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<https://doi.org/10.52696/OGYV3613>

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Malaysian Undergraduates' Dilemma in Communication: A Pilot Study

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ABSTRACT

This paper deals with communication apprehension among Malaysian undergraduates as one of the causes for poor communication skills, which has caused unemployment. This challenge is particularly in public speaking, which hampers learners' ability to perform oral assessments in both online and face-to-face settings. A pilot study examined communication apprehension levels among 47 tertiary learners enrolled in Business Administration and Hotel and Tourism Management programmes at a public university in Sabah. The quantitative study employed the Communication Anxiety Inventory, which comprises two components: Form-Trait, a 21-item self-report measuring general communication apprehension across three contexts, and Form-State, a 20-item assessment evaluating anxiety responses in specific communication situations. Findings revealed a high percentage of both general trait and state communication apprehension among the respondents, with 76.6% and 61.7% respectively. A moderate positive correlation was also observed between trait and state apprehension ($r = 0.48$, $n = 47$, $p = 0.01$). Public speaking emerged as the most anxiety-inducing context, with the highest trait apprehension mean score of 2.82. Given that many Malaysian ESL undergraduates struggle with communication apprehension, particularly in public speaking, tertiary institutions should revise communication courses to better equip students with essential language and communication skills necessary for employability.

KEYWORDS: Communication Apprehension, Self-Efficacy, Public Speaking

Introduction

While some graduates demonstrate strong academic performance and possess the necessary technical competencies to enter the workforce, their limited proficiency in soft skills often impedes their ability to adapt effectively to the corporate environment, thereby presenting challenges to their professional integration and development (Vezi-Magigaba & Utete, 2024). In addition to specialised knowledge in their respective fields, employers place significant value on soft skills as a means of maintaining a competitive advantage within the industry. Among these skills, effective communication and confidence in professional interactions are particularly valued, as they are not only critical for academic success but are highly sought after by recruitment agencies. Employers prioritise candidates who can communicate proficiently in workplace settings without hesitation or apprehension (Muftah, 2023).

Graduate unemployment has been a persistent concern in Malaysia in recent years. It refers to the condition in which individuals with academic qualifications remain without employment despite their credentials. (Van der Berg & Van Broekhuizen, 2012). A considerable portion of graduates experience prolonged intervals before obtaining employment, often waiting for a minimum period of 6 months or longer before securing a job (Chen & Guat, 2019). Notably, fresh young graduates experience unemployment at a rate three times higher than that of adults, with the global youth unemployment rate standing at 13% (Teng et al., 2019). Communication apprehension, in particular, limits graduates' ability to participate effectively in interviews, workplace discussions, and teamwork, thereby diminishing their employment prospects (Fahimirad et al., 2019; Noah & Abdul Aziz, 2020). Research indicates that individuals with elevated levels of communication apprehension frequently display behaviours including communication avoidance, withdrawal, and disruption (Shanahan, 2012). Consequently, many Malaysian undergraduates encounter difficulties in securing employment due to the disparity between the training offered by universities and the skill sets demanded by employers. A report by Shanmugam (2017) revealed that 24% of the 273,373 graduates were unemployed up to six months after graduation. The rise in unemployment suggests that the optimisation of human resources is not being achieved. An increase in the unemployment rate will negatively affect a nation's productivity. Given these adverse effects, it is crucial for relevant parties to efficiently oversee unemployment in the labour market.

Recent statistics show that Malaysia's unemployment rate for graduates decreased to 3.4% in 2023, down from 3.7% in the prior year. Nonetheless, the unemployment rate for graduates under the age of 25 has steadily risen since 2021, reaching 17.6% in 2023 (*Graduate Statistics 2023, 2024*). The data emphasises the persistent challenges encountered by fresh graduates in Malaysia's labour market, indicating the necessity for focused strategies in the courses concerned to improve employability. Communication apprehension (CA), defined as the fear or anxiety associated with real or anticipated communication, has been identified as a significant barrier to employability, preventing graduates from effectively expressing ideas, collaborating with colleagues, and engaging in professional discourse (Adeyemi et al., 2017). It is undeniable that communication apprehension (CA) may be a long-term issue beginning in secondary school, as evidenced by findings indicating that 56.5% of Form 1 students experience a moderate level of anxiety when speaking English." Among the contributing factors, fear of negative evaluation emerged as the most significant, with a mean score of 2.59 (Mustapha & Uri, 2024). The study concludes that learners' English proficiency, along with

socioeconomic and geographical background, significantly influence the degree of speaking anxiety among ESL students in Malaysia.

This study aims to underscore the critical impact of communication apprehension on the employability of Malaysian undergraduates. By addressing this issue, universities can equip graduates with the necessary communication skills, enhancing their readiness for the workforce and improving their career prospects.

Literature Review

Communication apprehension (CA) is widely recognised as a disruptive factor in both foreign and second language communication contexts. Lucas (1984) argued that CA can have detrimental effects in the classroom, impeding effective communication. It can also affect individuals in the workplace, where Cardon et al. (2023) found that CA may result in professional challenges for people in groups, individuals and organisations. Significantly elevated levels of CA were noted in early career professionals, women, introverted individuals and those with anxiety problems (Cardon et al., 2023). In another study among 366 respondents, around 22.1% of the learners reported high levels of communication apprehension, particularly in public speaking and classroom interactions, where a significant negative correlation was found between communication apprehension and communication self-efficacy (Schulenberg et al., 2024).

The academic discourse surrounding CA dates back to 1915 when it was initially conceptualised as “stage fright” (Robinson, 1915). The evolution of terminology from stage fright, fear, and anxiety to communication apprehension (CA) was formally introduced by McCroskey (1970), who sought to provide a more comprehensive framework for understanding anxieties associated with communication. McCroskey (1977) later defined it as an individual's apprehension or anxiety concerning actual or anticipated communication. This phenomenon is prevalent across various linguistic contexts (McCroskey, 1984). Moreover, CA has been categorized as a psychological handicap stemming from adverse experiences during early childhood, aligning with the broader construct of reluctance to communicate (McCroskey, 1970; Wrench et al., 2008). It is typically classified into three categories: trait apprehension, context apprehension, and state apprehension (Libretexts, 2022; McCroskey & Andersen, 1976; Petry, 2016).

Table 1. Description of Three Types of Communication Apprehension

Type	Examples	References
Trait-CA - A general inclination towards apprehension that has been exhibited in the past in a variety of situations and is included in one's personality	An individual who consistently experiences anxiety regarding speaking in public, engaging in interpersonal communication, or participating in group discussions may be classified as having trait communication apprehension.”	(Asparanita, 2020; McCroskey, 1984)

Context-CA	Individuals may experience anxiety when engaging in one-on-one discussions with authoritative figures, such as supervisors or professors, despite feeling at ease when speaking in public. (McCroskey, 1984)
- Anxiety that is felt in specific communication scenarios.	
State-CA	An individual who is typically self-assured may experience heightened nervousness prior to delivering a presentation to a large audience or engaging in a tense situation that involves an elevated pulse rate, sweating, stammering, or the repetition of words during a speech. (Asparanita, 2020; Booth-Butterfield & Gould, 1986; McCroskey et al., 1985)
- Temporary apprehension experienced in specific situations	

Trait communication apprehension (Trait-CA) refers to an individual's inherent predisposition to experience anxiety or nervousness due to past experiences, irrespective of the situation or context (Asparanita, 2020). Research suggests a child's use of a second language may be discouraged by the lack of reinforcement for communication when parents face linguistic challenges or when multiple languages are mixed during early school years (McCroskey, 1977b).

Contextual communication apprehension (Context-CA) is a subcategory of Trait-CA characterised by persistent anxiety that is heightened in specific contexts or situations (Asparanita, 2020; Ellis, 1994). Consequently, an individual with a high level of Context-CA would endeavour to avoid these contexts whenever possible (McCroskey, 1977a).

State communication apprehension (State-CA), in contrast, manifests during specific communication events such as public speaking and can significantly impair performance. Symptoms of State-CA include physiological responses such as increased heart rate, excessive sweating and stammering, all of which can negatively affect speech delivery (Asparanita, 2020; Kemnitz, 2005).

CA is a widely observed phenomenon among tertiary students in Southeast Asia, particularly when they are required to speak in English. One of the primary reasons for this apprehension is the fear of negative evaluation and limited vocabulary knowledge, both of which contribute to heightened anxiety (Indrianty, 2016). Studies exploring nonverbal indicators of apprehension have found that students exhibit physical signs of anxiety during oral presentations. A study utilizing video recordings and interviews (Aripin et al., 2020) revealed that students experiencing apprehension often engage in self-touching behaviours, such as adjusting their clothing or touching their heads, along with frequent changes in posture, aimless glances, and avoidance of eye contact with the audience. These findings align with Anjaniputra's (2021) research, which suggests that urban learners tend to experience heightened apprehension in evaluative situations, reinforcing the role of fear of judgment in communication anxiety. Horwitz (2001) also confirmed that the fear of negative evaluation plays a critical role in language anxiety, particularly in contexts that involve group discussions, interviews, and public speaking assessments.

Interestingly, a comparative analysis of urban and rural learners highlights distinct differences in CA levels. While urban students show greater anxiety in evaluation-based scenarios, rural learners exhibit higher overall CA scores, with fear of negative evaluation being a significant contributing factor.

In the Malaysian context, Naser & Isa (2021) investigated CA among 150 public university undergraduates, revealing that most students experienced a moderate level of anxiety, despite demonstrating strong academic performance in public speaking courses. A parallel study on 40 private college diploma graduates found that students reported a greater fear of using the English language itself rather than public speaking anxiety (Shamsuddin et al., 2021). A Systematic Literature Review (SLR) findings suggest that most Malaysian tertiary learners experience a moderate level of CA, primarily driven by fear of evaluation, anxiety and limited self-efficacy skills (Raj et al., 2024).

These studies collectively highlight the prevalence of CA among tertiary students in Southeast Asia and underscore the need for targeted interventions to address both language anxiety and communication-related fears. Future research should explore longitudinal approaches to understanding CA, as well as the effectiveness of various instructional strategies in alleviating anxiety in real-world communication settings. This study attempts to address the following research questions:

1. To what extent do tertiary learners experience communication apprehension?
2. Is there a difference in the level of communication apprehension between male and female learners?
3. Is there any difference in the level of communication apprehension between different programmes?
4. Is there any correlation between TR-CA and ST-CA?

Methodology

A pilot study was conducted on 47 tertiary learners from a Malaysian public university based on convenience sampling, comprising respondents from Hospitality and Tourism Management (HM) and Business Administration (BA) programmes. A survey was conducted utilising a questionnaire called Communication Anxiety Inventory (CAI) developed by Booth-Butterfield & Gould (1986). The CAI indicates that the level of fear, anxiety, or state apprehension is significantly correlated with the context or trait apprehension, and it has a Cronbach's alpha of .898 and strong predictive validity. Context-focused apprehension traits are classified as dyadic, small-group, and public speaking communication apprehension. It is a 41-item self-report form that consists of two questionnaires: Form State and Form Trait. The capacity to precisely quantify two distinct categories of communication apprehension is one of the advantages of a two-form system. It is also capable of explicitly testing the relationship between state-CA and context-CA (Booth-Butterfield & Gould, 1986, p.199). It was distributed to the respondents on the first day of class after their first introductory speech in the class. The respondents were asked to fill in the questionnaire honestly.

There were four analyses carried out, namely normality test, descriptive statistics, independent samples t-test and Pearson correlation of traits concerned. The normality test was employed to identify the distribution of data was normally distributed while descriptive statistics to identify

the level of apprehension. The independent t-test was to see if there is any significant difference in scores among genders or programme. Correlation was used to measure the relationship between the traits.

Findings

The analysis of the data showed that it was normally distributed based on the normality test, and thus parametric analysis was done: an independent T-test and correlation of the traits.

Table 2. Test of Normality for the Traits

	Kolmogorov-Smirnov			Shapiro-Wilk		
	Statistic	df	Sig.	Statistic	df	Sig.
MeanTR	.101	47	.200*	.968	47	.232
MeanST	.101	47	.200*	.984	47	.744

* This is a lower bound of the true significance.

A Kolmogorov-Smirnov test above shows a significant normality, KS (47) with .101 for MeanTR and MeanST respectively at p value of .200. The Shapiro Wilk test shows normality for MeanTR, W (47) with .968 at p value of .232 and MeanST with W (47) with .984 at p value of .744, which is lower than the significance level of 0.05. As the significance value is higher than the significance level of 0.05, the data met the assumption of normality.

Levels of CA Among Tertiary Learners

Research Q1: To what extent do tertiary learners experience communication apprehension?

Table 3. CA Level Among Tertiary Learners

Level	TR-CA	%	TR-PS	%	ST-CA	%
Very High	5	10.6	8	17.1	7	14.9
High	36	76.6	30	63.8	29	61.7
Moderate	6	13.8	9	19.1	11	23.4
Low	0	0	0	0	0	0

Table 3 presents the levels of communication apprehension (CA) among tertiary learners across three dimensions: Trait Communication Apprehension (TR-CA), Trait Public Speaking Apprehension (TR-PS), and State Communication Apprehension (ST-CA). The majority of learners exhibit high levels of CA across all dimensions, with 76.6% reporting high TR-CA, 63.8% experiencing high TR-PS, and 61.7% demonstrating high ST-CA. A smaller proportion of learners fall into the very high category, with 10.6% for TR-CA, 17.1% for TR-PS, and 14.9% for ST-CA. Moderate CA levels are reported by 13.8% for TR-CA, 19.1% for TR-PS, and 23.4% for ST-CA. Notably, no learners reported low levels of CA in any dimension, indicating a pervasive presence of communication apprehension among the sample.

Independent samples t-test

Research Q2: Is there a difference in the amount of communication apprehension between male and female learners?

Table 4. Independent samples t-test to compare Trait-CA between genders

Gender	n	Mean	SD	t	p
Male	12	2.79	.322	.971	.337
Female	35	2.70	.255		

Table 4.1. Independent samples t-test to compare State-CA between genders

Gender	n	Mean	SD	t	p
Male	12	2.72	.243	.376	.709
Female	35	2.68	.304		

Table 4 shows independent-samples t-test was conducted to compare Trait Apprehension between genders. There was no significant difference in Trait Apprehension between male (M=2.79, SD=.322) and female (M=2.70, SD=.256); $t(45) = .971, p = .337$. Another independent samples t-test was done as can be seen in Table 4.1 to compare State Apprehension between genders. There was no significant difference in State Apprehension between male (M=2.72, SD=.243) and female (M=2.68, SD=.304); $t(45) = .376, p = .709$. These two results show that gender difference does not have an effect on trait and state apprehension at .05 level of significance. Similarly, an independent samples t-test was carried out to compare Trait and State Apprehension between programmes.

Research Q3: Is there any difference in the level of communication apprehension between different programmes?

Table 5. Group Statistics

	Programme	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
MeanTR	Hotel and Tourism Management	23	2.7433	.25146	.05243
	Business Administration	24	2.7123	.29771	.06077
MeanST	Hotel and Tourism Management	23	2.7239	.35319	.07365
	Business Administration	24	2.6646	.21135	.04314

Table 5.1. Independent Samples t-test to compare Trait-CA between Programmes

Programme	n	Mean	SD	t	P
HM	23	2.74	.251	.384	.702
BA	24	2.71	.298		

Based on Table 5, an independent-samples t-test was employed to compare Trait-CA between Hotel and Tourism Management (HM) and Business Administration (BA) programmes. The HM programme (N=23) was associated with M=2.74(SD=.251) and M=2.72 (SD=.353) for the mean of trait apprehension and mean of state apprehension, respectively. On the other hand, the BA programme (N=24) was associated with M=2.71 (SD=.297) and M=2.67 (SD=.211). Based on this analysis, there was no significant difference in Trait Apprehension between HM and BA programme learners; $t(45) = .384$, $p = .702$. The result shows difference of programmes does not have an effect on Trait apprehension at a significance level of .05. It can be concluded that one's Trait-CA is not associated with either type of programme that is being taken.

Table 5.2. Independent samples t-test to compare between State-CA and Programmes

Programme	n	Mean	SD	t	P
HM	23	2.72	.353	.695	.491
BA	24	2.66	.211		

However, on the independent samples t-test to compare State-CA and Programmes showed a significant difference at $t(35.7) = .695$, $p = .491$. This shows difference of programmes has a significant effect on State Apprehension at a significance level of .05. It means that HM programme learners have higher State Apprehension compared to BA programme learners. This could be due to the HM learners were not used to speaking often in front of an audience compared to the BA learners.

Correlation Between Trait-CA and State-CA

Research Q4: Is there any correlation between TR-CA and ST-CA?

Table 6. Correlations Between Trait-CA and State-CA

		MeanTR	MeanST
MeanTR	Pearson Correlation	1	.480**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		<.001
	N	47	47
MeanST	Pearson Correlation	.480**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	<.001	
	N	47	47

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

Tabel 6.1. Correlation Between Public Speaking Apprehension and State-CA

		MeanST	MeanPubSp
MeanST	Pearson Correlation	1	.459**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.001
	N	47	47
MeanPubSp	Pearson Correlation	.459**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.001	
	N	47	47

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

Table 6 presents the results of Pearson's product-moment correlation analysis to examine the relationship between Trait-CA and State-CA. The analysis revealed a positive correlation between the two variables, $r=.480$, $n=47$, $p< 0.01$, indicating a statistically significant correlation. Among the different dimensions of Trait Context Apprehension is between Public Speaking Apprehension and State Apprehension, as shown in Table 6.1. The results indicate a positive correlation at $r=.459$, $n=47$, $p=0.01$, suggesting that individuals with higher levels of Public Speaking Apprehension tend to experience greater State-CA. These findings imply that Trait-CA, particularly in the context of public speaking, significantly influences an individual's level of State Apprehension. positive correlation between Public Speaking Apprehension and State-CA.

Discussion

The findings of this study confirm that communication apprehension (CA) is prevalent among Malaysian tertiary learners, with a significant proportion experiencing high levels of both trait and state apprehension. Notably, public speaking was identified as the most anxiety-inducing context, which aligns with previous research indicating that fear of public speaking is a major contributor to CA among university students (Indrianty, 2016; McCroskey, 1984). The high levels of CA observed suggest that despite students' academic capabilities, their ability to effectively communicate remains a significant challenge, potentially impeding their employability. These findings are consistent with previous studies indicating that public speaking is a primary source of anxiety for ESL learners (E. K. Horwitz et al., 1986). Thus, without addressing CA, the tertiary learners would have difficulty getting a job that requires communication skills as a prerequisite. It raises issues on learners' English proficiency, along with socioeconomic and geographical background, significantly influence the degree of speaking anxiety among ESL students in Malaysia (Mustapha & Uri, 2024).

The principal finding of this study is that there was no statistically significant difference in CA levels between male and female learners. This finding contrasts with earlier studies suggesting that gender may play a role in communication apprehension (Schulenberg et al., 2024), implying that CA is a widespread issue affecting students regardless of gender. Similarly, the results indicate no significant difference in trait apprehension between students from different academic programmes. This suggests that CA is not limited to specific fields of study but is a general challenge faced by tertiary learners in Malaysia.

The moderate positive correlation between trait and state apprehension ($r = 0.48$, $p = 0.01$) highlights that students who generally experience communication apprehension are also likely to suffer from heightened situational apprehension in specific contexts, such as public speaking. This aligns with previous literature indicating that individuals with trait apprehension often exhibit avoidance behaviours and struggle with effective verbal expression in professional and academic settings (Shanahan, 2012). Given that communication skills are crucial for employability, the prevalence of CA among Malaysian graduates underscores the urgent need for targeted interventions to improve students' communication competencies.

Independent samples t-tests results showed no significant differences between male and female learners for both Trait-CA and State-CA ($p = 0.337$ and $p = 0.709$, respectively), suggesting that gender does not influence communication apprehension levels. However, a significant difference was observed between programmes for State-CA ($t(35.7) = 0.695$, $p = 0.491$), with Hotel and Tourism Management students exhibiting higher State-CA than Business Administration students. This may be due to fewer public speaking opportunities within the Hotel and Tourism Management programme, leading to increased anxiety in communication situations.

Implications and Recommendations

The findings of this study suggest that tertiary institutions should revise their communication courses to better prepare students for professional communication demands by addressing the issue of communication apprehension. The following recommendations are proposed:

1. Integration of Public Speaking Training:

Universities should incorporate structured public speaking modules into their curricula to help students gradually overcome their communication fears.

2. Use of Experiential Learning Approaches:

Naqiyah (2022) found that experiential learning techniques can enhance self-efficacy. Role-playing exercises, mock interviews, and real-world communication simulations can provide students with hands-on opportunities to practice speaking English to build their self-efficacy in public speaking by reducing apprehension. Hence, targeted feedback to address issues by not creating an apprehensive environment can be a motivational tool and support even for post-graduate learners (Osman et al., 2024).

Conclusion

This study highlights the significant impact of communication apprehension on Malaysian tertiary learners, emphasizing its role in impeding students' ability to participate effectively in professional and academic settings. The findings indicate that high levels of both trait and state communication apprehension are prevalent, particularly in public speaking contexts, irrespective of gender or academic program.

Given the strong correlation between communication skills and employability, addressing CA among students should be a priority for higher education institutions. By revising curricula, integrating practical communication training, and providing psychological and mentorship

support, universities can better prepare graduates for the workforce. Future research should explore long-term interventions and their effectiveness in reducing communication apprehension like public speaking module to ensure that graduates are equipped with essential communication competencies required in today's competitive job market.

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