

ANXIETY DURING PUBLIC SPEAKING: A STUDY AMONG UNIVERSITI TUN HUSSEIN ONN ENGINEERING UNDERGRADUATES

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Abstract. Anxiety is a feeling of fear about something. Anxiety takes place in different situations and it happens at different ages. It is a widely discussed issue in the field of language and communication. This paper aims to investigate the level of anxiety among engineering students in UTHM especially when they deliver their presentation. There are 125 undergraduates from 8 faculties involved in this study. This study is using the Personal Report of Public Speaking Anxiety (PRPSA) by McCroskey as the instrument of the research. 34 items were asked in measuring their anxiety during public speaking. The data collection was done at the end of semester 2, 2023/2024. Findings show that the students are having moderate levels of anxiety when dealing with public speaking. Also, the number of students who possess high levels of anxiety is quite high. A thorough investigation needs to be done in dealing with this issue as the number is alarming.

Keywords: *anxiety, communication anxiety, public speaking, engineering undergraduates, PRPSA*

Introduction

Anxiety is a widespread phenomenon among people that is not easy to overcome. Anxiety is unavoidable, whether you are in secondary school, at college, or in professional life. This is the uneasiness or fear that arises when you have to speak or share your thoughts in front of others. This anxiety can have a significant impact on a person's academic and personal life, leading to feelings of worry, tension, and poor performance in communication-related tasks (McCroskey, 2009). This problem is not unique to Malaysia but occurs globally. Previous study found that accounting graduates have poor oral presentation skills. The study conducted found that anxiety during communication, or it is known as communication anxiety, is a significant problem among pharmacy students in the United States. Although there is a growing body of research on communication anxiety, there is a lack of comprehensive studies that specifically focus on students in Malaysia. This study addresses this gap by examining the prevalence of communication anxiety among engineering students at Universiti Tun Hussein Onn Malaysia. Communication skills are increasingly recognized as critical competencies for engineers and play a crucial role for academic success and career advancement. Engineering graduates are expected to be able to communicate their ideas effectively, collaborate in teams and present technical information clearly to both technical and non-technical audiences.

Despite the technical concentration of engineering courses, the requirement for engineers with good communication skills has prompted educators to promote the incorporation of communication training into engineering programs. However, communication anxiety, a type of nervousness connected with speaking or talking in public, is a substantial impediment to acquiring these skills. Communication anxiety is

common in many disciplines, but it has been particularly noticeable among engineering students due to the technical character of their courses and the little emphasis on building soft skills. In Malaysia, where the engineering sector is a vital driver of economic growth, resolving communication concerns is critical to ensuring that engineering graduates are not only technically competent but also capable of effectively communicating their ideas.

Literature review

Communication anxiety is a sensation of unease caused by existing or anticipated actions of communication, including oral and written forms. It is characterized by a fear of being evaluated and worries about one's self-image, which cause bodily symptoms such as perspiration, nausea, and forgetfulness (McCroskey and Beatty, 1986). McCroskey classified communication anxiety into four categories: trait anxiety, context anxiety, audience anxiety, and situational anxiety (McCroskey 1982). Trait anxiety is a dread of communication that is inherent in one's psyche, whereas context anxiety is caused by specific situations that elicit anxiety responses. Adrenaline worsens these fears, resulting in physical signs such as increased heart rate and perspiration. A study found that communication anxiety is linked to academic achievement. They conducted a study on communication apprehension among undergraduates and identified personal characteristics such as self-esteem and anxiety as contributors to communication apprehension. Previous research did a separate study on the same topic, and their findings suggested that social interactions, including peer support and teacher-student links, were very effective in reducing anxiety during communication among undergraduate students. Othman et al. (2024) also found that the pharmacy students faced these challenges due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Communication anxiety is a well-researched topic that affects people in a variety of scenarios. Fadda and Scalas (2016) discovered a strong relationship between personality factors including introversion and neuroticism and greater levels of communication anxiety. Their longitudinal study found that those with high levels of neuroticism and introversion suffer increased anxiety in communication situations, indicating that personality assessments may be important in understanding communication anxiety.

Rimkeeratikul (2016) investigated the impact of multicultural components on communication anxiety (CA). The study found that cultural context plays a significant influence in developing communication anxiety. The study showed a positive association between culture and communication anxiety. Further research found that participants experienced communication fear and anxiety as a result of numerous self-related aspects. The elements include psychological, cognitive, linguistic, intellectual, social, and cultural components. Their concerns were restricted to personality traits, low language proficiency, projected academic challenges, scholastic competency, and poor pronunciation. Zeqiri (2022) study discovered that participants showed moderate levels of communication fear, which had a negative impact on their speaking performance. Özalp and Merç (2022) investigate pre-service English as a Foreign Language (EFL) instructors' willingness to engage in conversation as well as their level of dread when speaking, specifically at a Turkish institution. The data reveal that the students have a strong tendency to engage in communication and have a reasonable level. Cardon et al. (2023) work on communication anxiety among autistics professionals. The data imply that students have a strong desire to communicate and are moderately frightened when speaking. They also show that students' communication dread is directly proportional to

their level of communication preparation. According to this statement, children experience varying levels of fear, which decreases as they progress through grade levels. It is encouraged that students engage in more frequent and uninterrupted conversations in a foreign language. This will lessen their nervousness when conversing in a foreign language.

Materials and Methods

Research design

This study is a quantitative approach. The objective of this study is to investigate the level of communication anxiety among engineering UTHM students when they do presentations. A set of questionnaires was given to the students in measuring their communication anxiety.

Participants

In the study, the random sampling method was used in getting the responses. A total of 125 participants from eight faculties in UTHM participated in this study. The participants were drawn from degree academic level.

Instruments

The study uses McCroskey's instrument (PRPSA) with 34 questions.

Personal Report of Public Speaking Anxiety (PRPSA)

McCroskey (1970) developed the Personal Report of Public Speaking Anxiety (PRPSA), which has been used in a variety of circumstances and themes to assess the level of communication anxiety. Participants were asked to rate 34 items on this measure using a Likert-type scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree. Higher scores indicate higher apprehension in the corresponding subdimensions. The Cronbach Alpha value for the entire scale exceeded 0.9. For this investigation, the Cronbach Alpha is 0.928.

Data collection procedures

A total of 125 questionnaires were collected from UTHM engineering undergraduates during the academic year 2023/2024. To meet the study's aims, surveys were disseminated via Google Forms. Prior to the study, all participants received clear instructions on how to correctly complete the necessary scales. They were also informed that their personal information and responses would be kept strictly confidential, ensuring the study's credibility. The process of completing the surveys took approximately 20 minutes.

Results and Discussion

Table 1 is the demographic information of the respondents. The gender of respondents is almost equal in number. Malay is the dominant race and the respondents are mostly 21 and 24 years old. They are enrolling in their degree programme. *Table 2* displays the level of communication anxiety among 125 UTHM engineering

undergraduates. Majority of them are categorised as “moderate” with 76 in frequency or 60.8%. 32.8 % are possessing high levels of communication anxiety while only 6.4% are having low levels of communication anxiety. The categorisation is based on the formula (highest-lowest)/ 3. The researchers would like to have 3 categories as “high”, “low”, and “moderate”.

Table 1. Demographic information (N=125).

Category	Sub-category	Frequency
Gender	Male	69
	Female	56
Race	Malay	85
	Chinese	24
	Indian	10
	Others	6
Age	21	25
	22	59
	23	26
	24	15

Table 2. Level of communication anxiety (N=125).

Level	Frequency	Percent	Valid percent
1	8	6.4	6.4
2	76	60.8	60.8
3	41	32.8	32.8
	125	100	100

Conclusion

It is concluded that UTHM engineering undergraduates are having “moderate” and “high” levels of communication anxiety. There are many factors that contribute to this scenario. Some of the reasons are due to lack of confidence when delivering presentations, vocabulary problems, culture, and also the issue of technology especially after the pandemic of Covid-19. Practices and drilling may help the students to reduce this fear. Support from friends, lecturers, and surroundings are also important in helping the students in reducing their fear.

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Conflict of interest

Authors declare that there is no conflict of interests regarding the publication of the paper.

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