Communication Apprehension among Technical and Commerce Learners in Polytechnic Port Dickson

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Abstract
Verbal and communicative tasks are common practices in schools and polytechnic academic system for academic and employbility success. Unfortunately, despite many years of learning, for some students this type of communicative practices in the classroom can result in physical and emotional anxiety that would effect their ability to succeed in the academic and non academic area. This study is to examine the English communication apprehension (CA) of technical and commerce students at college level. This study surveyed and analyzed 128 of polytechnic learners using PRCA 24 (Personal Report of Communication Apprehension) This study aims at identifying the level of communication apprehension and its category. The results indicate that the communication apprehension of technical and commerce of polytechnic learners was moderate. Some recommendations are given for future research.

Keywords : communicative apprehension, technical and commerce learners, college level

1. Introduction

"While doing an oral presentation, I just could not look up at the audience. I am afraid of meeting their eyes…" "*I'm worried that they spotted my mistakes and laughed at me..., I could not remember my points...".* Such phrases are rather common to teachers of English or foreign languages. Communication apprehension (CA) is to be closely related to inherent nature and intelligence of an individual. A person may be communication apprehensive in one situation but not in another. Meanwhile, Mc Croskey (1977a , in Kaeokallaya 2006) viewed CA as "an indiviual's level of fear or anxiety assosicated with either real or anticipated communication with another person or persons." Hence, CA refers to the fear or anxiety people experience when communicating with others which in general, they thought they are being evaluated. Although anxiety is rather normal, for some people it prevents them from performing successfully, particulary in English as a Second Langue (ESL) or English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms where many people find it stressful.

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Some researches showed that high CA effects ones performance and success in both academic and workplace (Byron, 2005; Kakepoto, et al., 2013; Amogne, 2013; Blume, Baldwin & Ryan, 2013). Findings indicate that students in the traditional educational environment experiencing high CA are at a distinct disadvantage when compared to their low or moderate counterparts. Mc Croskey et al. (1989) discovered the students who have high CA were significantly more likely to drop out and attain lower grade point averages compared to low CA students. Similarly, with regard to employment interview (Mc Aresa et.al 2009) , it was found that high CAs avoid thinking about interviews, avoid preparing for them, and use a pattern of communicative minimization (few gestures, few words, etc.) in employment interviews. In Malaysia, despite the fact that English language is learned for almost ten years, many learners, not only in schools but also at tertiary levels, regard communicating before an audience as nerve breaking. Researches that involved pre-university students (Amelia Alfred Tom et al., 2013 ; Mohammad Huwari et al., Huwari, 2010) found that many students at the tertiary level are nervous when asked to present in front of their classmates.This phenomenon needs careful analysis in order to identify viable measures that will address the problem.

Communication skills is one of the vital skills required by most of employers nowadays. To secure a job locally or abroad, graduates are expected to demonstrate their abilites to speak or write well in English as well as Malay language. Based on a report by Adler & Elmhorst, (2008) the most important skill and quality a college graduate can have is effective communication. They stated that accounting firms spend 80% of their work time communicating with others, individually and in groups. Likewise, engineers spend most of their professional lives writing, speaking, and listening. Technical people with good communication skills earn more, and those who are weak communicators suffer. Unfortunately, as claims from industires, polytehnic students are not "work ready" because they lack commnication skills. This paper addresses this issue of learners at the college level at a public learning institution. Hence, the purpose of this study are to determine the level of communicative apprehension of technical and commerce learners and to identify the level of communicative apprehension of four types of communicative activities .

2. Literature Review

The most commonly used definition for CA comes from McCroskey (1977), where he defined CA as "an individual's level of fear or anxiety associated with either real or anticipated communication with another person or persons". Communication apprehension (CA) is generally viewed in four contexts (group, meeting / classroom, interpersonal, and public. He predicts that individuals with high CA minimize human contact to prevent the discomfort associated with various communicative acts. Individuals with low CA are not apt to demonstrate such reticence because they experience little to no discomfort when engaging in human communication.

Many students, even at higher levels of study , experience some level of fear and anxiety when asked to communicate, especially in public (McCroskey, 1984). This feeling of discomfort when communicating is called communication apprehension. Ayres (1986) stated that communication apprehension (CA) has been linked to both cognitive processes and psychological perceptions. Hence, students who already have some level of CA in their native language will face more anxiety when communicating in a foreign or second language, such as English (Schlenker & Leary, 1982). There is a wide range of researches on CA that begins in early 70's. The following are some areas researched that are related to CA researches from 80's to 2000's.

 Mc Croskey et al. (1976) reported that communicative apprehension was found to be positively correlated with anxiety, dogmatism and external control. According to him this findings support the characteristics that has a broad relationship with an individual's total personality. While Wan Zumusni et. al (2010) examined CA among 50 ESL students at tertiary level. The results indicate that the students have a comparatively high level of communication apprehension. The study also reveals that the students prefer group discussion as a way of reducing their communicative anxiety.

According to McCroskey & Richmond (1982), CA can exist during interpersonal, meeting, group, and public speaking. He noted that CA can present itself along a four-point continuum (1) as a trait, (2) in a generalized context, (3) with a given individual or group across contexts, and (4) with a given individual or group in a given situation. In addition, students with high CA spend less time on the communicative aspect of speech preparation and more time in the library and in preparing notes. It was found that students with high public speaking anxiety receive lower grades due to poor preparation and delivery techniques rather than a lack of preparation. The poor preparation may be the result of negative thoughts associated with the anticipated speech. Clearly, students with high CA are at a disadvantage in the classroom (Zhao Na, 2007).

Zimbardo (1977) has associated CA with shyness. Shyness is the lack of tendency to talk and engage in communication with others . According to Mc,Croskey and Richmond, (1982), shyness can result in oral CA and lack of verbal skills. Communication apprehension exists in every person; the level of shyness or hesitation to participate in discussion is a marker which defines the level of CA . Although CA in the classroom is not a new phenomenon, most studies have focused solely on communication apprehension in young children, high school students, or traditional aged college students. These studies have excluded a large segment of the college population of the late twentieth and early twenty first century (Burk J., 2001; Amogne and Yigzaw, 2012; Wan Zumusni et al., 2010; Rojo-Laurilla, 2007; Ali and Shahla, 2015)

3. Methodology

Participants

The participants for this study were 128 commerce and technical learners . A cluster random sampling method was used to approach the potential participants. They were chosen on the basis of their area of specialization and duration of study Polytechnic of Port Dickson; semester five. Participants were both males and females.

Instruments

McCroskey's (1984a) *Personal Report of Communication Apprehension* (PRCA 24 was the main component used to measure learners ' apprehension about communicating. This instrument which is the most widely used to measure CA, contains 24 items on a 5-point Likert-type scale (anchored by "strongly disagree" and "strongly agree") assessing respondents' apprehension in four communication situations ; group discussion, interpersonal exchanges (dyad), meetings and public speaking. Each of these communication situations, comprises of six items. In previous research, this instrument has demonstrated high internal consistency, with alpha reliability estimates ranging from .93 to .97. McCroskey (1984b) found the instrument to have a high level reliability (Cronbach alpha = 0.94). Similarly, Beatty (2000) found the alpha reliability of the PRCA − 24 to be between 0.93 and 0.95 which guarantees the researchers to use it as a standardized scale. Others (McCroskey, et al., 2006; Wan Zumusni et al., 2010) similarly reported the instrument to have shown a very high reliability (>0.90).

Scoring the responses

The responses obtained from the 24-items were scored using the original PRCA-24 reporting scale. Respondents indicate the level of anxiety he or she feel about participating in four oral communication situations by filling out the questionnaire. Based on these answers, the general score indicating the general level of anxiety of individual's score is computed . A "high" score means that respondents report more anxiety related to oral communication than most people do (based on surveys of people in the United States). The "high" range is from 80 to 120. A "low" score means that respondents report less anxiety related to oral communication than most people do. The "low" range is any score below 50.

3. Findings and Discussion

Communication skills is vital for future workers with no acceptional to techical and commerce graduates. Ignorance in this regards will affect their future as technical people with good communication skills earn more, and those who are weak communicators suffer. A total of N=128 respondents participated in this study. Figure 1 revealed that, the level of CA among technical and commerce of polytechnic Port Dickson learners was moderate. It shows that 82 % of learners obtained scores from 51 to 79, representing those with moderate levels of trait CA. Several factors may contribute to this outcome. For instance, polytechnic learners were exposed or used to present assignment in front of their classmates. Yet some of them are undecided about whether or not they would prefer to speak in English when are asked to express their opinions. In Figure 2,when comparing between the area of specialization, technical learners experienced higher CA level compared to commerce learners. However, the difference is rather small. Further exploration on the basis of departments of specialization showed that Electrical Engineering learners' CA level was the most moderate compared to their other counterparts. On contrary, Figure 3 revealed that learners of Mechnical Engineering Department obtained the highest level of CA compared to learners of three other departments,

Commerce, Electrical Engineering and Civil Engineering. This findings contradicts with Mohd Zulkeflee & Nek Kamal (2013) where they found that more than 50 % of accounting major learners of the highest level of CA .
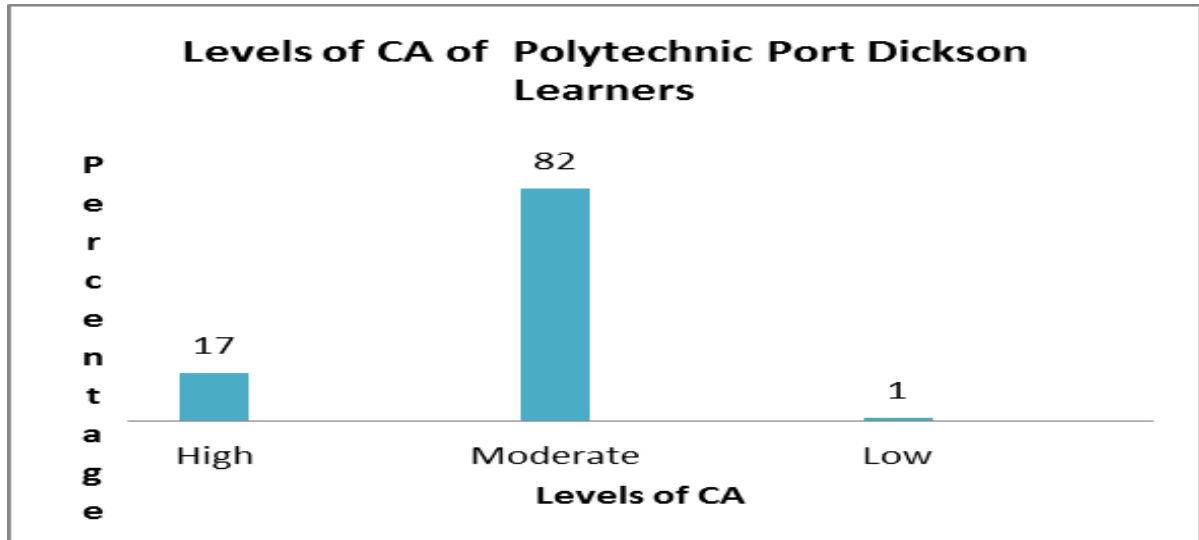

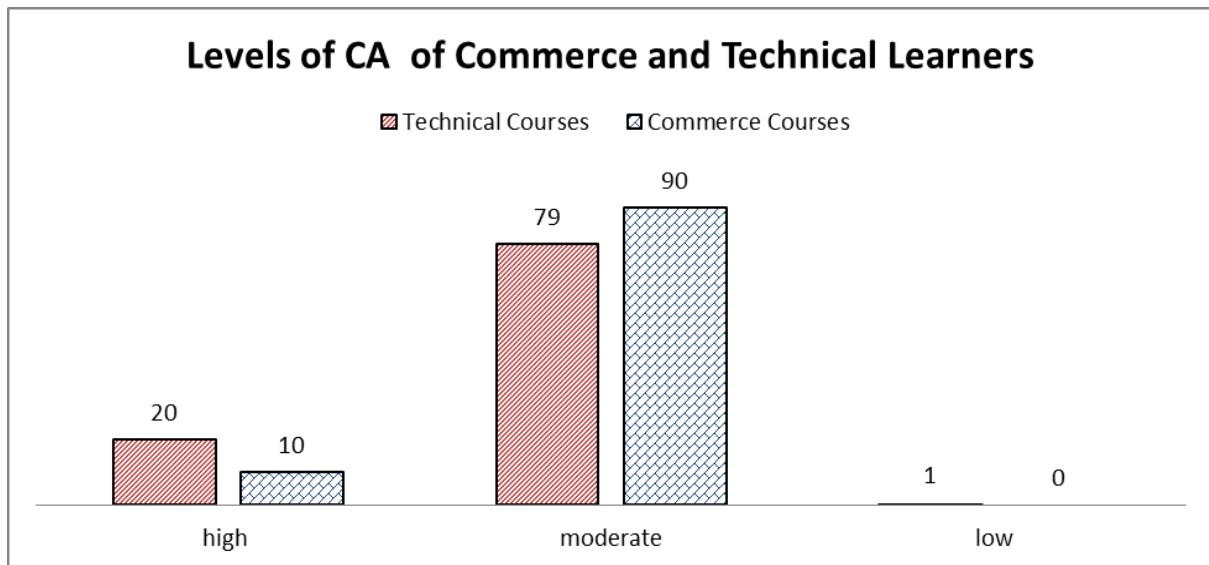Figure 1   Levels of CA of Polytechnic Port Dickson Learners

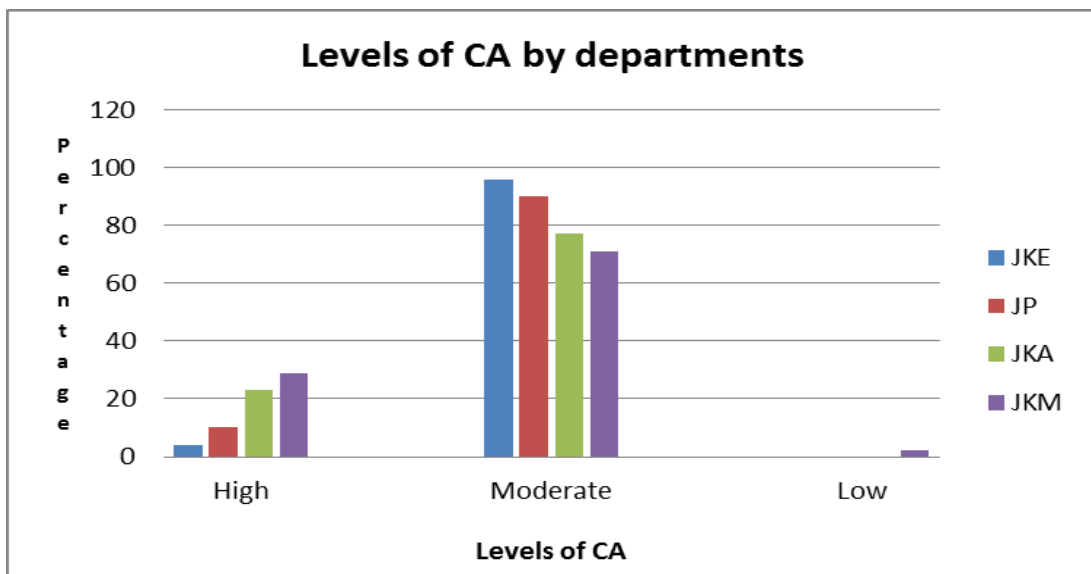Figure 1   Levels of CA of Commerce and Technial Learners

Figure 3   Levels of CA of Polytechnic Learners (by departments)
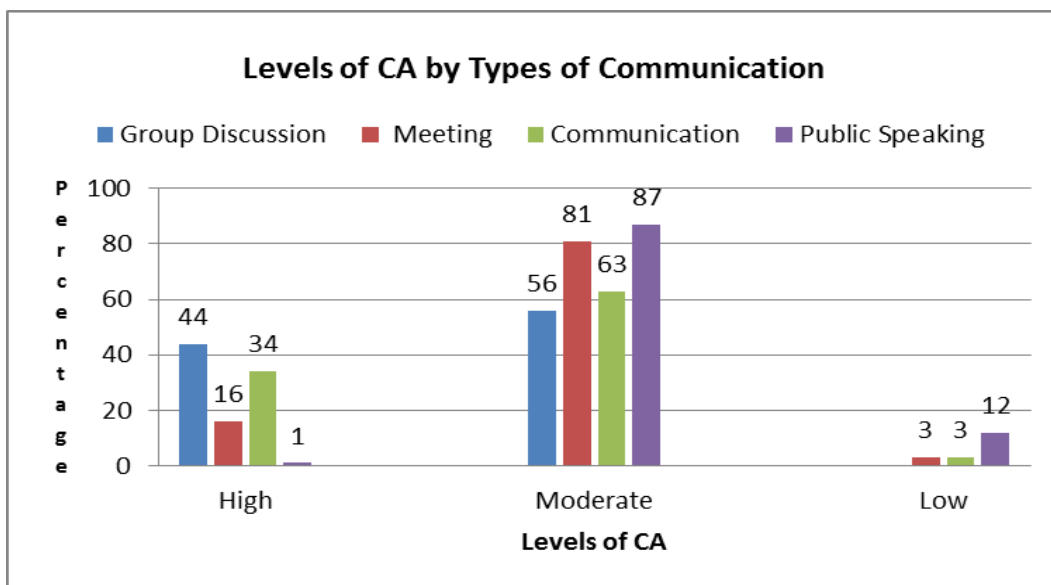

Figure 4 Level of communication apprehension (CA) by types of communicative activities

 Figure 4 revealed that the level of CA by communication situations; group discussion, meeting, interpersonal communication and public speaking. The findings showed that polytechnic learners reported a high CA during group discussion and interpersonal communication. Perhaps, this might be possibly due to their unwillingness or shyness to speak to others and undecided whether to express opinions or to enquire. Surprisingly, these learners reported that they had low CA in public speaking. This perhaps is because they are used to public speaking or oral presentations. In fact, in most of the modules learnt at polytechnic level required the learners to do oral presentation as one of their assessments. Nevertheless, the percentage was minimal; 12 % or 15 learners only.

4. Recommendation and Conclusion

This paper has revealed some findings regarding the English communication apprehension (CA) of students at college level. This study was carried out on final year of technical and commerce learners of Polytechnic of Port Dickson. The results allow us to conclude that majority of the students had a moderate level of CA while the group discussion has high CA compared to other communication categories. We recommend, the learners should be taught basic group discussion skills, such as how to structure an individual involvement, ways to begin and end a discussion, as well as verbal and non-verbal communication skills. Additionally, implementing activities which focus on improving students' pronunciation may help alleviate their fear of being unable to pronounce unfamiliar words. Furthermore, using fun speaking activities, such as songs, poems or board games, may be able to encourage the students to speak, and thus, this could lower their anxiety levels in the group discussion/involvement.

Although, this findings found that the CA of group activities was high , teachers should develop this in students. Teachers should not limit group activities only in the classroom but also ask students to complete assignments in equally divided groups. Besides that, teachers should continuously change the groups so that there is more interaction among the students. This process helps a lot in the long run. Many prevailing studies indicate that adequate anxiety plays a positive role and can motivate students to maintain their efforts on learning. Therefore, the teacher's real task is to help students find an adequate level of anxiety. In additional, according to Zhoa Na (2007) in order to ensure effective communication , teachers should take the affective factors of the students into consideration. They must pay more attention to this anxiety and can also explicitly inform students about the inevitable existence of anxiety in English learning. They can advise students that anxiety can be reduced through the self-regulation of their thinking and studying. There is an obvious need to examine the relationship between CA and performance in communication tasks, and with overall academic achievement. Moreover, research which explores the link between CA and other background variables (e.g., culture, personality, socio economic status) could reveal further insights into the antecedents of CA. Thus , more research is needed to support the findings and to discover more about anxiety in English classrooms (Opal, 2008).

Many teachers might not aware of the situation anxiety that is the result of reduce feelings of confidence. Also, it is never easy to put oneself in another person's position, teachers particularly ESL/ELL must strive to understand not only the linguistic / academic challenges but also the affective factors that can affect learning. Besides learning another language, these students are learning another culture and ways of life. Hence, there is an immediate need to focus on the communication skills of polytechnic learners. Negligence in this regards may result in lack of confidence in future global workforce.

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