

## A Study of Communication Apprehension and Self Concept among Undergraduates in UiTM Pahang

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### ABSTRACT

*Numerous studies have been done on the subject of communication apprehension (CA) among university students but none has adequately addressed the issue of perception. This study tries to examine the relationship between self concept and communication apprehension among undergraduates. It attempts to find out whether students' perception of themselves and their negative or positive self image have had any effect on their ability to communicate either orally or in writing. The study involves 169 respondents from the Bachelor in Office Management programme in UiTM Pahang. It was discovered that majority of the degree students have low CA and high self-concept. The level of CA in some speaking situations such as public speaking and meetings is still high, and majority admitted to having anxiety when speaking in a formal situation. It is felt that the degree students lack exposure to real life workplace communication. Thus, a few suggestions are given with regards to this aspect, specifically to enable them to hone their communication skills with people outside the university especially business people or professionals. It is hoped that the findings can help lecturers identify better approaches in tackling learners' problem in communicating in the classroom as well as prepare them for future workplace communication events.*

**Keywords:** *Communication apprehension, CA, self concept, perception*

### Introduction

Many potential employers nowadays complain that graduates of local universities cannot perform as expected in job interviews. They often cite the graduates' inability to communicate well during interviews as an important factor for these graduates' inability to get jobs. Many university students on their part claim that they are good candidates and should be given the chance to prove themselves on the job. They feel that they are unfairly judged based on their one time performance at the job interview. This scenario clearly illustrates the disparity between employers and university students' expectations in terms of their suitability for a job. A constant theme running through such discussions involving graduates readiness to face the challenging world of work is their ability to communicate effectively.

### Problem statement

The fear of speaking in public has always been cited as the number one fear among many adults. This indicates that it is quite common for ordinary people to experience fear when asked to speak in public. However, how far does this problem extend to university students? It is expected that university students from their exposure to the rigorous requirements of university and academic work should have less nervousness when speaking in public or communicating with people. With the constant need to present their work in front of an audience whether big or small, this should have seen them get used to speaking in public and alleviate any apprehension they might have. This however may not be the case. Speaking in front of an audience is definitely something not many students would volunteer to do.

Furthermore, many companies complain about the lack of speaking skills among undergraduates. With the tough competition that awaits them in their endeavor to look for jobs after graduation, it is imperative that those who are involved in the education system, more specifically tertiary education, study the problem of communication apprehension among university students. Undeniably, many researches have been done on communication apprehension. However, not much research done in Malaysia has attempted to study both communication apprehension and self image. Thus this research is interested to find out not only the level of communication apprehension (CA) but also how students view themselves, or in other words their self concept.

## Literature review

Communication skills are indeed important skills for Business Management students to master. The students should be able to communicate effectively with people from all walks of life especially in the workplace. There is a great demand for excellent communication skills from both private and government agencies. At present many business management students display varying levels of communication apprehension in different communication situations such as class discussion, oral presentations, student-teacher interaction, where they have the fear of asking or answering questions, and interaction with the public. According to McCroskey and Richmond (as cited in Beebe, 2001), communication apprehension is described as “an individual’s level of fear or anxiety associated with either real or anticipated communication with another person or persons”.

McCroskey (1984, as cited in Myers, 2007), also mentioned that communication apprehension can emerge in four forms: trait, context-based, audience-based, and situational. Trait communication apprehension refers to the individuals’ characteristics that consist having fear in all situations of communications. Trait CA is characterized by the feeling of fear or anxiety in any type of condition by a person when interacting with individuals, a small group or large numbers of people. (Lederman, 1982). These feelings of anxiousness might appear when they have to participate in class discussion, give a public speech, or talk to their lecturer. These feeling of nervousness will instruct the minds to not participate or ask questions. However, De Vito (2007) felt that this state can be related to a person’s culture (DeVito, 2007). Furthermore, McCroskey (1997, as cited in Myers, 2007) explained that the feeling of worry or fear might appear in the person when he thought that he might answer wrongly which he interpreted and evaluated as being weak and would be viewed negatively by the lecturer. Apparently, this feeling will remind the person of his weaknesses which reflects his low self concept.

Context-based apprehension appears to be specific with some associated situation, (DeVito, 2007) such as fear in giving a speech in public. The same person however, may not have any difficulty with dyadic communication. Some might not like to give opinions in class, but like to participate in small group discussions. Again this might be due to cultural influences which form the individuals’ self concept (De Vito, 2007). Daley as cited in Lee (2007), as well as some other researchers felt that CA can be caused by genetic influence, lack of skill development and lack of practice in communication skills and not having communication role models.

Another form of CA that is relevant to this research is ‘situation apprehension’ which refers to the individual’s experience when communicating with a given person in a particular situation (Myers, 2007). This situation can explain a person’s personality (Chien-Huang, 2007 as cited in McCroskey & Beatty, 1988). When the person is shy, fearful or feels inferior, he can become quiet which can lead to feelings of anxiety. Such a person will have low self- concept eventually. Furthermore as mentioned by Wood and Taylor (1991, as cited in Chien-Huang 2007), feelings of uncertainty can lead one to ‘evaluate oneself via social comparison’. Thus a person may feel inadequate when he compares to others in his own social group.

## Objectives

The objectives of this research are mainly

1. to determine the level of communication anxiety (CA) among Bachelor in Office Management students

2. to identify the level of self concept among Bachelor in Office Management students.

## Research Questions

This research seeks to answer the following research questions;

1. What is the level of communication anxiety (CA) among the Bachelor in Office Management students?
2. What is the students' level of self concept?

## Methodology

This research used questionnaires to gather data on CA and self concept. The PRCA questionnaire designed by Blaine, Dennice, Dave R. Lowe, Wild F. Meixner, Hossein Nouri (2003) was used to investigate the level of CA among the respondents. As for the questions relating to self concept, some questions were adapted from the educational self concept survey found in Bey & Yates (2007). However, the questions were modified to suit the researchers' needs and focus. All students from parts 4, 5 & 6 of the Bachelor in Office Management program were selected as respondents in this survey since the total population was quite small. The number of students currently finishing this program from all parts was 313 and from these 169 were from the selected groups (i.e. parts 4, 5 & 6). These students had either possessed a diploma or STPM prior to entering UiTM. Majority were female with 88 percent and the rest, i.e. 11 percent male. This ratio of female to male is reflective of the ratio in the population of students in this programme where female students far outnumber male students. All questionnaires were distributed through the respective class representatives and were collected on the same day to be handed to the researchers for analysis. Data analysis was done using the SPSS 20.0.

## Findings and discussion

### Respondents' Level of Communication Apprehension

Several questions were asked to determine the level of anxiety of the respondents. It is interesting to note that majority of the students said that they were calm and relaxed during group discussions. However, when asked whether they felt nervous when participating in a conversation with a new acquaintance, majority i.e. 57.4 percent admitted that they felt nervous when doing so. About 22.5 percent disagreed i.e. they did not feel nervous about it at all and the rest i.e. 19.5 percent were not sure. This indicates that many of the respondents do not socialize well with strangers. This could be a bad sign to a certain extent because when they work later on these students would be expected to meet clients and company staff from other offices whom they are expected to entertain. They certainly will need to have good skills in interacting and mixing with people they are not familiar with. Thus, their shy manner could be detrimental to their future success in the corporate world.

Graduates will have to face a lot of different situations which require them to speak. One such situation is during meetings. As middle management level employee these students would be expected to voice opinions or ask questions during meetings. When asked whether they were afraid to express themselves at meetings, majority or 48 percent said they were not afraid while 26 percent were not sure and the rest i.e. 26 percent agreed that they were. In response to another question asking whether they were uncomfortable when communicating in meetings slightly more than half said no. Apparently about half of the respondents felt comfortable participating in meetings. However, these percentages cannot be used as an indicator that they are able to be active participants in company meetings. This is because the only exposure these students have had in the course of their studies was in meetings with their fellow students or lecturers on campus. Thus, it is difficult to gauge whether they will feel the same way when they attend meetings at the workplace. Furthermore, from the statistics above, there were still a substantial number of students i.e. more than half of the respondents who would probably not be able to participate actively during meetings. Another question posed to the respondents was whether they were able to handle questions in meetings. Interestingly, the respondents were mostly either nervous (34 percent) about answering questions or were not sure (29 percent) of how they felt. Only about one third or 29 percent said they were relaxed when answering

questions in meetings. Another question asked was whether they would get nervous and forget facts that they know when asked to give speech. The majority or 63 percent of the respondents said that they did while 22 percent said they did not. This is not surprising as it has always been cited in communication textbooks that the fear of speaking in public is one of the most common phobias and one of the effects of fear is that the mind can suddenly go blank.

A pattern seems to exist here whereby the students' level of CA is slightly higher in formal situations compared to ordinary informal communication. For example, a slight majority i.e. 43 percent disagreed when asked whether they were tense and nervous in conversations compared to 64 percent who admitted that they felt nervous when talking in a formal situation. This is consistent with the findings earlier whereby majority of the respondents experience low anxiety when communicating in small group discussions. On another aspect, it was discovered that 51 percent the respondents were confident of their ability to express their ideas clearly when speaking while only 18 percent disagreed and the rest, 31 percent were not sure. When asked whether the respondents always volunteered to answer questions in class, only 18 percent of them said they did, while the majority i.e. 48 percent stated that they did not and 34 percent were not sure.

Next, the students were asked questions that relate to feelings of anxiety in written communication. Slightly more than half of the respondents i.e. 52 percent felt that they could present and explain the content well in their writing projects while the rest were either not sure or felt it was not easy for them to do so. Furthermore, about 34 percent admitted they felt nervous about writing in a formal situation while 47 percent said they did not feel nervous and the rest i.e. 19 percent were unsure. A large majority of the students i.e. 71 percent felt confident of their ability to express ideas clearly with the rest (12 %) saying they were not confident of doing so and 17 percent were not sure of their level of confidence in this aspect. However, many of these same students i.e. 46 percent felt that they did not write as well as others. Only 26 percent said they did and 28 percent were not sure. However, when asked whether it was easy to prepare a written project, majority i.e. 53 percent felt it was. Furthermore majority of them i.e 70 percent also expected to do well in written assignments. Thus, it can be seen that most of the undergraduates seem to be quite confident in their writing ability. Table 1 shows the mean distribution of the respondents' feedback to some of the questions relating to CA in oral and written communication.

Table 1: Mean Distribution of Responses to CA Items(n=169)

Item on Communication Apprehension	Mean
I am calm and relaxed while participating in group discussions	3.99
While participating in a conversation with a new acquaintance, I feel very nervous	3.42
I hate speaking in public	3.00
While giving a speech, I get so nervous, I forget facts I really know	3.51
My thoughts become confused and jumbled when I am giving a speech	3.12
I feel nervous about conversing in a formal situation	3.51
I don't think I speak as well as most other people	3.41
I don't think I write as well as other people	3.22

### Respondents' Self concept

Besides studying students' level of communicative anxiety, this research also aims to examine how the students view themselves. When asked whether they felt that their classmates were smarter than them, 55 percent of the respondents answered 'yes' while only 13 percent said 'no' and the rest i.e. 32 percent were unsure. However, when asked if they thought their lecturers had a low opinion of their work, 44 percent of them did not think so. Majority of them (47 percent) however, were unsure whether their lecturers viewed their work as poor while only 9 percent felt so. Thus it can be seen that there is a mix of how the students view themselves where on some aspects the students have high self concept and on others low. On whether they considered themselves good in their studies, about half or 49 percent were unsure and could not give a definite answer. 29 percent agreed that they were good in their studies while 22 percent felt they could not be considered good. When asked whether they were satisfied with the way they were then, majority i.e. 54 percent said they were compared to 30 percent who claimed they were not while 16 percent were unsure. In terms of their socializing skills majority of these students or 63 percent considered

themselves to be good at socializing compared to 14 percent who did not and 23 percent who were unsure. Table 2 shows the mean for selected items on self concept.

Table 2: Mean Distribution of Responses to Self Concept Items (n=152)

Item on Self Concept	Mean
Most of my classmates are smarter than I am	3.55
I am willing to do my best to pass all the subjects	4.56
I do not give up easily when I am faced with a difficult question in my class work	3.85
I am a friendly person	4.02
I consider myself a good student	3.58
I feel I am good at socializing	3.61
I am a sensitive person	3.63

## Conclusion

From the findings discussed above, it can be concluded that the overall level of communication apprehension of the UiTM degree students is not high. This could be because these students have had some exposure to different forms of communication in the classroom such during their English classes, public speaking, interpersonal communication courses and the various other communication courses conducted by the university. Another reason could be that they are mostly 'senior' students who are a bit older and probably more mature. These respondents were in their second or final year and were around 21 to 22 years old.

However, it can also be seen that for most of the questions posed to the students, only a few had a clear majority in terms of category of answers given. The number of respondents who were unsure of their feelings on the issue touched was also quite high. In fact in many cases the number of those who indicated some fear in communication combined with those who replied that they were unsure far exceeds those who claimed they experienced low CA in some of the questions. The lack of clear majority indicates that many of the students do experience some level of anxiety. Furthermore, much of these students' exposure to communication in a formal setting occurs on campus. They do not have much opportunity to communicate in formal situations with people other than their friends and lecturers. Thus, even if they registered low levels of CA or in other words they do not appear to have high levels of anxiety in speaking and writing, it does not mean that upon graduation these students are ready or well equipped with the skills to communicate in the workplace. For example, they might say that they are able to speak up during meetings but their meetings so far have been with fellow students. Thus, when put in a workplace environment they might experience a higher level of anxiety. From this research it can be also be seen that students who have a positive self concept have a tendency to experience lower CA. However, more research needs to be carried out to confirm this because the number of those who admitted having low self concept is quite small i.e. less than 10 percent of the sample.

## Recommendations

Even though many degree students seem to have low CA and high self concept, many still experience some level of anxiety especially when communicating in formal situations as their exposure to real life communication experiences such as office meetings, negotiation with clients, presenting reports to bosses etc. is still limited. Thus, some of the degree students might feel they have low communication anxiety but this might not truly be the case when they work later on. Therefore it is highly recommended that lecturers expose these students to real life communication situations may be through presentations outside campus such as in national or international seminars or by getting them to visit and observe office staff at work. The students' speaking assignments can also be geared towards

making them interact with members of the public such as businessmen, bank officers, office workers and others. This will help sharpen their skills in communicating with outsiders especially professionals and business people.

## Suggestions for further research

This study focuses on the existence of CA from a general perspective whereby no distinction is made concerning the language used as the medium of communication. Thus, it is suggested that further research be done to see if there is any difference in the level of CA among students when the medium of communication is English and also to look at the possible reasons for CA. It would also be good to further compare the CA that exists between degree students who are diploma holders and those who enter the degree programme with STPM qualification.

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