

Communication Apprehension in Using English Language Among Non-Academic Officers at a Public University in Malaysia

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Abstract

This research addresses issues on communication apprehension in using English language among non-academic officers (grade 41 to 48) at Universiti Sultan Zainal Abidin (UniSZA), Malaysia. The notion of communication apprehension in this context is their anxiety in executing language tasks in terms of: group discussion, meeting, interpersonal and public speaking by using English language as medium. The objectives of this research are to identify the level of anxiety in using English language among the non-academic officers and to identify potential problems faced by the non-academic officers in learning English language during the English course. This research is based on an observation in an intensive course called English for non-academic staff conducted at UniSZA for the period of 30 hours where the researcher is one of the instructors of the programme. The methodology used in this research is using quantitative approach and applying an instrument called Personal Report of Communication Apprehension (PRCA-24) developed by James C. McCroskey (1982) in order to assess the level of anxiety in using English language. The findings reveal that most of the non-academic officers experienced average levels of communication apprehension. Only a few officers recorded a low level of communication apprehension and one officer who experienced a high level of communication apprehension. Work commitments at office by the officers is one of the factors that impedes their time in learning English. It also reveals that the officers enjoy themselves when the lessons are related to their daily duties. As conclusion, although they experience apprehension or anxiety in using English language, they are still determined to improve themselves especially in spoken English for the sake of their future career.

Keywords: Communication Apprehension, English, PRCA-24, Non-Academic Officers

1. Introduction

Among some major languages in the world, English language has its own role and pedigree due to its wide use in the world such as in economy, politics, culture, sports, etc. Our world nowadays does not seem to be able to link and communicate without this international language. For example, the extensive use of social media such as Facebook or Twitter are enabled mainly due to the English language. Internet as the main source of

information now is not spared with the use of this language. In short, this international language has become a lingua franca among the population on this planet.

For professional purposes, English is widely used in private sectors. In Malaysia, there are so many multinational companies who run their business in this country. As established companies, they must ensure that the delivery system as well as the communicational system among their staff be smoothly done where every single directive given by a superior to their subordinates must be clearly conveyed. In return, the subordinates or employees must also be able to understand and translate the directive into a proper action. So the best language medium used that can be understood by both parties is English language.

The importance of mastering English language is also shared by the government sectors. For those working at the government offices as civil servants, they also feel the urge to master the English language well to smoothen their duty and task. One of the government sectors whose staff need to master this international language is at universities. Unlike in the previous years or decades where the enrollment of students every year would only come from the local candidates, the intakes of students at the universities in Malaysia nowadays have been opened to foreign students who want to pursue their tertiary education in Malaysia. Almost all universities in Malaysia, be it from public universities or private high learning institutions are now competing neck to neck to fish foreign students to study at their place. The success in getting foreign students to a university now has become a Key Performance Indicator (KPI) for the institution as a successful place to internationalize their university to other world. The more foreign students a university gets, the more prestigious the university is deemed.

As a consequence, the university receiving students from abroad must be ready in every single need of the students, be it from academic as well as their welfare during their stay at the university. The state of the arts of facilities, attractive tuition fees, prospective academic programs, future career upon graduation, distinguished professors or lecturers and conducive learning ambience are some of the most sought after criteria that foreign students scout before deciding to pursue their studies overseas. Besides the academic staff as the backbone of the university, the non-academic staff also play vital roles in ensuring the welfare and smooth-running of their studies in Malaysia. For example, a faculty at a university is usually headed by a dean and assisted by some deputy deans, head of departments and some non-academic support staff such as assistant registrar, assistant administrator, typist or office boy. These non-academic staff are the ones who man the office full time where their duties are to cater to the need of the students including the foreign ones. We could not imagine how these staff would be effective manpower if they could not converse reasonably well in English language.

At university level, an officer is usually appointed from those who hold bachelor degrees and they are given a scheme that starts with grade 41. The promotion exercise will enable a grade 41 officer to enjoy a grade 44 and then jump to grade 48. These three level of officers usually play important roles in ensuring the smooth-running of the office. Apart

from catering the needs of their clients at office, these officers are sometimes assigned to attend a meeting with other institutions or bodies that require them to use English in the event. In this case, a staff with good competency and proficiency in English language will have the edge over those who are handicap of the language where they have low confident and low self-esteem due to their lack of command in English. This matter will indirectly affect their self-confidence and their future career.

One of the most obvious problem in using the language is a phenomenon known as communication apprehension. Communication apprehension or CA is defined as an individual's level of fear of anxiety associated with either real or anticipated communication with another person or persons (McCroskey, 1977). The definition given by McCroskey shows that this phenomenon exists in the society, especially among speakers. Most people actually tend to be anxious about doing anything important in public. Actors are nervous before a play, politicians are nervous before a campaign speech, athletes are nervous before a big game (Lucas, 1992). It is a common truth that everyone cannot avoid from being nervous or anxious in their life.

Communication apprehension is also known as speech anxiety and the latter refers to fear of speaking in front of an audience. Before, during, and after giving a speech, speakers experience a wide range of sensations and behaviors that spring from the internal causes of nervousness. These may include quavering voice, shaky hands, changes in body temperature, itchy skin, dry mouth, the mind going blank, increased heart rate, shortness of breath, increased rate of speech, trembling legs, sweaty palms or cold hands and feet (Coopman & Lull, 2012).

2. Objectives of the study

In this study, the researcher wants to carry out investigation to find answers on the following phenomena. Firstly, to identify the level of anxiety in using English language among the non-academic officers and secondly is to identify problems faced by the non-academic officers in learning English language that can impede their progress in mastering the English language well.

3. Methodology

This research is based on an observation in an intensive course called English for non-academic staff conducted at Universiti Sultan Zainal Abidin (UniSZA) Malaysia for the period of 30 hours where the researcher is one of the instructors of the programme. Contents of the syllabus for this program are tailored in line with the officers' needs in their daily duties such as: practical language functions, meetings, public speaking as well as some skills in writing memos, minutes of meeting, etc. Grammar of English is also indirectly taught when a need arises to help the students form sound English sentences. There are 30 samples comprising non-academic officers holding 11 different posts from 17 departments or units at UniSZA with grades 41, 44 and 48 respectively. The methodology used in this research is using quantitative approach by administering questionnaire to the respondents as well as

applying an instrument called Personal Report of Communication Apprehension (PRCA-24) developed by James C. McCroskey (1982) in order to assess the level of anxiety in using English language. The findings reveal that most of the non-academic officers experienced average levels of communication apprehension.

The PRCA-24 is the instrument which is most widely used to measure communication apprehension. It permits one to obtain sub-scores on the contexts of public speaking, dyadic interaction, small groups, and large groups. This instrument is composed of twenty-four statements concerning feelings about communicating with others where the respondents will indicate the degree to which each statement applies to them by marking whether you they: Strongly Disagree = 1; Disagree = 2; are Neutral = 3; Agree = 4; Strongly Agree = 5

The complete statements are as follows:

1. I dislike participating in group discussions.
2. Generally, I am comfortable while participating in group discussions.
3. I am tense and nervous while participating in group discussions.
4. I like to get involved in group discussions.
5. Engaging in a group discussion with new people makes me tense and nervous.
6. I am calm and relaxed while participating in group discussions.
7. Generally, I am nervous when I have to participate in a meeting.
8. Usually, I am comfortable when I have to participate in a meeting.
9. I am very calm and relaxed when I am called upon to express an opinion at a meeting.
10. I am afraid to express myself at meetings.
11. Communicating at meetings usually makes me uncomfortable.
12. I am very relaxed when answering questions at a meeting.
13. While participating in a conversation with a new acquaintance, I feel very nervous.
14. I have no fear of speaking up in conversations.
15. Ordinarily I am very tense and nervous in conversations.
16. Ordinarily I am very calm and relaxed in conversations.
17. While conversing with a new acquaintance, I feel very relaxed.
18. I'm afraid to speak up in conversations.
19. I have no fear of giving a speech.
20. Certain parts of my body feel very tense and rigid while giving a speech.
21. I feel relaxed while giving a speech.
22. My thoughts become confused and jumbled when I am giving a speech.
23. I face the prospect of giving a speech with confidence.
24. While giving a speech, I get so nervous I forget facts I really know.

Group discussion : 18 - (scores for items 2, 4, & 6) + (scores for items 1, 3, & 5)

Meetings : 18 - (scores for items 8, 9, & 12) + (scores for items 7, 10, & 11)

Interpersonal : 18 - (scores for items 14, 16, & 17) + (scores for items 13, 15, & 18)

Public Speaking : 18 - (scores for items 19, 21, & 23) + (scores for items 20, 22, & 24)

To obtain total score for the PRCA, simply add the sub-scores together.

Scores can range from 24 - 120. Scores below 51 represent people who have very low CA. Scores between 51 - 80 represent people with average CA. Scores above 80 represent people who have high levels of trait CA.

Source: McCroskey, J. C. (1982). *An introduction to rhetorical communication* (4th Ed). Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.

The questionnaire and PRCA-24 were then analyzed using Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS) version 20 by applying descriptive analysis.

4. Findings

4.1 Exact Score of PRCA 24

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	34.00	1	3.3	3.3	3.3
	43.00	1	3.3	3.3	6.7
	47.00	1	3.3	3.3	10.0
	50.00	1	3.3	3.3	13.3
	51.00	1	3.3	3.3	16.7
	53.00	2	6.7	6.7	23.3
	54.00	1	3.3	3.3	26.7
	55.00	1	3.3	3.3	30.0
	56.00	1	3.3	3.3	33.3
	57.00	1	3.3	3.3	36.7
	58.00	1	3.3	3.3	40.0
	60.00	1	3.3	3.3	43.3
	62.00	4	13.3	13.3	56.7
	63.00	2	6.7	6.7	63.3
	67.00	1	3.3	3.3	66.7
	68.00	3	10.0	10.0	76.7
	69.00	1	3.3	3.3	80.0
	70.00	1	3.3	3.3	83.3
74.00	1	3.3	3.3	86.7	
76.00	1	3.3	3.3	90.0	

	78.00	1	3.3	3.3	93.3
	80.00	1	3.3	3.3	96.7
	91.00	1	3.3	3.3	100.0
	Total	30	100.0	100.0	

Table 1 : Exact Score of PRCA 24

Data from table 1 above shows distribution of score obtained by 30 students after they complete filling up the PRCA-24. The lowest score was 34 and the highest score was 91 with the obtained mean of score was 61.80.

4.2 Score of PRCA-24

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid 80 >	1	3.3	3.3	3.3
Valid 51-80	25	83.3	83.3	86.7
Valid 51 <	4	13.3	13.3	100.0
Total	30	100.0	100.0	

Table 2 : Score of PRCA-24

Table 2 above reveals that only 4 respondents (13.3%) managed to obtained scores of PRCA-24 below than 51 meanwhile 25 respondents scored between 51 to 80 which was equivalent to 83.3% and 1 respondent scored 91.

4.3 Levels of PRCA-24

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid High level of communication apprehension	1	3.3	3.3	3.3
Valid Average communication apprehension	25	83.3	83.3	86.7

Very low communication apprehension	4	13.3	13.3	100.0
Total	30	100.0	100.0	

Table 3 : Levels of PRCA-24

Table 3 clearly shows that 25 of the respondents or equivalent to 83.3 % experienced average communication apprehension, meanwhile 4 respondents or equivalent to 13.3% experienced very low communication apprehension. On the other hand, 1 respondents (3.3%) experienced a high level of communication apprehension.

4.4 Did you enjoy learning English?

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid Yes	30	100.0	100.0	100.0

Table 4: Respondents' comments on the English Course.

Table above table shows that all respondents (100%) fully enjoyed themselves attending the class sessions during the course.

4.5 Did you have problem in attending class?

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid Yes	19	63.3	63.3	63.3
Valid No	11	36.7	36.7	100.0
Total	30	100.0	100.0	

Table 5 : Problem in attending class.

The table above shows that 19 respondents or equivalent to 63.3% opined that they had problem in attending the class. Only 11 respondents (36.7%) responded that they did not have any problem to attend the class.

4.6 Reasons for being absent from class

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid Work commitment	30	100.0	100.0	100.0

Table 6 : Reasons for being absent from class

The figure shows that all of the 30 respondents agreed that their work commitment was the main reason why they were absent from attending the English course.

5. Discussion

From the data showed above, it can be derived a statement that the level of communication apprehension among Universiti Sultan Zainal Abidin's officers from grade 41 to grade 48 were generally good since they only experienced average communication apprehension. The notion of average communication apprehension here is that, an officer could still manage to execute or converse in a well-accepted way to make other people understand although the officer himself or herself still feels a bit apprehensive when communicating, be it during group discussions, meetings, dyadic interactions or even public speaking. On a high note, it was also prevailed that there were 4 UniSZA staff who had a very low level of communication apprehension be it during group discussions, meetings, dyadic interactions or even public speaking. These types of officers, if given ample exposure, could become good assets to the university since they hardly had any problem in relation to speaking or conversing in English language. However, there was 1 respondent whose score fell under the category of experiencing high level of communication apprehension. This type of officer was suspected to undergo some difficulties in making a successful communication be it during group discussions, meetings, dyadic interactions or even public speaking.

The English course conducted by the university actually had shimmered their attention and they did enjoy learning during the course. Unfortunately, the drawbacks happened when these officers would have to fulfill other duties or tasks when the time for the class came. This could happen when an officer had to attend a meeting or a mandatory course to them. Their commitment, enthusiasm and self-determination were sometimes hampered by some programs that could not be avoided. This factor in some way could demotivate their spirit and subsequently impede their progress in mastering the language well.

6. Suggestions

The researcher highly recommends and suggests that the English course for Universiti Sultan Zainal Abidin's grades 41 to 48 officers be continued in the future by taking into account some fabulous feedbacks from the students cum respondents. Some

amendments or modifications are needed to revamp and rejuvenate the program especially in tailoring with the schedule or timetable that can suit the time of most of the staff.

The researcher also recommends that some routines or activities in the office such as official meetings, discussions or even chit-chat in the pantry can be conducted using English language as medium. As the saying “practice makes perfect”, admitted or not, it is indeed very difficult to practice a second language in an environment where majority of the speakers speak their mother tongues.

The next suggestion, try cultivating a culture to read any English-materials, be it newspapers, books, magazines or even a novel. The good habit of reading any materials with English language can stimulate interest in the language, enrich vocabulary as well as gaining some knowledge at the simultaneous time.

7. Enclosure

There is no short-cut in mastering English language, especially in relation to speaking or conversing English language without experiencing the so-called a high level of communication apprehension be it during group discussions, meetings, dyadic interactions or even public speaking. Being an officer at a public university, one must equip themselves with a sound performance in conversing using English as medium to cater to the needs of their clients from overseas as well as in developing themselves for the sake of their future career.

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