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Communication apprehension among Malaysian undergraduates: A theoretical perspective

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Abstract: One of the main reasons of poor performance of graduates in interviews is due to communication apprehension. This has resulted in unemployment in Malaysia which are caused by an excess of graduates who are unable to find jobs that align with their educational skills. Communication Apprehension or fear of public speaking need to be addressed as it can become a hindrance of pursuing careers of interest. This opinion paper deals with the theoretical aspects of communication apprehension and its connections to theories that can identify probable solutions in a South -East Asia context. Findings show that there is a link among the following theories; communication apprehension (CA), affective filter hypothesis (AFH) and self-efficacy (SE) among others act as a foundation for a theoretical framework to create a public speaking teaching module to address communication apprehension.

Keywords: Public speaking, self-efficacy, affective filter hypothesis, communication fear

Introduction

Humans' public speaking is a verbal talent that is often taught in English courses at Malaysian universities and is used to assess and improve a person's ability to talk confidently. English is considered as a second language in Malaysia which should be mastered by all Malaysian learners with a minimum of eleven years of school. Thus, one of the ways to express mastery is through public speaking presentations where a speaker must skillfully employ both spoken and non-spoken communication methods while presenting to a live audience.

Verbal communication includes the use of words to express meaning by the way they are pronounced, the tone used, and the projection of one's voice. Non-verbal communication encompasses elements such as eye contact, facial expressions, and gestures (Lucas, 2015; Yee et al., 2022). The concept of Communication Apprehension (CA) has been highlighted academically since 1915 as fear that is usually experienced during public speaking though the term used then was stage fright (Robinson, 1915).

Lucas (2015, p 9) uses the term nervousness in public speaking as being anxious when giving speeches in public. Despite the different terms used, this paper will use the term communication apprehension (CA) made popular by (McCroskey, 1970a) to refer to stage fright, nervousness, speaking anxiety, glossophobia or fear of public speaking. It can be experienced by an individual at various communicative circumstances (McCroskey, 1984). CA is also labelled as a handicap due to negative experiences during the formative years of a child which is also considered as a subconstruct of unwillingness to communicate (McCroskey, 1970a; Wrench et al., 2008).

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Based on past researches reviewed, all the studies had acknowledged the element of communication apprehension being a barrier to acquisition of ESL speaking skills but most have used the term as speaking anxiety. However, it is accepted that communication apprehension is academically used term since 1915 as fear that is normally experienced during public speaking despite the common term used at that time as stage fright (Clevenger, 1955; Robinson, 1915). This term went through shifts to represent total anxieties and fears and known as oral communication apprehension (McCroskey, 1977). Most of the studies found moderate speaking anxiety or communication apprehension among the participants of the studies.

CA is considered as a social phobia, a condition for which renowned pharmaceutical corporations prescribe medication to alleviate public anxiety (Wrench et al., 2008). The prevalence of communication apprehension has increased from approximately 20 to 40% in the 1970s to around 77% of the global population in the present millennium (Fritscher, 2021; McCroskey, 1984; Wrench et al., 2008). Loureiro et al. (2020) observed that learners encountering difficulties with CA exhibit notable challenges in the classroom when they need to present assignments in the form of public speaking.

The term CA has transitioned from a general dread of public speaking to include several aspects such as states, traits, contexts, person-group dynamics, and situational influences (Booth-Butterfield & Gould, 1986; McCroskey, 1970b). The categorisation of trait-CA and context CA is as predisposition, and state-CA is noted as the actual fear response. As can be seen in Table 1 below, shows the relationship of the types of CA. Prior studies have indicated that apprehension in language is linked to overall measures of language success, such as academic grades (Macintyre & Gardner, 1991, 1994). Similarly, communicative apprehension (CA) limits one's progress in communication and restricts subsequent communication development. It is found that communication skills can be hindered if CA is not addressed (Allen & Bourhis, 1996) where expected performance not be shown due to high level of CA.

Table 1. Description and examples of types of CA

Type	Examples
Trait-CA a general tendency of apprehension experienced in the past in various situations forming part of personality	An individual who regularly experiences anxiety about speaking in public, participating in group discussions, or engaging in interpersonal communication may be categorized as having trait communication apprehension.
Context-CA apprehension experienced-in particular communication situations.	One may feel at ease speaking in public but feel anxious while having one-on-one discussions with authoritative figures like supervisors or professors.
State-CA temporary apprehension experienced is specific situation	An individual who is usually self-assured may feel increased nervousness before delivering a presentation to a large crowd or participating in a tensed situation with increased heart-rate, sweating, stammer or repeat words during speech.

Source: Adapted from (Booth-Butterfield & Cottone, 1991; McCroskey, 1977)

Literature Review

Communication apprehension (CA) in a local context

CA among tertiary students in South East Asia is evident when they are asked to speak in English where fear of negative evaluation and lack of vocabulary knowledge are among the reasons for this predicament (Indrianty, 2016). Classroom observations and interviews done by Indrianty (2016) found that there were two types of apprehension which were trait apprehension and state apprehension faced by the students. A video recording and interview carried out by Aripin et al. (2020) revealed that gestures that relate to apprehension can be expressed by touching of head or part of clothing worn during presentation, changing body postures several times during presentation and looking aimlessly

without focus and avoiding eye contact with the audience. The findings by (Anjaniputra, 2021)) suggest that urban learners are predominantly prone to apprehension in situations related to evaluations. Horwitz (2001) confirmed that the fear of negative evaluation contributes to the development of language anxiety. This fear involves feeling apprehensive about how others will evaluate you in situations like group work, interviews, and other activities involving peer, group, or individual evaluation. In comparison to rural area learners were found to have the highest score on communication apprehension followed by negative evaluation (Anjaniputra, 2021). In this study, CA is addressed by exposing students to face it through guided techniques in a public speaking classroom.In a local context, Naser & Isa, (2021)found out that most of 150 Malaysian public university undergraduates encountered a moderate degree of anxiety despite achieving strong academic performance in their public speaking course. While in a Malaysian private college study of 40 Diploma graduates found that the respondents have fear of using the English language rather that fear of public speaking (Shamsuddin et al., 2021). Employers in general prioritise communication skills than other skills when selecting employees (Daud et al., 2021).

General Treatment for CA

Currently, exposure-based cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) is considered as an established treatment for childhood multiple apprehensions which requires 6 to 8 sessions to address apprehension like avoidance by exposing them to fear provoking stimuli (James et al., 2020). However, de Jong et al., (2021) found that employing CBT with anxiety management strategies would be just as effective provided that exposure is initialized first. Anxiety management strategies (AMS) include cognitive or relaxation strategies which is suggested to be implemented prior to exposure to change anxious thinking and to calm oneself (de Jong et al., 2021). Thus, one of the consistencies found in the researches (de Jong et al., 2021; McCroskey, 1972) is that exposure to situations that might cause apprehension could be addressed by going through the process of facing CA through experiences or exposure to the situation gradually. In an ESL classroom, it can be inferred from studies (Badrasawi et al., 2020; Long et al., 2019; Zabidin et al., 2021) the communication apprehension can be managed through creating a comfortable environment and training the learners to visualize positively as well as begin by stating the strengths of the learners initially when giving feedback which are self-efficacy teaching techniques to manage CA .Self efficacy(SE) a foundational concept social cognitive theory popularized by Bandura (1997) identified four primary ways to develop SE which are mastrry experience, vicarious experience (social modelling) , social persuasion and psychological responses. Findings by Kadir and Raof (2020) showed lack of self-efficacy (SE) skills contributed to CA.

Communication Apprehension, self-efficacy and affective filter hypothesis

Communication apprehension(CA) and self-efficacy (SE) can be associated inversely to each other as most researches showed that those with stronger sense of SE perform better and have lower apprehension (Jackson, 2002; Lane & Lane, 2001; Pajares & Miller, 1994). Thus, it can be concluded that anxiety or apprehension could be a byproduct of efficacy perceptions (Sardegna et al., 2018). This is in line with Krashen's "affective filter hypothesis"; a theory by Stephen Krashen which states that negative emotions like fear or apprehension are like filters that strains comprehensible language input (Gonzalez, 2020). According to Krashen (2009), the affective variables can be categorised into either one of these labels namely motivation, self-confidence and anxiety.

It is evident that CA can be lowered if SE can be enhanced as mentioned in Hassall et al. (2013) and also suggested future considerations in teaching approaches to develop communication skills that promotes self-efficacy. Suggested techniques like systematic de-sensitization, cognitive restructuring and assertiveness training would be effective nevertheless need trained professionals and not conducive for classroom setting (Hassall et al., 2013). Addressing CA effectively requires a multi-faceted approach that includes enhancing self-efficacy and reducing the affective filter. Engaging in activities and tasks that reduce anxiety, foster a sense of belonging, are suitable for both blended and

face-to-face learning environments. These activities can enhance students' connection with their classmates and teacher.

Methodology

A comparative analysis on the three main theories namely communication apprehension (CA), self-efficacy (SE) and affective filter hypothesis(AFH) was carried out by identifying connections among these theories and suggestions to address CA in the classroom to form the theoretical framework of the study. These are done through literature review by identifying definition and explanation on how they are related to CA based on literature search.

Comparative Analysis and Findings

Table 2.
Relationship among communication apprehension, self-efficacy and affective filter hypothesis in public speaking

Theories	Communication Apprehension	Self-Efficacy	Affective Filter Hypothesis
Definition	CA is a regular experience of fear or anxiety of public speaking which might hinder communicating of message or idea (Asparanita, 2020; McCroskey, 1970). The main types of CA are trait-CA , context-CA and state -CA. State-CA is considered to be temporary fear due to the moment of presentation.	SE is a component from social cognitive theory is perceived as beliefs of one's ability to produce expected levels of performance that can affect the events or even one's life (Bandura, 1997) .	The Affective Filter Hypothesis is a theory underpinned by Stephen Krashen where the concept was originally introduced by Dulay & Burt (1977) explaining on how effective language acquisition occurs when learners are in low-anxiety.
Implementation of strategies to enhance or limit the constructs in the classroom.	Limiting CA is essential for effective learning by creating comfortable learning environment. Fear of negative evaluation and instructors can be reduced through giving positive feedback and putting on a smile before giving feedback (Ahmad et al., 2022).	SE can be enhanced through two main ways. Firstly, in mastery experience, through classroom instructions and feedback through teacher immediacy are suggested (Mehrabian, 1967; Usher & Pajares, 2009). Secondly, verbal persuasion by giving encouragement and praise is suggested (Zalake et al., 2021).	Lowering stress and emotional factors as well as creating positive learning environment (An et al., 2022)

From the onset of the table above can be seen the connections of communication apprehension, self-efficacy and affective filter hypothesis.

Theoretical Framework of the Study

The study's theoretical framework shown in Figure 1 underpin four theories namely self-efficacy (SE), teacher immediacy (TI), communication apprehension (CA) (McCroskey, 1977), affective filter hypothesis (AFH) ((Krashen, 2009b) and SE which proposes the beliefs that one can enable to perform specific tasks by (Bandura,1997) is derived from social cognitive theory forms the foundation in the development of the teaching and learning module known .TI is related to SE as the implementation involves self-efficacy strategies.. TI established by Mehrabian and Ferris involves actions that promote a tight physical and psychological connection between instructors and learners. These behaviours encompass nonverbal signs like gestures and eye contact, as well as verbal behaviours such as employing a conversational tone and giving positive feedback (Mehrabian, 1967; Richmond et al., 1987). On the other hand, CA deals with fear or apprehension when speaking to others which reveals the extent to which it can interfere with SE by increasing affective filter. AFH by Krashen suggests

how anxiety or stress can affect language acquisition. It can be stated that low CA would increase SE in public speaking encouraging language acquisition by reducing the affective filter.

In addition to the above explanation, the connections between these theories can be explored through how they are measured. For CA, one of the common ways to measure is through PRCA-24 (McCroskey et al., 1985), a questionnaire to assess.

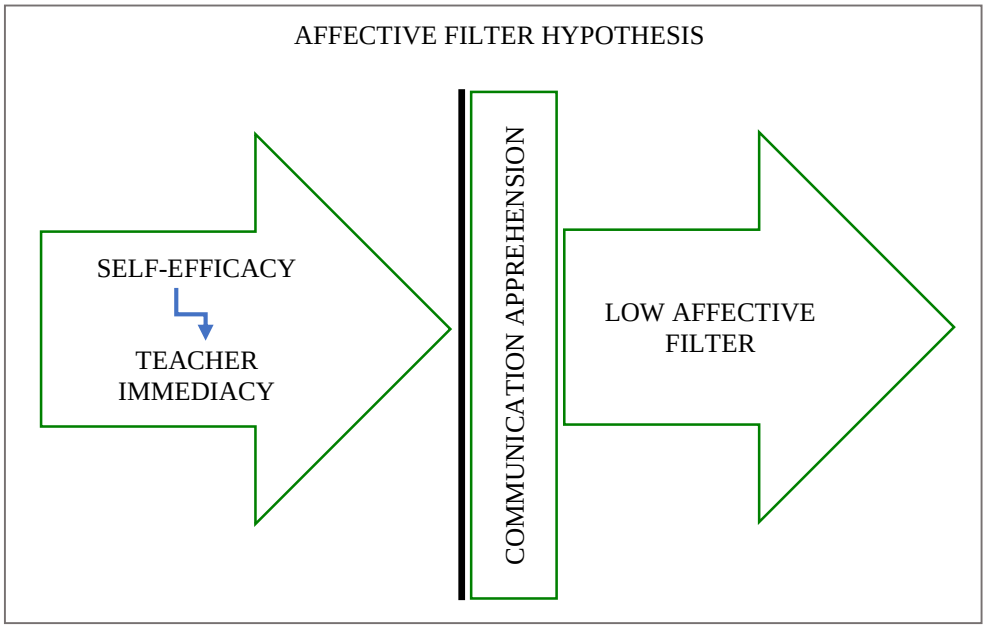


Figure 1. Theoretical framework of the study

Conclusion

This opinion paper gives an insight on how a theoretical framework has been formed based on literature study and understanding the connections amongst theories namely communication apprehension, self-efficacy, affective filter hypothesis and teacher immediacy. The need to come up with an intervention is essential to overcome CA in public speaking. Self-efficacy techniques incorporating teacher immediacy is believed to be the bases for the planned teaching module for public speaking.

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