Speaking in English: Oral Communication Apprehension and Self-Perceived Communication Competence among Marketing Undergraduates in Malaysia[1]

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Abstract

In this study perceptions of final year marketing undergraduates were investigated at Universiti Malaysia Sarawak towards the feeling of anxiety they experienced when speaking in English. Specifically, the objectives of the study were to determine (a) the level of oral communication apprehension; (b) the level of self–perceived communication competence; and (c) to identify the relationship between the students' English oral communication apprehension and self-perceived communication competence. A quantitative research design was adopted and McCroskey's well-known questionnaire was used to measure communication apprehension levels in four communication contexts (group discussion, meeting, interpersonal and public speaking). The Self-Perceived Communication Competence questionnaire by the McCroskeys' was used to measure communication in various contexts (public, meeting, group, and dyad) and from different receivers (stranger, acquaintance and friend). The results showed that the final year marketing undergraduates had moderate levels of oral communication apprehension. Their level of self-perceived communication competence was also at the moderate level. Results also indicated a significant correlation between communication apprehension and self-perceived communication competence among the students.

Keywords: *Oral communication apprehension, self-perceived competence, marketing undergraduates*

Background of the Study

English is the language of international communication and the medium of instruction in most public universities in Malaysia, such as at Universiti Malaysia Sarawak (UNIMAS)–the context of this study. English communication skills are also considered a pre-requisite for many jobs, thus making it necessary for students to learn and master the language, especially for communication purposes. As the second most important language in Malaysia, English is extensively used in the education system.

Although English is taught from the level of primary school until university, many students at the tertiary level still have difficulty when communicating in English (Mustapha et al., 2010). Many studies have revealed that students fear the thought of speaking in English and seem to display signs of being ill at ease when communicating in the language (Subramaniam & Harun, 2013). These findings are of concern, especially since universities are partially responsible in preparing students be able to deliver information and express thoughts, feelings, and opinions competently. These communication skills are important as it improves students' chances at employment in the future (Abdullah et al., 2010). Given these observations, in this study the aim was to analyse UNIMAS marketing students' oral communication apprehension and their self-perceived communication competence. Findings from this study will add to current knowledge regarding Malaysian students' ability in oral communication, which will be of value for the planning of language curricula at the higher education level.

Communication and Communication Apprehension

DeVito (1986) defined communication as "the process of transmitting a message from a sender to a receiver, through a channel and with the interference of noise" (p. 61). Wood (2015) expanded the definition of communication by stating that "communication is a systematic process in which people interact with and through symbols to create and interpret meanings" (p. 9). Communication involves verbal, nonverbal and electronic means of human interaction, and is an integral aspect of social life. A study by Adler et al. (2001) revealed that adults spent at least 30% of their time speaking, 45% listening, 16% reading, and nine% writing.

Communication, however, is not a process that is necessarily without issues. At times, people may find themselves in situations where they are nervous to communicate. This may be referred to as communication apprehension (CA), which is the predisposition to avoid communication, or the experience of anxiety when forced to communicate (Kim, 2015). Communication apprehension can be found in different settings where evaluation, or the perception of evaluation, is taking place. These settings may be classrooms, schools, universities, organizations, meeting, or even in group discussions. Among the causes of the fear or anxiety to communicate are lack of proficiency in the target language, the lack of practice, and even insecurity (Devi & Feroz, 2008).

Extensive studies have examined CA and its relation to foreign language (FL) anxiety. Such anxiety is a complex, multidimensional phenomenon referring to "the feeling of tension and apprehension specifically associated with second language [L2] contexts, including speaking, listening, and learning" (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1994, p. 2). Horwitz et al. (1986, p. 127) identified three components of FL anxiety: communication apprehension, test anxiety, and fear of negative evaluation. Communication apprehension is "a type of shyness characterized by fear of or anxiety about communicating with people." People who typically have trouble speaking in groups are likely to experience a greater difficulty speaking in an FL class where they have little control over the communicative situation and where their performance is constantly monitored (Liu & Jackson, 2008).

Oral Communication Apprehension (OCA)

From Horwitz et al.'s (1986) conceptualization of FL anxiety, we can see how OCA is inherently related. This understanding has persisted in the broader field of applied linguistics (Arnold, 2007). While there are beliefs that one is the sub-set of the other, there are scholars who consider CA and FL anxiety as conceptually similar or even synonymous (MacIntyre et al., 2002; MacIntyre & Charos, 1996). Communication apprehension may be further defined, such as that seen in the work of McCroskey (1970), who categorized oral communication apprehension (OCA) into two types, namely, a state communication apprehension (State CA) and a trait communication apprehension (Trait CA). A state CA refers to a specific oral communication situation, such as giving a speech to a group of strangers or interviewing with a prospective employer for a desired position. On the other hand, a trait CA refers to individuals who experience fear or anxiety in virtually all oral communication encounters (McCroskey, 1970). Rasakumaran and Devi (2017) reported that OCA existed moderately among the freshmen of the Medical Faculty at the University of Jaffna, Sri Lanka. In a study by Ilias et al. (2013) at Universiti Tenaga Nasional, Malaysia, it was revealed that most students faced anxiety or fear when asked to participate in various communication contexts such as meetings and group discussions. Furthermore, the study by Devi and Feroz (2008) reported a correlation between OCA and the academic performance of Mechanical Engineering undergraduates at Universiti Teknikal Malaysia, Melaka, in their Malaysian University English Test (MUET) speaking assessment. Taha and Rezeq (2017) revealed that the degree of OCA among English senior majors at Al-Quds Open University in Palestine was moderate. Nevertheless, Jordanian postgraduate students had high levels of OCA, as reported by Huwari and Hashima (2010).

Self-Perceived Communication Competence (SPCC)

According to Dilbek et al. (2009), there are several views of how a group views communication competence (CC). This involves understanding what is orally competent as well as proficiency to create a competent oral communication outcome (Morreale et al., 2000). Self-perceived communication competence (SPCC) refers to learners' perceptions of their "adequate ability to pass along or give information" (McCroskey & McCroskey, 1988, p. 109). Durak (2020) found that self-perceived communication competence is thus perception of the ability to pass along or give information through communicative means. Lockley (2013) noted that speaking self-perceived communication competence (SPCC) is how individuals perceive their own competence in spoken communication.

Statement of the Problem

Possessing good oral communication skill will benefit marketing undergraduates to increase their prospect of employability. Most employers value the ability of communication skills for group discussions, conducting meetings, and interpersonal and public speaking. Learning oral communication and having good proficiency thus should be a priority for marketing graduates since they are expected to engage in various teamwork collaborations with other English-speaking customers. Furthermore, the marketing industry needs marketers who can communicate effectively with people from diverse backgrounds, to deal with multiple stakeholders, the government, private industries, and the public at large. In addition, to work in a global context, marketing undergraduates must be proficient communicators in English. Despite having proficiency in English oral communication, other requirements sought by employers include the ability to present ideas, explain issues and problems, to speak in a constructive manner, to resolve problems, to understand issues and problems faced by costumers and to come up with workable solutions to problems. For instance, Schlee and Harich (2010) stated that conceptual knowledge, technical skills, and communications skills are among the job requirements that marketing undergraduates should fulfil. Although studies regarding OCA and SPCC are available, studies on students taking a marketing major remain minimal. Existing studies have examined students from engineering, medicine, accounting, and those studying English as a second language (Aeni et al., 2017; Dar & Khan, 2014; Devi & Feroz, 2008; Ilias et al., 2013; Taha & Rezeq, 2018; Rashidi et al., 2012).

Objectives of the Study

This study aimed to determine the level of OCA and SPCC among final year marketing undergraduates in UNIMAS. In this study an attempt was made to identify the relationship between the students' OCA and SPCC.

Methodology

This study utilized a quantitative approach. Data were collected through a questionnaire and was statistically analysed to describe trends in the responses to questionnaire items. Two sets of survey instruments were administered to collect data from final year marketing undergraduates.

The total number of marketing undergraduates at the Faculty of Economics and Business for academic year 2019/2020 was 390. While the number of final year marketing undergraduates at UNIMAS was 123 students. The sample size adopted for this study was 100 final year students from the Marketing program. This number (N = 100) is adequate because the appropriate number lies between 30 and 300 people (Sekaran, 2000).

To determine the level of CA, this study utilized McCroskey's (1982) PRCA-24 survey instrument. The PRCA-24 is currently the most widely established instrument available for the measurement of CA. The questionnaire contained 13 statements concerning the students' uncomfortable feelings about communication in English. Examples of the items are: "I dislike participating in group discussions," "I am tense and nervous while participating in group discussions," "I am afraid to express my feelings at meetings." There were 11 statements that focused on the students' enjoyment when communicating in English. Some are examples are: "I feel relaxed while giving a

speech," "I have no fear of speaking up in conversations," and "I like to get involved in group discussion."

Besides the PRCA-24 questionnaire, this study also used the SPCC survey instrument, which was also introduced by McCroskey and McCroskey (2013). The instrument consisted of 12 statements representing various communication contexts (public speaking, talking in large meetings, talking in small groups, and talking in dyads) and three types of receivers (strangers, acquaintances, and friends). It is utilized to investigate people's perception of their own competence in various types of communication contexts. Responses from both instruments were fixed to a five–point agreement scale with 1 = *strongly agree* and 5 = *strongly disagree*. In a pilot test, Cronbach Alpha values of .91 (PRCA-24) and .88 (SPCC) were observed. Based on these results, it was anticipated that stable and consistent results would be obtained.

The questionnaire was emailed to 123 participants in March 2020. Only 100 sets were returned, which yielded a response rate of about 81.3%. The demographic data from the 100 respondents indicated that about 46% are Malays, followed by Chinese (27%), Iban (12%), and others (15%). Female respondents (74%) exceeded the males (26%). With regards to academic achievement, 49 respondents (49%) were in the range of 3.00–3.49 CGPA points, whereas 38 respondents were in the range 2.5–2.99 CGPA points, followed by 12% in the 3.5–4.00 CGPA point range, and 1% in the 2.00–2.49 CGPA point range.

Scoring for the PRCA-24 Instrument

For this instrument, the respondents answered 24 statements, which were scaled to five points of agreement. From this instrument, scores should range between 24 and 120. Individuals with scores between 24 and 55 were considered to have a low level of CA, scores between 55 and 83 were moderate, while scores between 83 and 120 indicated a high level of CA.

Scoring for the SPCC Instrument

In this study, respondents completed the SPCC questionnaire by indicating their level of competence in different communication contexts. Each context indicated a possible range of level of communication competence. Zero was the lowest score and 100 was the highest score.

To compute the four different communication contexts (group discussions, meetings, interpersonal conversations, and public speaking) and three receivers in dyadic interactions (stranger, acquaintance, friend), the scores for certain questions were added and the total scores were divided by the numbers accordingly. The total SPCC scores should range between zero and 100. It was determined that zero was considered as completely incompetent, while 100 was highly competent. Overall, individuals who scored < 51 are considered competent whereas those who scored > 93 were held to have high competence.

Data collected from the two questionnaires was analysed using SPSS. A descriptive analysis was performed to compute the means and standard deviations for each item. The numerical aspects of this study included means, percentages, and standard deviations. The statistical analysis included calculation of Pearson Correlation Coefficient, which analyses the relation between the variables.

Results

The first objective of this study was to investigate the level of OCA among the final year marketing undergraduates. Results indicated that most respondents (69%) had a moderate level of OCA. This is followed by 24% who obtained low level of OCA, and only 7% scored a high level of OCA. In short, the overall level of OCA among the final year marketing undergraduates was at the moderate level.

Table 1 shows that the overall mean score was 65.22. The data revealed that the final year marketing undergraduates were most apprehensive in public speaking with a mean of 17.81. This was followed by Interpersonal, Meeting, and group discussion.

Table 1 *Oral Communication Apprehension Scores*

Score	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Dev.
Overall Communication Apprehension	100	24.0	120.0	65.22	15.49
Group Discussion		6.0	30.0	15.02	4.88
Meeting		6.0	30.0	15.74	4.50
Interpersonal		6.0	30.0	16.65	4.77
Public Speaking		6.0	30.0	17.81	4.04

Based on the 24 questions regarding the four communication contexts, Table 2 reveals that respondents scored high mean values on items "I dislike participating in group discussions" (3.75); "Communicating at meetings usually makes me uncomfortable" for Meetings context (3.51); "I am afraid to speak up in conversation" in Interpersonal context (3.30); and "I have no fear of giving a speech" in Public Speaking context (3.06). It is also interesting to note that some of the statements which were reverse coded had a rather high mean, such as "I have no fear of giving a speech" (3.06), and "I dislike participating in group discussion" (3.75).

Table 2 *The Four Different Communication Contexts*

Questions	Mean
GROUP DISCUSSION	
I dislike participating in group discussions	3.75
Generally, I am comfortable while participating in group discussions.	2.38
I am tense and nervous while participating in group discussions.	3.38
I like to get involved in group discussions.	2.5
Engaging in a group discussion with new people makes me tense and nervous.	3.18
I am calm and relaxed while participating in group discussions.	2.55
MEETINGS	
Generally, I am nervous when I have to participate in a meeting.	3.15
Usually, I am calm and relaxed while participating in meetings.	2.6
I am very calm and relaxed when I am called upon to express an opinion at a meeting.	2.56
I am afraid to express myself at meetings.	3.26
Communicating at meetings usually makes me uncomfortable.	3.51
I am very relaxed when answering questions at meeting.	2.60
INTERPERSONAL	
While participating in a conversation with a new acquaintance, I feel very nervous.	3.26
I have no fear of speaking up in conversations.	2.98
Ordinarily I am very tense and nervous in conversations.	3.20
Ordinarily I am very calm and relaxed in conversations	2.77
While conversing with a new acquaintance, I feel very relaxed	2.78
I'm afraid to speak up in conversations.	3.30
PUBLIC SPEAKING	
I have no fear of giving a speech.	3.06
Certain parts of my body feel very tense and rigid while giving a speech.	2.91
I feel relaxed while giving a speech.	2.82
My thoughts become confused and jumbled when I am giving a speech	3.03
I face the prospect of giving a speech with confidence.	2.81
While giving a speech, I get so nervous I forget facts I really know.	2.93

The second objective of the study was to analyse the level of SPCC. Table 3 shows that overall value was 75.34. It also shows that the marketing undergraduates were moderately competent in all

four sub-scores. The highest mean among the four communication contexts was the Dyad (77.44). This was followed by Public speaking, the Group setting, and finally the Meeting.

Table 3 *The Overall Self-Perceived Communication Competence Score*

Score	N	Mean	Std. Dev.
Overall Self-Perceived Communication Competence	100	75.34	13.51
Public		74.82	14.68
Meeting		72.25	16.03
Group		77.23	14.18
Dyad		77.44	13.63

In terms of SPCC level for each respondent, this study identified that most of the respondents (63%) have a moderate competency, as shown in Figure 1. Based on these results, it may be assumed that the overall level of SPCC among the final year marketing undergraduates was at a moderate level.

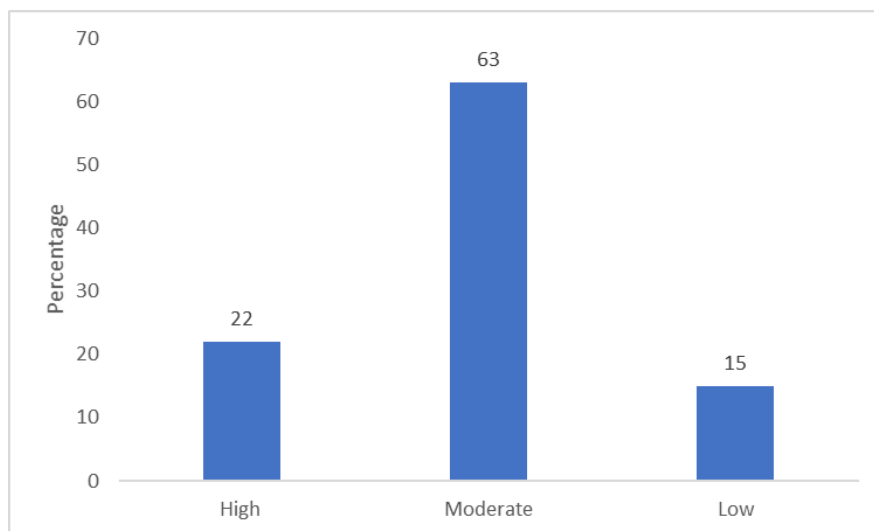**Figure 1** *Self-Perceived Communication Competence Levels of Final Year Marketing Undergraduates*

Table 4 indicates the mean values for each item in the SPCC instrument. For the Public context, the highest score (81.4) was for the item "Talk in a group of friends." The lowest score (73.8) was for the item "Talk in a small group of strangers." For the Meeting context, the item "Talk in a large meeting of friends" had the highest mean, and the item "Talk in a large meeting of strangers" had the lowest mean value. The item with the highest mean value for the Group context was "Present a talk to a group pf friends" (79.3) and the item with the lowest mean is "Present a talk to a group of strangers" (68.8). For the Dyad context, the highest mean value was seen in the item "Talk with a friend" (86.8) while the lowest with a 70.7 mean value is from the item "Talk with a stranger." Table 4 also shows the percentages of competency according to each statement of the different communication contexts. Although all scores concentrate in the moderate level for the public context, the highest percentage came from the item "Talk in a small group of acquaintances" (46% competency). This was followed by "Talk in a large meeting of friends" (53% competency) for the Meeting context. For Group situations, the highest percentage was for "Present a talk to a group of acquaintances" (50% competency). Moreover, "Talk with an acquaintance" (52% competency) was the highest score for Dyad situations.

Table 4 *Four Different Communication Contexts of SPCC Scores*

Questions	Mean	Competency % (Low)	Competency % (Moderate)	Competency % (High)
PUBLIC				
Talk in a small group of strangers.	73.8	35	42	23
Talk in a small group of acquaintances.	75.5	31	46	23
Talk in a small group of friends.	81.4	18	41	41
MEETING				
Talk in a large meeting of friends.	75.6	8	53	39
Talk in a large meeting of acquaintances.	73.5	14	50	36
Talk in a large meeting of strangers.	66.6	29	46	25
GROUP				
Present a talk to a group of strangers.	68.8	26	48	26
Present a talk to a group of friends.	79.3	10	44	46
Present a talk to a group of acquaintances.	75.9	12	50	38

Table 4 *Four Different Communication Contexts of SPCC Scores (Cont.)*

	Mean	Competency % (Low)	Competency % (Moderate)	Competency % (High)
DYAD				
Talk with an acquaintance.	75.1	28	52	20
Talk with a friend.	86.8	13	26	61
Talk with a stranger.	70.7	39	40	21

Table 5 shows the SPCC scores for different communication receivers. For communication receivers, Stranger showed a moderate mean score, as did Acquaintances and Friend. Essentially, these three scores indicated a moderate level of communication competence. Based on the 12 questions from the SPCC, Table 5 shows that the respondents reported high competency in item "Talk with a friend" with a mean of 86.7 and "Talk in a small group of friends" with a mean of 81.4. Moreover, the respondents felt least competent in items "Talk in a large meeting of strangers, and "Present a talk to a group of strangers.

Table 5 *Self- Perceived Communication Contexts in Three Different Receivers*

	Mean	Competency % (Low)	Competency % (Moderate)	Competency % (High)
STRANGER	70.05			
Present a talk to a group of strangers.	68.8	5	58	37
Talk in a small group of strangers.	74.3	2	50	48
Talk with a stranger.	70.6	4	54	42
Talk in a large meeting of strangers.	66.7	9	53	38
ACQUAINTANCE	75.13			
Talk with an acquaintance	75.12	28	61	11
Talk in a large meeting of acquaintances.	73.2	34	53	13
Talk in a small group of acquaintances.	75.5	29	55	16
Present a talk to a group of acquaintances.	75.8	28	53	19
FRIEND	80.85			
Talk in a large meeting of friends.	75.6	53	39	8
Talk with a friend.	86.7	24	48	28
Present a talk to a group of friends.	80.0	38	48	14
Talk in a small group of friends.	81.4	37	40	23

This study's final objective was to investigate if there was a relationship between OCA and SPCC. From a Pearson Correlation Coefficient analysis, the r score between the two variables was -.302, with $p < .05$, indicating that there was significant inverse relationship between the two variables (Table 6).

Table 6 *Correlation between the PRCA-24 and SPCC*

		PRCA-24	SPCC
PRCA-24	Pearson Correlation	1	-.302[**]
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.002
	N	100	100
SPCC	Pearson Correlation	-.302[**]	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.002	
	N	100	100

Note. ** represents $p < .01$

Discussion

In this study the levels of OCA, SPCC were examined and their relationships among final year marketing students at UNIMAS. Overall, the level of OCA was moderate. This finding is equivalent to the study conducted by Isa and Tamam (2012), which reported that a great number of students from Polytechnic Port Dickson, Malaysia had a moderate level of CA. Moreover, this study also revealed that the marketing undergraduates in this study were most apprehensive about speaking in public. This finding is also reflected in the study by Stewart and Tassie (2011), who reported that public speaking classroom was among the activities that create a sense of stress and nervousness among students. In a study done by Tom et al., (2013), they discovered that among the causes for students to experience anxiety and apprehensive in public speaking are the fear to be laughed at and the inability to pronounce English words properly.

On the other hand, this study reported findings where students were less apprehensive in group discussion, similar to the study by Hasni et al., (2017). This may be due to students being more comfortable talking with friends, even in the context of academic activities. This finding contrasts with the study by Taha and Rezeq (2021), where they reported that students at Al-Quds were afraid of communication in groups as they were required to be involved in open discussions.

Furthermore, findings from this study showed that the final year marketing undergraduates experienced a moderate level of SPCC. This is supported by Subekti's (2020) study which indicated learners' medium level of SPCC. It is worth noting that the respondents in this study felt most competent when having dyadic conversation and group discussion with friends as receivers. This could be perceived as they might feel they were being supported by their peers during these two events (Sabri & Qin, 2014). The finding also supports the concept from Morreale et al. (2000), who explained that CC is the ability to share messages to achieve goals while maintaining social acceptance. In this regard, respondents believed that they had high competency when talking to friends because they are confident that they could adapt to their respective goals to produce smooth and productive dialogues.

This study also showed that respondents felt the least competent when communicating with strangers in meetings. This may be because undergraduates are not familiar with the formalities and settings of meetings, let alone conducting the meeting in English. Students may feel more apprehensive when the meeting is attended by strangers, and this apprehension may be felt even when talking in groups with unfamiliar classmates (e.g., Mustapha et al., 2010).

Finally, the findings from this study indicated that there was a negative relationship between OCA and SPCC among the participants. A Pearson's correlation analysis revealed a negative relationship for both variables (SPCC and PRCA-24), including the four communication contexts. It shows that there is an "inverse" relationship between the OCA and SPCC. For instance, if the respondents had low SPCC when communicating in group discussion they tended to have a high OCA and vice versa. This finding is supported by Devi and Feroz's (2008) study that claimed that the

higher the students' perception of their communication competence, the more possible it is for a lower score for communication apprehension and vice versa. Subekti (2020) also noted that learners' OCA level tends to be lower when their SPCC level is higher.

Conclusions

The moderate level for both OCA and SPCC among the final year marketing undergraduates indicates that the students could be prepared for workplace communication. In the effort to reduce apprehension in English oral communication among the students, it is also hoped that the findings from this study can shed some insights of what managerial strategies can be done to improve English oral competency at the tertiary level. For instance, both course instructors and students can initially examine and acknowledge the challenges that affect oral communication in English. Moreover, the faculty can strategize activities that are conducive towards reducing OCA. Despite the possible contributions of the study of OCA and SPCC in the context of marketing undergraduates, this study also acknowledges a limitation, where it focuses only on quantitative data. The data obtained could not explain in-depth how respondents felt about each item in the questionnaire. Future research should consider adopting the mix-methods design.

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