

## **Public Speaking Skills Needs of English Majors at Universiti Sains Malaysia**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Demands of the academic disciplines as well as the versatility and competitiveness in today's job market have prompted scholars, educators and researchers to emphasise the importance of learners' success in handling oral communication skills, in general, and public speaking skills, in particular (Payne and Carlin 1994; Yamashiro and Johnson, 1997; Lucas, 2007). In line with this necessity, the current investigation draws into the public speaking skills needs of the English majors at Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM). The study aims to identify the forms and skills of public speaking frequently used by the students. It also explores the students' lacks and communication apprehension in public speaking. Thirty-nine second, third and fourth year students majoring in English at the School of Humanities, USM participated in the study. The results indicate that besides the frequent use of a number of preparation and delivery skills by the English majors, certain types of speech, such as small group, informative and persuasive appeared to be among the communicative tasks the students confront in their academic discourse discipline. The findings also reveal that the majority of the respondents are competent enough in performing almost all the public speaking skills, although they do experience moderate level of communication apprehension. Some implications for the learners, lecturers and course developers are stated briefly.

*Keywords:* Public Speaking, Needs Analysis (NA), Communication Apprehension (CA)

### **1.0 INTRODUCTION**

There is a consensus among educators and researchers that excellent public speaking skills are essential requirements for ESL students' academic, personal and professional success (Nicosia, 1997; Morreale *et al.*, 2000; Emanuel, 2005; Sarjit Kaur, 2005; Verderber & Verderber, 2003; Hou, 2008). According to Hou (2008), ESL learners' success in handling public speaking skills will reinvigorate them in learning spoken English, thinking logically and innovatively and improving context awareness and confidence. This in turn will enable learners to perform well in presentation activities, small group discussions, negotiating and answering questions in class, as well as demonstrating ideas

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and commenting on certain topics. Also, it would enhance their employment opportunities and marketability as effective public speakers would be able to handle magnificently their interpersonal communication problems during their occupational life (Murugesan, 2005).

In fact, an effective speaker requires physical coordination, mental concentration, content organisation, skills practice, and a great deal of experience (Ainol Haryati Ibrahim and Zailin Shah Yusoff, 2012). However, Kavaliauskienė (2006) argues that despite the wide-published materials on the issues of making presentations and how to prepare a presentable talk and deliver it, teaching and learning how to make well-organised presentations in front of an audience take a lot of practice. He acknowledges the crucial role of identifying learners' perceptions and attitudes towards speaking in public on different themes and their strengths and weaknesses in using the skills. The importance of analysing learners' needs prior to program implementation has been emphasised by many scholars, researchers, and educators (e.g. Hutchinson & Waters, 1987; Brindley, 1989; West, 1994; Dudley-Evans & St. John, 1998; Hyland, 2006). Conducting needs analysis will help understand the kind of training the learners need and provide them with the most effective learning experience (Kavaliauskienė, 2006; West, 1994).

Although the literature has a plethora of research conducted on analysing ESL learners' communication skills needs (e.g. Ferris, 1998; Ferris & Tagg, 1996; Bolsher & Smalkoski, 2002; Mahmoud, 2005; Ridvi, 2005; Kim, 2006; Al-Tamimi, 2010), a limited number of studies have been carried out in the Malaysian context on learners' communication skills needs. The main focus of those studies was on the workplace communication needs of engineering undergraduates (Lee, 2003; Suzana Rahim, 2005), hotel management and tourism students (Siti Hanim & Ismie Roha, 2005), IT graduates (Sarjit Kaur and Lim Hua, 2006), and industrial design students (Nor Aslah Adzmi, 2007). The results indicated that English speaking skills are the most important type of communication skills that Malaysian ESL learners need to acquire.

However, to the best of the researchers' knowledge, Malaysian English majors' public speaking skills needs have been out of the scope of any needs analysis research. Therefore, the researchers are motivated to carry out the present study. The findings will contribute to fill in the gap in previous research and provide further insights into English majors' public speaking skills needs at a public university in Malaysia.

## **2.0 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

The current study is based on Hutchinson and Waters' (1987) target and learning needs model to help investigate English majors' public speaking target and learning needs. This model is adopted because it offers a useful classification of needs and provides "a more manageable framework for analysing the target situation and also a parallel framework for analysing learning needs" (Mason, 1994:1). This justifies the use of this model as it is a thorough, more manageable, well-known, appropriate and has been recommended by many writers and researchers (e.g., Chin, 2004; Hyland, 2006; Mahmoud, 2005; Munir Shuib, 2005; Sarjit Kaur & Lim Hua, 2006; Suzana Rahim, 2005).

Hutchinson and Waters (1987) distinguish between two types of needs: *target* and *learning needs*. The *target needs* comprise three important distinctions: necessities, lacks and wants. Following the target needs framework, the researchers investigated English majors' necessities by identifying the forms and skills of public speaking that the students have to know in order to function effectively in the target situation. Hutchinson and Waters (1987) point out that once necessities have been identified, learner's lacks (i.e. the gap between target and existing proficiency of the learner) should not be ignored. Therefore, the lacks of the English majors in performing the target public speaking skills are identified.

For the *learning needs*, on the other hand, the researchers concur with Brindley (1989) in that needs analysis means "much more than the definition of target language behaviour: it means trying to identify and take into account a multiplicity of affective and cognitive variables which affect learning" (p. 63). Hence, using Hutchinson and Waters' (1987) learning needs model as a guideline, the researchers investigated the possible impact of an affective factor namely, communication apprehension on English majors' performance in public speaking. This is because current theories and research in language learning suggest that the problem of communication apprehension represents a serious impediment to ESL learners' performance of oral presentations (Ely, 1986; Spolsky, 1989; Payne and Carlin 1994; McCroskey, 2001; Cutrone, 2003; Murugesan, 2005 and Neff; 2007). The issue becomes more complex in Malaysia as far as non-native students of English are concerned. Previous research among Malaysian ESL learners have found that, even at the university level, many students feel apprehensive, awkward, shy, and insecure when asked to speak English in the classroom, let alone in public (Sarjit Kaur, 2005; Noor Hashimah Abdul Aziz, 2007; Devi and Feroz Farah Shahnaz, 2008; Rosnah Mustafa and Siti Norfishah Mohd Zain, 2009; Noor Raha Mohd Radzuan and Sarjit Kaur, 2010; Wan Mustapha *et al.*, 2010). For instance, Noor Hashimah Abdul Aziz (2007) in her qualitative study among English majors at Universiti Utara Malaysia found that the majority of them were very nervous when giving formal oral presentations. Similar findings were reported by Rosnah Mustafa and Siti Norfishah Mohd Zain (2009) in that public speaking caused high apprehension among the majority of the undergraduates who enrolled in the English for Specific Purposes 1(ESP1) course in University Malaysia Sarawak. Hence, the arising concern of Malaysian ESL learners' apprehension in public speaking has prompted the researchers to address this issue among Malaysian English majors at a public university.

### 3.0 METHODOLOGY

The study adopts a quantitative survey design to find out English majors' public speaking skills target and learning needs. A set of questionnaires was developed as the main instrument for data collection. It consists of four sections. The first section gathered information regarding the respondents' background. The second and third sections were developed to identify the students' perceptions regarding their frequent use of 20 English public speaking skills and their ability in performing the skills. The skills are related to the varieties of public speaking (items 1 to 4), preparation skills (items 5 to 11) and delivery skills (items 12 to 20). The categorisation of the skills is

based on Lucas' (2007) work "*the Art of Public Speaking*", which is considered the leading and most reliable text used by many researchers in the field of public speaking.

The last section was used to elicit information regarding the students' communication apprehension in public speaking. Six related items were adopted from McCroskey's (1982) Personal Report of Communication Apprehension (PRCA) instrument. The PRCA is considered to be the most preferable, valid and commonly employed measure of ESL learners' communication apprehension in public speaking (Rayan & Shetty, 2008; Akram, 2009). This instrument required the subjects to rank their agreement of six statements, regarding their feelings when presenting a speech, on a five-point Likert scale (5 being *strongly agree*)

#### 4.0 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 1 describes the demographic profile of the respondents. They were 39 second, third and final year English majors at the School of Humanities, USM. The majority were female (94.8%), with a Malay ethnic background (61.5%) and in the 19-25 age group (92.3%).

**Table 1** The demographic background of the students

Demographic Factors		Total (n=39)	
Age	19-25	36	92.3
	26-30	2	5.1
	31-35	1	2.6
Gender	Male	2	5.1
	Female	37	94.8
Race	Malay	24	61.5
	Chinese	10	25.6
	Indian	5	12.8
Level	Second year	7	17.9
	Third year	17	43.5
	Fourth year	15	38.4

In the survey, the subjects were asked to rank the frequency of using 20 public speaking skills on a scale of 1-4, with 4 being most frequently used. The skills were related to the varieties of public speaking and speech preparation and delivery.

Regarding the varieties of public speaking, the results as displayed in Table 2 show that *small group speech* received the highest mean score (M= 2.9744) as the most frequent type of speech used by the subjects. *Informative* and *persuasive speeches* comes next with mean scores (M= 2.8205) and (M= 2.6410) respectively, indicating that they are *sometimes* being used. These varieties of public speaking appeared to be among the communicative tasks the students confront in their academic discourse discipline. Therefore, they were most crucial for the students' academic success.

However, *special occasions speech* received the lowest mean score (M= 2.2821), indicating that it was *rarely* being used. This might not be surprising, as in the Malaysian culture they do not have

that many special occasion speeches such as weddings, funerals, eulogy or toast. They only have normal speeches like welcoming, entertaining people or acceptance speeches.

**Table 2** The frequency of using public speaking skills

	Public speaking skills	Mean
<b>Varieties of public speaking</b>	Giving speech in small groups	2.9744
	Giving speech to inform people	2.8205
	Giving speech to persuade people	2.6410
	Giving speech in special occasions.	2.2821
<b>Preparation skills</b>	Searching the internet to collect supporting materials for your topic.	3.5385
	Adjusting what you will say to make it as clear, appropriate and convincing as possible.	3.4872
	Organizing the body of the speech appropriately and effectively.	3.4615
	Using visual aids suitable for your topic of presentation.	3.2564
	Assessing how your audience is likely to respond to what you will say in your speech.	3.1282
	Doing library research to collect supporting materials for your topic	3.0256
<b>Delivery skills</b>	Anticipating questions and preparing answers to them.	2.9487
	Pronouncing words clearly.	3.4359
	Using appropriate body language such as gestures, movement, posture and stance.	3.3846
	Using the language accurately, clearly and appropriately when presenting your topic.	3.3333
	Maintaining good eye contact with the audience.	3.3077
	Reinforcing the audience's understanding of the central idea when ending the speech.	3.2308
	Displaying the visual aids properly, discussing them clearly and integrating them effectively with the rest of your presentation.	3.2308
	Responding to the audience's questions briefly and straightforwardly.	3.2051
Responding to the audience's questions graciously.	3.0769	
Getting through the stages of your speech confidently and without blundering.	2.9487	

For the preparation and delivery skills, the data reveal that the majority of these English language majors spent most of the time preparing for their presentation. This is evident as the following preparation skills were reported to be most frequently used: “*searching the internet to collect supporting materials for their topic*” (M= 3.5385), “*adjusting what they will say to make it as clear, appropriate and convincing as possible*” (M= 3.4872), and “*organizing the body of the speech effectively*” (M= 3.4615). When delivering their speech, the subjects state that they frequently “*pronounce words clearly*” (M= 3.4359), “*use appropriate body language*” (M= 3.3846), “*use the language accurately and clearly*” (M= 3.3333) and “*maintain good eye contact with the audience*” (M= 3.3077). It seems that they were more concerned with their good pronunciation and accurate use of verbal and non-verbal language skills when presenting their speech. On the other hand, the least frequent skills reported by the subjects were “*getting through the presentation stages confidently*” and “*anticipating questions and preparing answers to them*” with the same mean value (i.e. M=2.9487).

### Students' Ability in Public Speaking

Table 3 below depicts the students' self-assessment of their ability in performing the English public speaking skills on a scale of 1-4, with 4 being very efficient. Generally, the findings demonstrate that the students had no problems in almost all the skills.

Table 3 Students' Self-ratings of their ability in public speaking skills

	Public Speaking Skills	Mean
Varieties of public speaking	Giving speech in small groups.	3.1795
	Giving speech to inform people.	2.9487
	Giving speech to persuade people.	2.7179
	Giving speech in special occasions.	2.5897
Preparation skills	Organizing the body of the speech appropriately and effectively.	3.1538
	Adjusting what you will say to make it as clear, appropriate and convincing as possible.	3.1282
	Using visual aids suitable for your topic of presentation.	3.1026
	Searching the internet to collect supporting materials for your topic.	3.1026
	Doing library research to collect supporting materials for your topic	2.9487
	Anticipating questions and preparing answers to them.	2.9231
	Assessing how your audience is likely to respond to what you will say in your speech.	2.8462
Delivery skills	Using the language accurately, clearly and appropriately when presenting your topic.	3.3590
	Displaying the visual aids properly, discussing them clearly and integrating them effectively with the rest of your presentation.	3.3333
	Pronouncing words clearly.	3.2308
	Using appropriate body language such as gestures, movement, posture and stance	3.1538
	Maintaining good eye contact with the audience.	3.1538
	Reinforcing the audience's understanding of the central idea when ending the speech.	3.1026
	Responding to the audience's questions graciously.	3.0513
	Responding to the audience's questions briefly and straightforwardly.	2.9487
	Getting through the opening stages of your speech confidently and without blundering.	2.9231

The findings show that the students estimated their ability in presenting in *small group* ( $M=3.1795$ ) and *informative speeches* ( $M= 2.9487$ ) higher than *persuasive* ( $M=2.7179$ ) and *special occasions speeches* ( $M= 2.5897$ ). The students' difficulties in *persuasive* speech could be justified as this type of speech involves using language and choosing the right words to express the content and convince people by presenting convincing arguments, supported by concrete details and examples. Difficulties for *special occasion* speech might arise from the students' low experience, as it was reported to be rarely used, and the nature of the speech, as it differs from the other speeches in that it may aim not just to *inform* or *persuade* people but rather to fit the special needs of a special occasion (Lucas, 2007).

For the preparation and delivery skills, the data reveal that the subjects rated their performance highly in the following skills: "*using the language accurately, clearly and appropriately*" and "*displaying the visual aids properly*", "*discussing them clearly*" and "*integrating them effectively with the rest of their presentation*", "*organising the body of the speech appropriately and effectively*". However, the data show that the following skills were rated the lowest: "*getting through the presentation stages confidently*" ( $M= 2.9231$ ), "*anticipating questions and preparing answers to them*" ( $M= 2.9231$ ) and "*assessing how your audience is likely to respond to what you will say in your speech*" ( $M= 2.8462$ ). Similar to the results presented in the previous section, the participants seemed to have some difficulties in performing the same skills which they *rarely* used. Needless to say that these skills are of paramount importance as far as presenting a topic in front of others is concerned. Ability to present and understand how to analyse and respond appropriately to audiences' questions are considered to be key elements in public speaking. This finding seems to concur with former research among ESL

learners in the Asian countries (e.g. Cheng *et al.*, 1999; Na, 2007; Batiha *et. al.*, 2014) and in the Malaysian context (e.g. Cheng *et al.*, 2013; Rafek *et al.*, 2014; Rafek *et al.*, 2015) which reported that EFL students lacked confidence and experienced problems in audiences' analysis as they usually got scared of negative evaluation by both teachers and peers. Hence, the students might need some training to improve their performance in these important skills.

### Communication Apprehension in Public Speaking

To identify the students' communication apprehension in public speaking, they were given six statements concerning their feelings about communicating with other people. The statements were adopted from McCroskey's (1982) PRCA. In analysing the subjects' results, the researchers firstly calculated the total score of each subject. Numbers were used to label each case of the data. Following McCroskey's (1982) formula, communication apprehension in public speaking is calculated by adding items 1, 3, and 5, minus items 2, 4, and 6, and subtracting that score from 18. An individual with a score less than 12.5 would indicate a low level of communication apprehension and a high level would be with a score above above 17.5.

Table 3 below exhibits the number and percentage of subjects who were classified as demonstrating high, moderate and low communication apprehension in public speaking.

**Table 4** Number and percentage of respondents who are classified as high, moderate or low on PRCA total scores

PRCA Scales	Number	Percentage
High communication apprehension	10	25.6%
Moderate communication apprehension	21	53.9%
Low communication apprehension	8	20.5%

The findings suggest that more than half of the subjects (53.9%) were classified as demonstrating moderate communication apprehension in public speaking. The data also indicate that 20.5% of the subjects felt they had low apprehension. Only 25.6% of the students, however, perceived themselves as having high apprehension in public speaking. Clearly, although not the majority, the number of respondents who have high communication apprehension is quite considerable.

It is interesting to note that the current study supported some past findings. Researchers such as Vest *et al.* (1996) and Noor Raha Mohd Radzuan and Sarjit Kaur (2010), have found that Malaysian ESL learners who had high levels of communication apprehension did have "poor" level in preparation skills. This might be consistent with the findings in the present study. In other words, the current English majors at USM reported that they devoted significant time to prepare for their speech prior to delivering it which might have a positive impact on raising their confidence level and decreasing their anxiety. This view is also supported by Lucas (2007) who asserts that public speaking requires more detailed preparation because if speakers do not prepare in advance their content, they will be in trouble.

Nevertheless, unlike this research, Noor Hashimah Abdul Aziz (2007) in her study on language anxiety among English majors at tertiary education reported that the majority of learners were very nervous when speaking in English and that they face great difficulty to express themselves in English. The present study, however, found many of the respondents scored what may be termed as “average” level of communication apprehension. In fact, a number of factors could contribute in elevating learners’ communication apprehension, such as, the lack of training that learners might receive. This view is consistent with the findings of previous research among Malaysian ESL learners (Vest *et al.*’s, 1996; Noor Raha Mohd Radzuan and Sarjit Kaur, 2010) which found that communication apprehension in public speaking was experienced by only those who had not taken public speaking courses during their university years. In this regard, Allen *et al.* (1989) averred that skills training programs are seen as one means of alleviating communication apprehension and its attendant behavioral manifestations.

To recapitulate, the findings presented earlier reveal the urgent need for English majors at USM to develop specific public speaking skills. This is in line with the views of many researchers and writers who highlight the importance of equipping the students with effective public speaking skills (Murugesan, 2005; Sarjit Kaur, 2005; Kavaliauskienė, 2006; Lucas, 2007).

## 5.0 IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSION

This study was sought to explore the public speaking skills needs of English majors at USM. The investigation points out to three general findings. Firstly; the study shows that *small group speech* is the most frequent type of speech used by the students, followed by *informative and persuasive speeches*, respectively. Although *informative* and *persuasive speeches* were considered to be *sometimes* used, they may still be considered important. This finding might reflect the demands of the target learning context and importance of these varieties of public speaking to these learners. Most of the preparation and delivery skills were reported to be frequently used by the students and much more emphasis was put on skills related to speech preparation compared to delivery. The findings might demonstrate the students’ understanding of the importance of public speaking skills, in general, and of the processes of preparing and organising their speech, in particular.

The second finding shows that students' self-assessment of their ability in public speaking skills categorises them generally as efficient in performing almost all the skills. The data also reveal that they might find some difficulties in “giving a *speech to persuade people*”, “*getting through the presentation stages confidently*”, “*anticipating questions*” and “*assessing and analysing their audiences*”. Therefore, if ample practice is given, it would help the students improve their level in these skills and hence become efficient speakers.

Finally, the results indicate that the majority of the undergraduates do have communication apprehension in public speaking but it is only at a moderate level. However, some students appeared to have high communication apprehension. It is recommended that these students take the public speaking course offered by USM. In addition English majors’ needs, as identified by this study, should be taken into consideration by language instructors who intend to teach the public speaking course.



To sum up, the data analysis and discussion offered areas which helped to identify “the gap between what is and what should be” (Brindley, 1989, p. 65) with regard to the students’ needs. The study showed that the students faced some difficulties in using the required public speaking skills. It also confirmed the seriousness of the need for English majors in a non-native English-speaking context to develop specific preparation and delivery skills that would help them to present their speech effectively in their target domains. It is hoped that the results could contribute to raise USM English majors’ awareness and knowledge about their public speaking skills needs. Knowing their strengths and weaknesses in public speaking would be beneficial so that future learning may be enriched if learners maintain their strengths and try to improve their weaknesses. The results might also raise the awareness of language instructors at USM regarding their students’ needs. This would enable these instructors to cater for their learners’ specific needs and help them to circumvent any activities that might hinder their students’ performance in public speaking.

There are, of course, limitations and weaknesses in the present study which should be highlighted so as to avoid any overgeneralisations and misinterpretations of the results. Of particular note are the small sample size of the students ( $n = 39$ ). However, the students’ results could be valid and reliable as the minimum sample size recommended by many researchers (Cohen *et al.* 2006) is thirty subjects. Yet, it would be optimal to increase the sample size and also include the views and input from various relevant parties and sources as a way to gauge aspects that need to be emphasised to fully understand the target and learning needs of Malaysian English majors in public speaking. Further, this study overlooked the possible effects of the students’ background factors such as age, gender, ethnicity and proficiency levels, particularly, on their communication apprehension. Therefore, the generalisation from the findings should be made with caution.

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