

Demographic Factors and Oral Communication Apprehension among Students in Malaysian Higher Learning Institutions

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Abstract

Purpose: To examine the relationship between demographic factors and oral communication apprehension among students in Malaysian higher learning institutions.

Design/methodology/approach: Questionnaires were distributed to students of two Malaysian higher learning institutions, which focused on demographics and oral communication apprehension. PRCA-24 is used as the measurement of oral communication apprehension based on five points Likert scale.

Findings: Academic performance is negatively related to oral communication apprehension indicating that lower achiever students have greater oral communication apprehension than their counterparts. However, gender and year of study do not influence students' oral communication apprehension.

Research limitations/implications: This study only use PRCA-24 as the measurement of communication apprehension and the samples covers two higher learning institutions. Perhaps, with other instruments and wider samples, the result would be more enhancing.

Practical implications: Hope to benefit universities and professional bodies to overcome the oral communication apprehension among students as they are the future leaders.

Originality/value: The findings contribute to literatures on whether demographic factors affect oral communication apprehension among students of higher learning institutions in Malaysia.

Paper type: Research paper

Keywords: Demographic factors, Oral communication apprehension, Students

Introduction

Communication skills have become one of the crucial elements especially for undergraduates, both during their college or university time and for job applications. Effective presentation

skills are important to obtain good marks in assessments, exchanging information with peers and lecturers, subsequently succeed in job interviews, prepare convincing reports and arguments in meetings (Kho & Ting, 2021). Communication ability is very crucial in group discussions, meetings and public speaking; hence, lack of communication skills may lead to failure in job applications (Ilias et al., 2013).

Graduates with strong oral and written communication abilities are increasingly in demand. Even though significant efforts have been made by higher learning institutions which concern on the enhancement of communication ability, still many students do not acquire the necessary abilities. Individuals may have a variety of communication-related anxieties. As English is used as a second language in Malaysian schools, majority of university undergraduates experienced moderate to high levels of communication apprehension (Mustapha et al., 2010). He further found that Malaysian students preferred group discussions with familiar peers as they were less apprehensive compared to unfamiliar group members. Most students feel worried about how others could track their English knowledge when speaking English in evaluative situations (Hashim & Isa, 2012). This is consistent with Bastida and Yapo (2019), whereby students might feel uncomfortable in public speaking, group discussions, meetings and interpersonal conversations. They may face problems during oral presentations, including difficulties to express their thoughts, which may lead to mumbling (Soomro et al., 2019).

McCroskey (1977) defined oral communication apprehension as “the level of fear or anxiety that a person or a group of people felt when having a real or anticipated communication”. One of the key elements linked to poor communication skills is communication anxiety. Fear, worry, and a lack of confidence while interacting with others are all factors that contribute to a lack of communication skill. Oral Communication Apprehension (OCA) is a term that refers to verbal communication that can include visual aids. Previous researchers has documented the definition of oral communication apprehension (Blanthorne et al., 2005; Burnett, 2003; Tanyel et al., 1999).

Past studies also found the impact of demographic factors on oral communication apprehension among students. They include genders (Arquero et al., 2017; Rajagopal & Shah, 2017; Rashidi et al., 2011), year of study (Nayeem et al., 2015; Tahir et al., 2017) and academic performance (McCroskey & Andersen, 1976; Ying, 2018). The current study examines the relationship between demographic factors towards level of oral communication apprehension among students in Malaysian higher learning institutions (MHL). It is hoped that the findings may benefit lecturers, universities or colleges to overcome the students’ oral communication apprehension based on their demographic background.

Literature Review and Hypotheses Development

Establishing good communication skills among peers and instructors is crucial in students’ campus life (Jill, 2013). He also argued that individuals who did not possess good communication skills or lack of vocabularies may create communication apprehension. Communication apprehension is “*the way a person feels about communication not how they communicate*” (McCroskey's, 1986).

The relationship of demographic background and communication apprehension also have received interest among many researchers. Demographic refers to a study of a population expressed statistically, such as gender, age, race, institution, hometown location, level of education, courses, academic performance measured by current grade point average (GPA) and the usage of languages.

Arquero et al. (2017) stated that female students, regardless of educational path, had lower levels of communication apprehension. Consistently, Byrne et al. (2009) found that female accounting majors have a lower level of communication apprehension than the male. Rajagopal

and Shah (2017) discovered that male students felt uncomfortable in situations when they are less confident and self-conscious, and this supported Borzi and Mills (2001) who indicated that men were facing high oral communication apprehension as compared to women. In contrast, Tahir et al. (2017) reported that in overall, males have less communication apprehension than females and this study supports previous studies whereby they documented that female students had a higher degree of communication apprehension. (Aly & Islam, 2005; Hassall et al., 2000; Daly & Miller, 1975; Nayeem et al., 2015; Simons et al., 1995). Rashidi et al. (2011) found a very low level of oral communication apprehension among male students while female students had the average level. Arquero et al. (2007), Gardner et al. (2005), Frantz et al. (2005), McCroskey et al. (1982) and Sherwyn (2007) found that female students have much higher levels of oral communication apprehension, particularly in public speaking and meetings. Meanwhile, Hashemi et al. (2021), Kianny et al. (2012) and Ying (2018) found no significant difference in oral communication apprehension between genders. Therefore, lead to the following hypotheses:

H1a: There is a significant relationship between gender and oral communication apprehension among MHL students.

H1b: There is a significant difference in oral communication apprehension between genders of MHL students.

Year 3 students shown two times less communication apprehension than Year 1 students (Tahir et al., 2017). Another study by Nayeem et al. (2015) evidenced a high level of communication apprehension among first year students. These studies are consistent with Duh et al. (2001) whereby their result showed accounting students show greater oral communication apprehension than business students at the freshman level not at the senior level. Others found that seniors were more confident communicators (Lee, 2011; Duh et al., 2001). On the other hand, Aly and Islam (2003), Ameen et al. (2000) and Frantz et al. (2005) found no significant difference in communication apprehension between the entering accounting students and the seniors. Similar result was found by Ameen et al. (2010) studies. Therefore, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H2a: There is a significant relationship between year of study and oral communication apprehension among MHL students.

H2b: There is a significant difference in oral communication apprehension between years of study of MHL students.

Ying (2018) evidenced that students' academic achievement is negatively related to communication apprehension, and its supported McCroskey and Andersen (1976) who found students who were scored high grade point showed a significantly lower level of oral communication apprehension compared to those who were poorly performed in their studies. They further argued that students who have high level of communication anxiety are less likely to join class discussion, resulting in less attention from lecturer, besides frequently misinterpreted as slow, lethargic, or uninterested, resulting in bad final marks. The negative impact of oral communication apprehension in academic environment was evidenced by Allen and Bourhis (1996), McCroskey et al. (1976) and McCroskey (1977). Students with a high oral communication apprehension shown a lower overall grade-point averages than those with a low oral communication apprehension. Honour students expressed much higher communication fear than their non-honour peers (Butler et al., 2004). However, Gardner et al. (2005) found no association between oral communication apprehension and academic achievement. Therefore, lead to the following hypotheses:

H3a: There is a significant relationship between academic performance and oral communication apprehension among MHL students.

H3b: There is a significant difference in oral communication apprehension between academic performance of MHL students.

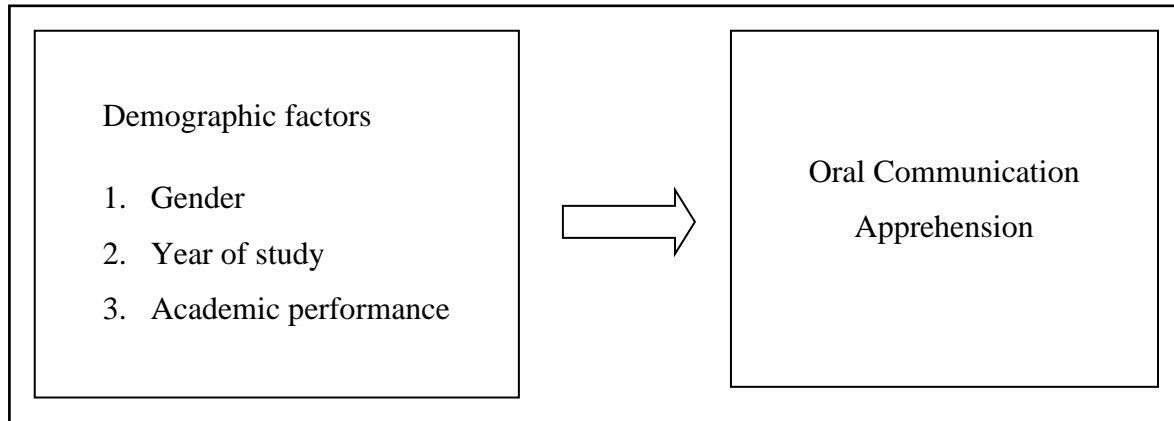


Figure 1: Theoretical Framework

Methods

The samples comprise of two higher learning institutions in Malaysia. These institutions are ranked top 20 universities in Malaysia based on QS World University Ranking. 400 questionnaires were distributed to each institution, totalling to 800 questionnaires. This is based on Roscoe (1975) who recommends an adequate sample size is larger than 30 and less than 500. In addition, a minimum sample size of 30 for subsamples such as males/females and junior/senior is appropriate. Because everyone has an equal chance of being selected to participate in this study, this sample is based on simple random sampling. Furthermore, this sample design is the least biased and most generalisable (Sekaran & Bougie, 2010).

The dependent variable of this study is oral communication apprehension. This variable is measured by using 24 items of Personal Report of Communication Apprehension (PRCA) from McCroskey (1986) whereby it is related to individual's responses towards the communication, based on five-point Likert scale. The demographics, which are the independent variables comprise of gender, year of study and academic performance.

Findings

This study examines the relationship between demographic factors and oral communication apprehension among students of higher learning institutions in Malaysia. Statistical Package of Social Sciences Version 26 was used for data analysis.

Reliability test was conducted to measure reliability of the instrument. Cronbach's Alpha for the oral communication apprehension is 0.844, which indicate that the instruments are reliable as the Cronbach's Alpha is more than 0.70 (Sekaran & Bougie, 2013). Sekaran and Bougie (2010) explains that the higher the value of Cronbach's Alpha approaches the value 1, the higher the internal reliability. When the total respondents are 30 or more, the sampling distribution is nearly normal, irrespective of the population distribution is normal or non-normal, based on the Central Limit Theorem (Paret & Martz, 2009). Hence, the parametric test can be used since the sample of the current study is more than 30 which is 695 respondents.

Table 1: Respondents' Demographic Information

	Category	Number	Percentage
Gender	Male	201	28.9
	Female	494	71.1
Year of Study	First year	336	48.3
	Final year	359	51.7
CGPA	<2.00	7	1.0
	2.00-2.49	49	7.1
	2.50-2.99	186	26.8
	3.00-3.49	258	37.1
	3.50-4.00	195	28.1

Table 1 presents the respondents demographic information. Majority of the respondents are female (71.1%), final year students (51.7%) and obtained a CGPA between 3.00-3.49.

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics of Oral Communication Apprehension

No	Statement	SD	D	N	A	SA
1	I am tense and nervous while participating in group discussions	28	190	174	242	61
2	My thoughts become confused and mixed when I am giving a speech	26	226	220	182	41
3	Communicating in class usually makes me uncomfortable	20	156	214	247	58
4	I have no fear of speaking up in conversations	29	95	226	290	55
5	I am afraid to express myself in class	23	161	258	199	54
6	I'm afraid to speak up in conversations	19	124	196	287	69
7	Generally, I am nervous when I have to participate in class	27	214	215	187	52
8	I have no fear of giving a speech	38	159	239	214	45
9	Ordinarily, I am very calm and relaxed in conversations	17	55	215	352	56
10	I am very relaxed when answering questions in class	23	97	268	259	48
11	While conversing with a new friend, I feel very relaxed	8	68	195	351	73
12	Ordinarily, I am very tense and nervous in conversations	21	159	205	251	59
13	I dislike participating in group discussions	34	132	191	262	76
14	I am very calm and relaxed when I am called upon to express an opinion in class	33	109	251	213	89
15	I am calm and relaxed while participating in group discussions	16	70	167	375	67
16	I feel relaxed while giving a speech	22	109	273	240	51
17	Generally, I am comfortable while participating in group discussions	17	66	228	320	64
18	While giving a speech, I get so nervous and I forgot facts that I really know	47	256	225	136	31

19	Usually I am calm and relaxed while participating in class	16	85	217	326	51
20	While participating in a conversation with a new friend, I feel very nervous	24	192	213	204	62
21	I like to get involved in group discussions	21	59	245	315	55
22	Certain parts of my body feel very tense and stiff while giving a speech	36	235	232	146	46
23	Engaging in group discussions with new people makes me tense and nervous	39	186	229	192	49
24	I face the prospects of giving a speech with confidence	16	79	257	256	87

Table 2 shows frequency of agreement in oral communication apprehension statement. Most students agree they feel tense and nervous while participating in group discussions, feel uncomfortable communicating in class, hesitant to speak up in conversations, and dislike participating in group discussions. However, some of them feel very calm and relaxed in conversations especially with new friends.

Table 3: Relationship of Demographic Factors and Oral Communication Apprehension

Variables	Coefficient's value	t-statistics	Sig.
Gender	.047	1.235	.217
Year of study	-.019	-.497	.620
Academic performance	-.130	-3.337	.001

A regression analysis is performed to identify the relationship between demographic factors and oral communication apprehension. Table 3 indicates that only academic performance is significantly negatively related to oral communication apprehension, therefore, H3a is accepted. Gender and year of study have no significant relationship with students' oral communication apprehension, hence, H1a and H2a are rejected. The results are further analysed to investigate the difference in oral communication apprehension across genders, years of study and academic performances.

Table 4: Differences in Oral Communication Apprehension across Demographics

	Mean	SD	Sig.
OCA level by Gender			
Male	64.9751	11.87874	0.244
Female	66.0283	10.30918	
OCA level by Year of study			
First year	65.9464	10.45174	0.599
Final year	65.5153	11.10484	
OCA level by Academic performance			
<2.00	65.7143	6.31702	0.005
2.00-2.49	68.5714	11.78806	
2.50-2.99	67.6828	10.77241	
3.00-3.49	64.3605	10.57151	
3.50-4.00	64.9436	10.64090	

An Independent Sample T-Test is used to test gender and year of study. The result in Table 4 above shows that no significant difference was found in the level of oral communication

apprehension based on genders and year of study. The results provide evidence that difference in gender and year of study do not influence the level of OCA among students in Malaysian higher learning institutions, therefore, H1b and H2b are rejected. Meanwhile, academic performance is tested using One-Way ANOVA. Table 4 proves that there is a significant difference in oral communication apprehension between range of academic performance among students in Malaysian higher learning institutions, accepting H3b. The mean for students with CGPA of less than 3.00 is higher compared to their counterparts.

Discussion and Conclusion

The study's findings verified previous theories concerning the link between academic performance and oral communication apprehension. Further analysis established that a significant difference exists in oral communication apprehension between ranges of academic performance.

The results indicate that academic performance of students in Malaysian higher learning institutions is negatively significantly related to oral communication apprehension. It might be due to the new environment of the learning style that affects their academic results for both higher learning institutions. The result supports Allen and Bourhis (1996), McCroskey (1977), McCroskey et al. (1976) and Ying (2018), whereby it proved that the negative impact of high communication apprehension has been established within the academic environment. Students who achieved high result are more likely to have low level of oral communication apprehension, meanwhile, students who scored low in their studies tend to have high level of oral communication apprehension. The result however, contradicts from Gardner et al. (2005) who documented an insignificant relationship.

The result on gender supports previous studies by Hashemi et al. (2021), Kiany et al. (2012) and Ying (2018) whereby they found an insignificant difference in oral communication apprehension between males and females. However, the result of the current study is different from previous studies who proved that females encounter a greater level of communication apprehension than males (Arquero et al., 2007; Nayeem et al., 2015; Tahir et al., 2017) and vice versa (Arquero et al., 2017; Borzi & Mills, 2001; Rajagopal & Shah, 2017) Meanwhile Byrne et al. (2009) found that female accounting majors have a lower level of communication apprehension than the male.

In terms of year of study, the result found is consistent with Aly and Islam (2003), Ameen et al. (2000) and Frantz et al. (2005) whereby they evidenced an insignificant difference in oral communication apprehension between freshman accounting students and the seniors. The current result confirms Aly and Islam's (2003) view that no difference exists in student's communication apprehension between those who are entering and exiting a program. The finding contradicted from Nayeem et al. (2015) and Tahir et al. (2017), who evidenced that juniors are less apprehensive compared to their senior counterparts. It also does not support Duh et al. (2001) and Lee (2011) who documented seniors were more confident communicators.

Theoretical, Practical and Social Implications

The significant relationship found between academic performance and oral communication apprehension among students in higher learning institutions signifies for further recommendations. Students with lower academic performance have greater oral communication apprehension, reveals that academic achievement influence individual's communication apprehension. Initiatives may be taken by instructors, colleges, universities or professional bodies through programs or short courses in order to overcome students'

communication apprehension so that they be able to communicate effectively in group discussions, classes as well as present arguments in meetings.

Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

This study used PRCA-24 as the measurement of communication apprehension. Future researchers may use other instruments, include other demographic factors, as well as conduct a more thorough analysis to allow for meaningful comparisons between genders, years of study and academic performance.

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