students were the audience factor and preparation. In comparison, language ability, personality traits, and confidence caused a moderate level of communication apprehension. Apprehension may negatively affect language learning (Campbell & Ortiz, 1991; Phillips, 1992). The findings are useful to language educators, curriculum designers, and policy makers because they identify areas of communication apprehension for educators to work on in courses and to give training to assist students in overcoming their fear of speaking in a second or foreign language. The findings suggest that a practical way for instructors to reduce their students' communication apprehension when making oral presentations is to teach them about audience awareness. By doing that, the students may be able to tailor their oral presentations to their audience, and react accordingly to the audience situation, so that they will be attracted to listen to the presentations. This includes interacting actively with the audience to control the audience mood. In addition, the importance of rehearsals must be impressed upon students who should take the initiative to improve their verbal communication skills. A limitation of this study was that the findings were based on students' self-reports, and may not be reflective of the actual apprehension levels experienced during oral presentations. Future research should investigate communication apprehension using observational techniques of audience factors and confidence levels while employing direct measures of the students' preparatory work for oral presentations. In addition, since the audience factor is the greatest barrier to confidence in oral presentations, intervention studies involving training of students to lessen communication apprehension due to the audience factor should be conducted to understand and alleviate student's communication apprehension.

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