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Is Average Worrying? A Mixed Method Study of Malaysian Public University Administrative Staff's Workplace Communication Apprehension

Mohd Zulfadli Mat Husin*
Deputy Vice Chancellor (Academic and International), Universiti Malaysia Kelantan,
16300 Bachok, Kelantan, Malaysia

Nor Yazi Khamis
Centre for Modern Languages, Universiti Malaysia Pahang, 26600 Pekan, Pahang, Malaysia

ABSTRACT

Even when employed, English oral communication skills proficiency continues to be an asset; mastering the skill is advantageous. The notion has driven comprehensive studies on communication, including apprehension, yet the focus on workplace contexts remains minimal. Therefore, this investigation aims to discern communication apprehension's effect on staff's communication skills, their administrative tasks, and the institution, to support the skill enhancement. Utilizing the Personal Report of Communication Apprehension instrument and a purposive sampling, the study's explanatory sequential mixed method design sampled institution's one hundred fifteen administrative staff. The staff communication apprehension levels were recorded as moderate, with the highest in delivering public speeches. Nevertheless, interview results proved differently to extend worrying trends among staff. The trend could jeopardize staff's personality and productivity in the long run. The mediocre level also hinted at skill's stagnant inclination or deterioration if it is not consistently used in conducting workplace tasks or events. The need for an impactful lifelong learning professional development plan to improve staff English oral communication skills is apparent by the University. The university's plan also need to include supporting sustained, inclusive, and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment, and decent work for their employees.

Keywords: ESP, Language Apprehension, Workplace Language, PRCA, Higher Learning

1.0 INTRODUCTION

English oral communication continues to be one of the most valued skills even after being employed. The skill is a sought-after competency for employability (Chen, 2021; Kamil & Muhammad, 2021), and mastering it will mutually benefit employers and employees (Brink & Costigan, 2015; Moslehifar & Ibrahim, 2012). Employers highlight oral communication as the most vital skill because it cultivates competitive workplace competence (Karachedee, 2017; Kassim & Ali, 2010; Rimkeeratikul, 2018). Employees are expected to maximize the skills when engaging in various teamwork collaborations with other English-speaking clients or stakeholders (Hussin & Makmur, 2021). The gravity of the skill is known for most Malaysian job seekers and promotions in most servicing sectors.

However, English oral communication is the most daunting skill to acquire for many English as Second Language (ESL) learners (Jusoh *et al*., 2018). One possible reason is the lack of proficiency in speaking

Correspondence to: Mohd Zulfadli Mat Husin (email: zulfadli.mh@umk.edu.my)

skills, leading to low confidence. The deficiency is linked to internal mechanisms, such as learning behaviour, motivation, and personality types, and external factors, such as socio-economic and sociocultural backgrounds and exposure to the language (Cong & Li, 2022). ESL speakers who do not have the confidence to communicate fear their image might be tarnished in front of other individuals, consequently, their language self-worth (Brown, 2001). This situation can lead to fear in communicating or anxiety about speaking in specific contexts, known as Communication Apprehension (CA).

Consequently, the expectation leads to anxiety. Anxiety is one of the challenges that most non-native or Second Language (L2) speakers experience dealing with oral communication. Since the 1970s, many studies on L2 speakers have explored anxiety's effect (Zulkifli, 2007). McCroskey (1977) introduces the concept of Communication Apprehension (CA) as "an individual level of fear or anxiety associated with either real or imagined communication with another person or persons" (p.78). It can cause fear of speaking in front of other people or anxiety about using the language. Lucas (2012) explains that CA is a problem related to psychological elements commonly found in all human beings. Also, studies involving CA and related constructs, such as willingness to communicate (WTC), have been conducted in various cultures. In general, relationships among these variables are somewhat similar across cultures, even when observed substantial mean differences.

Nevertheless, in a more recent study to address the gap between ICT influences, learning orientations, culture, and willingness to communicate (WTC), Waluyo (2020) disclosed that most Thai learners believe their cultures are not attributed to their shyness to speak in English. Thai culture does not impede them from speaking English; it does not influence their decisions in asking questions, makes them feel uncomfortable or bored, and makes them perceive English as a strange language. These are renewed findings from the typical previous results like worries about making mistakes, the belief that teachers are always right, and expecting teachers to teach everything (Shao & Gao, 2016). Thai culture's social interaction norms establish a network of relationships and maintain the hierarchical social system, influencing an individual's decisions to interact or endure silence (Waluyo, 2020). Arguably, English as Foreign Language (EFL) learners are not culturally conditioned to be silent and passive. In other words, there are more than just cultural influences; the importance is on interactions and contextual factors like the workplace, which can address communication anxiety.

At home, public universities in Malaysia are becoming the hub of tertiary education for ASEAN students and are more global than before. The National Higher Education Strategic Plan 2007-2020 (NHESP) is systematized to transform the country HE by bolstering competition and enhancing national productivity and innovation. Malaysian HE internationalization is one of the strategic thrusts of the plan (Wan & Sirat, 2017). Moreover, the subsequent Malaysia Education Blueprint (Higher Education) 2015-2025 identifies global prominence through internationalization as one of the ten shifts to enhance the Malaysian HE system (MOE, 2015). As globalization continues, university associates that comprise academic and non-academic (administrative) staff firmly need to be effective with their English oral communication.

Administrative staff, including officers and support groups responsible for managing the institutions and related affairs, must possess linguistic ability in the language(Jusoh *et al.*, 2018). Cameron (2002) asserts that "communication becomes not just something workers are required to do, but something they are expected to be, or become, good at" (p. 73). The ability is needed to ensure smooth interactions and transactions when dealing with university stakeholders, including international liaisons and students, on non-academic matters. The university administrative staff are expected to deliver and portray the institution's best possible service and image especially dealing with internation students and staff (Huwari & Aziz, 2010; Jusoh *et al.*, 2018).

Hence, considering the increased frequency of language use at local tertiary educational institutions, the need for proficient oral communication skills has indirectly become a highly sought-after criterion for administrative staff. The staff may eventually experience a variety of behaviours before, during, or after verbally using the language in certain communicative events at the workplace. Those certain behaviours related to CA can cause a rise in body temperature, trembling hands, fingers or legs, palms becoming sweaty, a blurry mind, and shortness of breath (Coopman & Lull, 2011). As a result of these behaviours, the staff would avoid or be reluctant to participate in any events or use the language at all, which could subsequently jeopardize the individual's job performance or reputation.

Notably, the English language in Malaysian tertiary education sectors is not solely required for pedagogical and research purposes. The ability is also indispensable to administrative staff in the institutions to administer and spearhead the country's education sector towards achieving world-class recognition. The demand makes English oral communication among essential skills to master for the workplace (Ahmed & Adam, 2018; Al-Mahrooqi & Denman, 2016; Al-tahtamoni, 2019; Fareen, 2017). Consequently, the inability is expected to cause CA among employers because "context can set expectations for what communication orientations and skills are valued" (Yook, 2015, p.2).

Moreover, it is understood that Oral Communication Apprehension (OCA) is the predisposition to avoid communication or experience anxiety when forced to communicate (Kim, 2015). Lack of proficiency in the target language, lack of practice, and even insecurity are the identified causes of fear or anxiety (Husin & Makmur, 2021). Such anxiety is a complex, multidimensional phenomenon referring to "the feeling of tension and apprehension specifically associated with second language [L2] contexts" (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1994, p. 2). It is also "a type of shyness characterized by fear or anxiety about communicating with people" (Horwitz et al. (1986, p. 127). People who typically have trouble speaking in groups are likely to have little control over the communicative situation (Husin & Makmur, 2021). Therefore, the study intends to determine the administrative staff CA levels during the four communicative events and how the level differs from their workplace variables.

CA studies on professionals, especially civil servants at public HEIs, are scarce and unexplored, deeming oral communication skills insignificant or merely as 'good to have.' It begs the question of the keen necessity of the skills integrated into the curriculum and highlighted in CVs for employability in the sector. The HE internationalisations "branch out strategies from the traditional role to global engagement where Malaysia can use her experience to facilitate sustainable and transformative development of the higher education sector" (MOHE, 2011, p. 3), has reinvigorated the need for the skills. More importantly, Malaysian universities were mandated to collaborate with universities in the ASEAN region to promote an ASEAN collaborative and cooperative spirit (Wan & Sirat, 2017).

Furthermore, contrary to the investigation of language learners' CA or anxiety, numerous studies expand from SLA at secondary (Bastida Jr. & Yapo, 2019; Jones & Procopio, 2017; Mak & White, 1997) to tertiary levels (Ghazali et al., 2020; Kimberley et al., 2020; Razawi et al., 2015; Vicky et al., 2016; Zulkifli, 2007). Hence, much literature is needed to find evidence of CA among professionals, i.e., the administrative staff working at tertiary institutions. The investigation must be systematically carried out during actual events, namely daily conversation, group discussion, meetings, and public speaking at the workplace. The research questions for the study are:

1. What are the administrative staff's overall CA levels in using the English language at the workplace?
2. What are the administrative staff CA levels in the four workplace communicative events, namely conversation, group discussion, meeting, and public speaking?

3. Do the administrative staff CA levels differ in workplace variables, i.e., gender, education level, year of service, job grade, and Malaysian University English Test (MUET) band?
4. Is there a correlation between CA level and workplace variables?

In addition, six null hypotheses are formulated for each workplace variable based on the fourth research question.

1. H_0: There is no statistically significant relationship between gender and CA levels
2. H_0: There is no statistically significant relationship between respondents' education level and CA levels.
3. H_0: There is no statistically significant relationship between respondents' years of service and CA levels
4. H_0: There is no statistically significant relationship between respondents' job grades and CA levels
5. H_0: There is no statistically significant relationship between respondents' MUET results and CA levels.
6. H_0: There is no statistically significant relationship between respondents' age and CA levels.

2.0   LITERATURE REVIEW

This study on CA in using English at the workplace is underlined by a concept known as English for Specific Purposes (ESP) and, more specifically, English for Occupational Purposes (EOP). ESP is a method that focuses on developing the materials and instructions based on the learners' aim toward learning that language (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987). ESP can be defined according to its characteristics. It features "to meet specific needs of the learners, makes use of underlying methodology and activities of the discipline it serves, and ESP is centred on the language appropriate to these activities in terms of grammar, lexis, register, study skills, discourse and genre" (Dudley-Evans & Maggie-Jo, 1998, p.19). With this definition, this study concentrates on how administrative staff must use English in communication at the workplace, termed EOP.

English for Occupational Purposes (EOP) is part of the ESP branch. EOP is about the English language used by professionals and non-professionals (Carkin 2005); hence, it is designed for adult learners to cater to their workplace needs (Sudipa *et al*., 2020). As part of the crucial elements in EOP or ESP, needs analysis is often used to find ways to enhance workplace language competency (Jalal, 2016; Singh & Harun, 2020). Three elements should be considered in defining the term needs: necessities, lack, and wants (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987). Berwick (1989) further described needs as "the gap between the current situation and the anticipated future state" (p. 52). There are studies on university-industry mismatch or gap (Abdullah, 2013; Hanapi & Nordin, 2014; Kenayathulla *et al*., 2019) to match the needs of the industry and EOP courses offered at universities to fit the needs.

Within the scope of this study, needs are referred to as the gap between administrative staff's current English competency level and the top management of public universities or employers' expectations. Necessities can be described as what administrative staff need to know to communicate better in English, and lack is defined by their English proficiency within workplace communicative events. In addition, administrative staff's learning needs can be described as their actions related to improving and enhancing

English communication skills at the workplace, specifically in four communicative events (meetings, group discussions, conversation, and public speaking).

Situated Learning Method in Community of Practice

A workplace can form a community that consists of constantly engaging in joint pursuit of enterprises (practices), interacting, and tuning their relationship with each other and the world. In other words, the community learn with each other by joining in everyday activities and mutual engagement in these activities (Wenger 1998). The practice is defined in three dimensions:

1. It is a joint enterprise as understood and continually renegotiated by its members.
2. It is a mutual engagement that binds members together into a social entity.
3. It produces a shared repertoire of communal resources (routines, sensibilities, artefacts, vocabulary, styles, etc.) that members have developed over time (Wenger, 1999: 73-84)

Hence, rather than looking at learning as acquiring certain forms of knowledge, the notion asks about the kinds of social engagements that provide the proper context for learning (Mercieca, 2017). In a community of practice, learning involves participation that is not simply in events of engagement in certain activities or with specific people; it is a "more encompassing process of being active participants in the practices of social communities and constructing identities in relation to these communities" (Wenger 1999: 4). A person's intentions to learn are formed through becoming a full participant in a sociocultural practice, including knowledgeable learning skills (Lave & Wenger, 1991).

Jean Lave's and Etienne Wenger's concept of situatedness involves people participating in the world and generating meaning. The method is about identity, with learning to speak, act and improvise in ways that make sense in the community. It highlights a way of thinking that could accrue benefits to the organization and how value did not necessarily lie primarily with the individual members of a community of practice. Also, communities of practice affect performance because it has the potential to overcome the inherent problems of a slow-moving traditional hierarchy in a fast-moving virtual economy, handle unstructured problems and share knowledge outside of the conventional workplace boundaries. These outcomes could increase the value of individual members of a community through enriched learning and higher motivation to apply what they learn (Mercieca, 2017). It leads to behavioural change that results in knowledge sharing to positively influence business performance which could thus enhance organization and profitability (Lesser & Storck, 2001).

Situated learning has the potential to generate the discussed outcome. This method is based on the belief that effective learning occurs when learners are placed in similar settings and share similar cultural backgrounds (Brown *et al*., 1989). Additionally, Lave and Wenger (1991) define this method as a community of practice, which they describe as a group of individuals working together or having a common interest. In this study, the method underlies workplace participants' need to learn with people in the same community to enhance their oral communication to work together effectively. However, given the nature of university administrative staff, the limited English oral communication courses and the scarce opportunities to practice the skill constitute a notable research gap for this study to adopt this method.

Oral Communication Apprehension

The general term related to anxiety among second language learners or speakers is communication apprehension (CA) (Du, 2009). McCroskey (1984) defined CA as "an individual's level of fear or anxiety associated with either real or anticipated communication" (p.13). Lucas (2012) further defined CA as a common psychological-related experience in humans. CA is also considered a natural phenomenon in which individuals experience discomfort when they try to communicate or interact with other people (Byron, 2005). More importantly, CA is a learned trait; in other words, no individual is born to be apprehensive (Pitt *et al.*, 2000). Individuals develop fear or anxiety in communication in their first or second language over time. This fear or anxiety is commonly associated with an unpleasant communication experience in a specific situation or with a particular person. Eventually, apprehensive individuals avoid contact and distance themselves from the fear of anxiety.

McCroskey and Beatty (1986) underlined four types of CA based on sources. The four are trait-like, context-based, audience-based, and situational. Trait-like CA is referred to as a type of CA that is a "relatively enduring, personality-type orientation towards a given mode of communication across a wide variety of contexts" (McCroskey & Beatty, 1986, p.281). This type is also associated with the "personality of an individual, and its variables hardly change over time" (Rasakumaran & Indra Devi, 2017, p.22). Individuals' personality seldom changes over the period if they do not receive any treatment or intervention; thus, their level of CA will stay the same. McCroskey (1997) asserted that different measurement tools used to examine anxiety levels based on the type of CA produced similar scores even without any treatment.

Context-based CA, also known as 'generalized-context CA', was defined by McCroskey (1997) as "an enduring personality type focusing on communication in a specific context" (p.86). This type of CA comprises people who might have a high level of CA in a classroom setting but shows a low level of CA outside the classroom when they communicate with different or the same peers. Similar to the trait-like type, Byron (2005) claimed that individuals with a high level of context-based CA "will remain unchanged over the period if no treatments are administered" (p.4). McCroskey (1997) defined audience-based CA as "a relatively enduring orientation towards communication with a given person or group of people" (p.86). This type of CA is not related to personality but is associated with the specific situation individuals experience and requires communication. When speaking in a large group, an individual may show a high CA level but present a low CA with familiar peers or close family.

The last type of CA is situational CA which was defined by McCroskey (1997) as "a transitory orientation towards communication with a given person or group of people" (p.87). This type of CA differs from 'Audience' and 'Context' because it only happens once "in a combination of people available and situations that arise" (Rasakumaran & Indra Devi, 2017, p.22). Individuals may show a high level of CA when they need to communicate with a particular supervisor during the performance-based assessment. This type of CA is similar to context-based and audience-based and is not grounded on any individual's personality and thus can change over time (Rasakumaran & Indra Devi, 2017).

The current study examines context-based OCA in which the scores of staff towards different communicative events in the workplace. The specificity of oral communication situations is studied in group discussions, interpersonal conversations, meetings, and public speaking. This type of OCA differs from the three because the apprehensive feeling varies, with some people might feeling uneasy in all four contexts mentioned earlier (Hussin & Makmur, 2021). Some people show a higher level of CA in one context (like public speaking or group discussion) but experience a lower level of CA in another context (such as conversation or meeting) (Russ, 2013). Apart from comparing the apprehension levels associated with the

four communicative events of late, researchers are also interested in reasons that can predict the levels (Kho & Ting, 2021).

Communication Apprehension at Workplace

Communicating effectively to get any job done is critical for employees and employers. Some jobs require employees to communicate more frequently based on their positions, pay grades or other factors. In Malaysian contexts, generally, all employees must be able to communicate in Malay, the official and national language, and English to their respective stakeholders. The necessity means OCA can have an impact on workplace communicative events. The extent of OCA impacts is conducted by several workplace variables, namely gender, job scheme grade, years of service, and language proficiency.

Gender is one of the most common variables associated with CA. Inconsistent and mixed findings are identified from the studies examining the relationship between gender and apprehension (Jusoh *et al*., 2018). Krohne *et al*. (2001) found that female respondents were more conscious of their language attitude and were motivated to use the English language in conversation. Still, male respondents showed more avoidance behaviour in terms of anxiety. Yet, as highlighted by Rafek *et al*. (2014), Rosenfeld and Berko (1990), "gender is not significant in communication anxiety" (p.92) which denotes CA's minimal connection with gender (McCroskey, 1984).

This study offered views on the relationship between CA level and gender in a workplace setting. Based on the findings from several studies on different contexts towards gender roles in CA (Abdullah, 2014; Khan *et al*., 2009; Kimberley *et al*., 2020; Rasakumaran & Indra Devi, 2017), a common trend was found in which females tend to show a higher level of CA compare to male. However, most studies did not test an extensive enough number of respondents to generalize this assumption. Notably, although we can link the significance of gender in CA, other essential factors need to be considered, such as upbringing, educational background differences, cultural differences, and context setting (Loureiro *et al*., 2020). This study would provide insight into the human resource development module or training focusing on specific gender to reduce CA.

Several experts found an exciting relationship between CA and variables in a workplace context. Winiecki and Ayres (1999) claimed that the CA level plays a significant role in the individual choice of occupation. In other words, people who experience a high level of CA tend to choose jobs that require less communication with other people. In addition, Winiecki and Ayres (1999) revealed that individuals with a high level of CA did not score well in the job interview, and this suggested that those with a high level of CA "were less likely to be offered a new position than those with a low level of CA" (p.436).

Likewise, concerning years of service and its relationship with CA, Winiecki and Ayres (1999) reported that individuals with a high level of apprehension tend to become problematic in terms of teamwork. Eventually, they quit that organization. Additionally, individuals with high CA levels were perceived to be less productive than others, less likely to hold higher positions, and scored low levels of job satisfaction. Their superior or supervisor tended to have lower expectations (Winiecki & Ayres, 1999). In addition, Russ (2013) identified trait-like CA as a determinant in the actual decision-making practice. Employees with lower CA are more inclined to involve others in decision-making processes than their colleagues with higher CA, who are less likely to include others when making decisions. The CA and workplace variables investigation can check CA effects on years of service. It is to find out whether one can sustain in an organization or has to develop coping strategies to adapt to certain situations and involve others in making decisions or prefer one person's show.

In terms of language proficiency, OCA significantly correlates with language learners' linguistic background and proficiency levels (Molnar and Crnjak, 2018; Botes *et al.,* 2020). Mahdi (2015) identified a significant relationship between EFL learners' CA and communicative competence. Learners' anxiety is regarded as a barrier to interaction and language learning. Hence, training which helps learners to have chances to communicate through the target language is recommendable. Spetz (2018) in Cong and Li (2022), who investigated Swedish foreign language learner CA, discovered that beginner learner has a higher CA level than intermediate. The foreign language CA is caused by numerous factors like inadequate activities in the language learning contexts, lack of input, overly first language interference, and linguistic, emotional, and sociocultural issues (Shan *et al*., 2020). The emphasis on communication comprehension can help lower CA levels (Hasni *et al*., 2019). In this study, the staff's Malaysian University English Test (MUET) band identifies the differences between OCA levels and the staff's language proficiency.

The Gaps in Communication Apprehension Studies

Many studies have been done in academic contexts to examine OCA. Most studies on CA in Malaysia and other countries prefer tertiary students as the population sample. These studies produced different results. Most studies reported that tertiary students experienced a moderate level of CA in English (Aeni *et al.*, 2017; Charlesworth, 2006; Ireland, 2020; Miskam & Saidalvi, 2018; Rasakumaran & Indra Devi, 2017). Moreover, concerning gender and CA level, most studies reported that females were more apprehensive than males (Faridizad & Simin, 2015; Khan *et al*., 2009; Kimberley *et al.*, 2020; Loureiro *et al*., 2020; Rasakumaran & Indra Devi, 2017; Vicky *et al.,* 2016; Zulkifli, 2007). Nevertheless, Borzi and Mills (2001) reported that male respondents were more apprehensive. Pragash *et al.* (2020) concluded no significant difference between gender and CA among 450 Malaysian undergraduates who responded from several public universities.

As most CA-related research is conducted in classroom contexts among secondary and tertiary students, there was a scarcity of research exploring CA in the workplace, especially in the government sector. Two studies (Abdullah, 2014; Jusoh *et al*., 2018) have investigated CA levels among Malaysian public university administrative staff. A survey by Abdullah (2014) focussed on non-academic staff in a Malaysian public university. The study, which used the Personal Report of Communication Apprehension (PRCA-24) as the research instrument, reported that most respondents showed average levels of CA.

Similarly, Jusoh *et al.* (2018) also employed PRCA-24 to examine categories of OCA among administrative officers and differences between the level of CA, gender and year of service. The study's respondents were 150 officers from different departments in a Malaysian public university. The female staff presented higher CA levels than the males, and those staff who served less than five years recorded the lowest CA level. The findings were consistent with Abdullah's (2014), in which most non-academic or administrative staff recorded average CA levels when using English at their workplace.

A qualitative study using an observation checklist as an instrument was conducted by Kakepoto *et al*. (2013). The study examines the CA among Pakistan's engineers with five years of experience. The study concluded that CA significantly affects engineers' job performance. Interestingly, engineers with high CA levels show low self-confidence, poor body language, and nervousness in their oral presentations (Kakepoto *et al*., 2013). These studies have shown an inconclusive correlation between CA levels and workplace variables; hence, more investigations on CA at the workplace are needed to shed some light on the matter.

3.0   METHOD

This study adopted an explanatory sequential mixed method approach in which quantitative design was the direct approach in providing answers to research questions. Consequently, a qualitative approach provided answers to the research questions. The combination of quantitative and qualitative methods provided better views on the highlighted issues of communication apprehension. Researchers can produce a better and clearer discussion of a particular issue by complementing data from qualitative to quantitative counterparts (Creswell, 2014). For this study, the research employed an explanatory design in which data collection for quantitative and qualitative were conducted in sequence. The quantitative data in questionnaires were collected, followed by the qualitative one.

The study adopted a purposive non-probability sampling wherein the respondents in this study were 115 administrative civil servants at a Malaysian university. The basis for adopting a non-probability technique for this study is time and cost limitations (Wiśniowski *et al.,* 2020). The sample size measurement for the current study was based on a five per cent margin of error, 95 per cent confidence level and the total population size of 166 staff. The staff are identified based on the standard civil service grade schemes (N) to specify their job descriptions and responsibility at the institution. The staff's roles and responsibilities primarily involved the four communicative workplace events in their daily job specifications.

For the qualitative methods, six individuals (four male and two female officers) gave their consent to be interviewed (Appendix). All the participants have between five and 15 years of service as administrative staff in a Malaysian public university. Four interviewees have bachelor's degrees, and two with master's degrees. Two of them hold the position of N41, another two are N44, and one for each N48 and N52. Table 1 provides the profile of the study participants.

Table 1 Profile of the Study Participants

Respondent	Gender	Level of Education	Job Grade
R1	Female	Master	41
R2	Male	Bachelor	44
R3	Female	Bachelor	48
R4	Male	Master	41
R5	Male	Bachelor	44
R6	Male	Bachelor	52

A specific instrument was adapted and developed to gather the respondents' data on CA levels. It is a questionnaire adapted from Frantz *et al.* (2005) and Jusoh *et al.* (2018). The instrument has the Malay translated version to cater to the respondents' varied English proficiency levels. It is designed to be bilingual so that it is well-understood by the targeted (Bhar, 2016), hence more effective in optimizing the reliability of the data. The questionnaire comprised two sections of 30 items:

1. Section A: About the respondents' socio-demographic background. The respondents were required to identify their educational background (Bachelor's Degree, Master's, or PhD), age, year of service, job scheme grade (41 to 44 or 48 to 54), and MUET band
2. Section B: Adapted Personal Report of Communication Apprehension (PRCA-24) items. PRCA-24 is the most common instrument for identifying CA levels (Croucher *et al.*, 2019). It

contains 24 items on a 5-point Likert scale from 'Strongly Disagree' to 'Strongly Agree.' The instrument consists of four events with six items: group discussion, interpersonal conversations, meetings and public speaking (Rimkeeratikul, 2018). The average of its Cronbach alpha scores is over 0.8 (Isa & Tamam, 2012; Jusoh *et al*., 2018; Ka-kan-dee & Al-Shaibani, 2018; Nantanawanich, 2017; Wan Mustapha *et al*., 2010).

In this study, the interview was conducted with administrative staff of different ages, gender, educational background, and job grade. The interview consists of eight (8) questions. The semi-structured interview was conducted at the end of November 2021. The data collection procedures were conducted in two weeks. The respondents were gently reminded when it was found that responses were still below the target. After the target responses of 115 were achieved, all responses were compiled and uploaded into Google Drive. The data were keyed into Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 26 for analysis. The questionnaires achieved the alpha value of 0.96 for all 24 survey items.

The interview questions are in a semi-structured format. It allows for a two-way conversation between the researcher and individual participants to have more detailed answers when necessary. The language choice during the interview sessions was based on the participants' preference; hence, they code-mixed the language between Malay and English. Four interviews were conducted using the Google Meet platform, and two were done face-to-face. An interview protocol was used to guide each session which took around 10 to 20 minutes. Each interview was recorded and kept confidential. The responses were transcribed as soon as each session was completed. The participants who held higher positions had longer sessions compared to those of lower grades because they had more experience dealing with communication issues at the workplace, which enriched the study data.

A review of comprehensive quantitative data was conducted to check for data entry errors and cleaned if necessary. Descriptive and inferential statistics in the form of comparing frequency, mean scores, standard deviation, and t-tests, as well as one-way ANOVA, were employed to examine the current study population concerning gender, education level, year of service, job grade, and MUET band. Furthermore, the CA level scores calculations were based on the guidelines by McCroskey and McCroskey (1988). PRCA sub-score calculation for each communicative event is detailed in Table 2. The overall CA score is a sum of all the communicative event scores.

Table 2 Calculation of PRCA Sub Scores for the Four Workplace Communicative Events

Communicative Events	PRCA Sub Scores Calculations
Group Discussion	18 – [Σ scores (item 2 + 4 + 6) + (item 1 + 3 + 5)]
Meetings	18 – [Σ scores (item 8 + 9 + 12) + (item 7 + 10 + 11)]
Daily Conversation	18 – [Σ scores (item 14 +16 +17) + (item 13 + 15 + 18)]
Public Speaking	18 – [Σ scores (item 19 + 21 + 23) + (item 20 + 22 + 24)]
Overall CA level	Group Discussion + Meetings + Conversation + Public Speaking

As depicted in Table 3, the PRCA score for each of the four communicative events (i.e., group discussion, meetings, conversation, and public speaking) can range from a minimum of six to the highest

of 30. If a score for an event is above 18, it indicates some degree of CA. For the overall CA score, the range is between 24 to 120. If the score is above 80, the individual has a high level of CA.

Table 3 Level of CA Categories based on PRCA Scores

Communicative Events	CA Levels		
	Low	Moderate	High
Group Discussion	1 – 11	12 - 19	20 and above
Meetings	1 – 13	14 - 19	20 and above
Daily Conversation	1 – 11	12 - 17	18 and above
Public Speaking	1 – 14	15 - 23	24 and above
Overall CA	1 – 50	51 - 80	81 and above

The thematic analysis by Braun and Clarke (2006) was used to analyze the interview data systematically. The data went through six steps: transcribing data, generating codes, searching for potential themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing a final report. The interview recordings were transcribed, and details of the transactions followed a simplified transcription convention by Dumanig (2010) and Bhar (2016). The researcher read the interview transcripts to identify reasons for English oral CA among the administrative staff of a Malaysian public university. The transcriptions were also repeatedly read and analyzed for themes and sub-themes development and classification. Participants' interview field notes and documents confirmed the developed themes or trends.

4.0 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Respondents' Demographic Profiles

In Table 4, the total number of respondents was 115, including 61 (53%) male and 54 (47%) female. 19 (16.5 %) of respondents were in the group of zero to five years of service, 54 (47 %) were in the group of six to 10 years, 39 (33.9 %) were 11 to 15 years, two (1.7 %) 16 to 20 years and only one (0.9%) was in the group of 21 years and above. For the job scheme grade category, 94 (81.7%) respondents were in the group of grades 41 to 44, and 21 (18.3%) were in 48 to 54. In terms of education levels, 93 (80.9 %) respondents have bachelor's degrees, 21 (18.3 %) respondents have master's degrees, and one (0.9 %) has a PhD. Finally, 1 (0.9 %) respondent scored Band 1 in MUET, 17 (14.8 %) respondents scored Band 2, 55 (47.8%) respondents scored Band 3, 18 (15.7%) respondents scored Band 4, and only four (3.5%) respondents scored Band 5. There were 20 (17.4 %) respondents had never sat for MUET.

Table 4 Respondent's Profile

Profile	Categories	F	%
Gender	Male	61	53
	Female	54	47
	Total *n*	115	100

Profile	Categories	F	%
Age	21 until 29	6	5.2
	30 until 39	85	73.9
	40 until 49	20	17.4
	50 and above	4	3.5
	Total *n*	115	100
Year of Service	0 to 5 years	19	16.5
	6 to 10 years	54	47
	11 to 15 years	39	33.9
	16 to 20 years	2	1.7
	21 years and above	1	0.9
	Total *n*	115	100
Job Grade	41 to 44	94	81.7
	48 to 54	21	18.3
	Total *n*	115	100
Education Level	Bachelor's degree	93	80.9
	Master's degree	21	18.3
	PhD	1	0.9
	Total *n*	115	100
MUET Bands	Band 1	1	0.9
	Band 2	17	14.8
	Band 3	55	47.8
	Band 4	18	15.7
	Band 5	4	3.5
	Band 6	0	0
	Never Took	20	17.4
	Total *n*	115	100

Respondents' Overall Communication Apprehension Levels

Table 5 shows that 52 respondents (45.2%) recorded a moderate level of communication apprehension using English, and another 47 respondents (40.9%) reported a low level. Only a small percentage, 16 respondents (13.9%), showed a high level of apprehension when communicating in English. The overall PRCA scores achieved the mean score of 62.20, which indicated the respondents' moderate levels of CA.

Table 5 Respondents' Overall CA Levels based on PRCA Scores

CA Level (PRCA Score)	F	%
Moderate CA (51-80)	52	45.2
Low CA (1-50)	47	40.9
High CA (81-124)	16	13.9

Communication Apprehension Scores for the Workplace Events

Table 6 presents CA level mean scores for the four communicative events during the daily conversation, group discussion, meeting, and public speaking. The highest CA using English was reported when delivering public speaking (16.62), followed by during meetings (16.18) and daily conversation (14.78). The lowest CA was during group discussion (14.62).

Table 6 CA Scores for the Four Communicative Events

Communication Events	Mean	SD
Public Speaking	16.62	5.34
Meeting	16.18	5.52
Daily Conversation	14.78	5.81
Group Discussion	14.62	5.45

Communication Apprehension Scores and Gender

Table 7 presents CA scores for the four communication events based on gender. The female staff recorded higher mean scores than the male respondents in all categories. The female respondents were most apprehensive when using English for public speaking (17.67), whilst the male staff had a high CA level during meetings (15.74). The female and male teams had similar lowest anxious moments during group discussions.

Table 7 CA Scores for the Four Communicative Events and Gender

Communicative Events	Male		Female	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Group Discussion	14.57	5.078	14.67	5.89
Meeting	15.74	5.282	16.69	5.79
Daily Conversation	14.70	5.43	14.87	6.26
Public Speaking	15.69	5.18	17.67	5.37

Table 8 indicates no significant difference in CA levels between genders. Both groups recorded a moderate CA level.

Table 8 Results of t-test for CA scores by gender

Gender	N	Mean	SD	Mean Difference	t value	df	p-value
Male	61	60.70	19.75	-3.18	-0.83	113	0.41
Female	54	63.89	21.38				

Communication Apprehension Scores and Job Grades

In Table 9, job grades 41 to 44 officers reported higher CA levels (62.45), while those in 48 to 54 grades reported lower apprehension levels (61.10). Furthermore, the *t*-test results showed no significant difference in the CA level and staff's job grades.

Table 9 CA scores based on Job Grades

Jobs Grade	N	Mean	SD	Mean Difference	*t* value	df	p-value
41 – 44	94	62.45	20.02	1.35	0.27	113	0.79
48 - 54	21	61.10	23.03				

Communication Apprehension Scores and Year of Services

Before the analysis, the categories, initially five, were combined into three as there was an uneven distribution of respondents between categories. The three new categories are less than five (5) years, six to 10 years, and more than 11 years (Table 10). The results showed that those serving less than five (5) years recorded the lowest CA level (59.11); the highest CA level was recorded by those in the more than 11 years category (63.38). In addition, Table 11 revealed the results from ANOVA analysis, which showed no significant difference in the CA level of using English and years of service.

Table 10 Descriptive analysis of CA scores and Year of Service

Category	N	Mean	SD
Less than five years	19	59.11	21.87
6-10	54	62.37	19.48
More than 11 years	42	63.38	21.49

Table 11 ANOVA for CA Scores and Year of Service

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F value	p-value
Between Groups	24.61	56	.43	.802	.796
Within Groups	31.79	58	.55		
Total	54.40	114			

Communication Apprehension Scores and Education Level

To analyse the CA score and the respondents' education level, the study used *t*-test analysis. Categories in the education level were combined into two (from three) as there was an uneven distribution of respondents. The two categories are bachelor's degree and master's and PhD. Table 12 showed no significant difference in the level of CA using English based on respondents' level of education. Yet, Table 11 proves those with Master's and PhD recorded the highest CA level (65.60), in contrast to staff with bachelor's degrees who had the lowest CA level (61.40).

Table 12 T-test for CA Score and Education Level

Category	N	Mean	SD	Mean Difference	*t* value	df	p-value
Bachelor's Degree	93	61.40	20.62	-4.19	-0.86	113	0.39
Master and PhD	22	65.60	20.06				

Communication Apprehension Scores and MUET Bands

Originally seven MUET bands, the variables were merged into three groups due to each option's uneven distribution of respondents. The three groups are Band 1 to 3, Band 4 to 6 and Never Took MUET (Table 13). There was a statistically significant difference in the staff's CA level based on their MUET bands as determined by one-way ANOVA (F(2,112)=3.366), p = 0.038) (Table 14). Those who scored MUET Band 1 to 3 recorded the highest CA level (M=1.8356, SD=0.70738), followed by those who had never taken MUET before (M=1.7, SD=0.65695). The lowest CA level was reported by those who scored MUET Band 4 to 6 (M = 1.4091, SD = 0.59033).

Table 13 Descriptive analysis of CA scores based on MUET bands

	N	Mean	SD
Band 1-3	73	1.8356	.70738
Band 4-6	22	1.4091	.59033
Never Took	20	1.7000	.65695

Table 14 ANOVA for CA scores by MUET results

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	3.098	2	1.549	3.366	.038
Within Groups	51.546	112	.460		
Total	54.643	114			

Pearson Correlation Analysis Test

H_0 : There is no statistically significant relationship between gender and CA levels

	Gender	Total CA Score
Gender	-	
Total CA Score	.115	-

A Pearson correlation coefficient was computed to assess the relationship between respondents' gender and their overall CA score. There was a weak, positive correlation between the two variables, $r = .115$, $n = 115$; however, the relationship was not significant ($p = .22$). Hence, we accept the null hypothesis; respondents' gender was not associated with the CA levels.

H₀: There is no statistically significant relationship between respondents' age and CA levels

	Age	Total CA Score
Age	-	
Total CA Score	-.002	-

For the respondent's age and CA levels, the Pearson correlation coefficient found a weak, negative correlation between two variables, $r = -.002$, $n = 115$; however, the relationship was not significant ($p = .987$). It is plausible that younger respondents appear to have higher CA levels. We accept the null hypothesis.

H₀ : There is no statistically significant relationship between respondents' job grades and CA levels

	Current Job Grade	Total CA Score
Current Job Grade	-	
Total CA Score	.022	-

A Pearson correlation coefficient was computed to assess the relationship between respondents' job grade and their CA levels. There was a weak, positive correlation between the two variables, $r = .022$, $n = 115$; however, the relationship was insignificant ($p = .819$). Therefore, the null hypothesis was accepted; there is no statistically significant relationship between respondents' job grades and CA levels.

H₀ : There is no statistically significant relationship between respondents' years of service and CA levels

	Total CA Score	Years of Service
Total CA Score	-	
Years of service	.022	-

A Pearson correlation coefficient was computed to assess the relationship between respondents' job grade and their CA levels. There was a weak, positive correlation between the two variables, $r = .022$, $n = 115$, but the relationship was not significant ($p = .819$). There is no statistically significant relationship between the years of service and CA levels. The null hypothesis was accepted.

H₀: There is no statistically significant relationship between respondents' education level and CA levels

	Total CA Score	Level of Education
Total CA Score	-	
Level of Education	.126	-

A Pearson correlation coefficient was computed to assess the relationship between respondents' job grade and their CA levels. There was a weak, positive correlation between the two variables, $r = .126$, $n = 115$, to indicate an insignificant relationship ($p = .179$). Thus, we accept the null hypothesis; there is no statistically significant relationship between respondents' level of education and CA levels.

H_0: There is no statistically significant relationship between respondents' MUET results and CA levels

	Total CA Score	MUET Scores
Total CA Score	-	
MUET Scores	-.135	-

A Pearson correlation coefficient was computed to assess the relationship between respondents' job grade and their CA levels. There was a weak correlation between the two variables, $r = -.139$, $n = 115$; the relationship was not significant ($p = .149$). The null hypothesis is accepted, which means no statistically significant relationship between respondents' MUET results and CA levels.

DISCUSSIONS

The Administrative Staff's Overall CA Levels

The findings revealed that the officers were moderately apprehensive about conducting oral English communicative tasks at their workplace. This finding concurs with Jusoh *et al.* (2018) and Abdullah (2014), who claimed most administrative staff in Malaysian public universities were moderately apprehensive about communicating using English. This result is also similar to Batiha *et al.'s* (2016) study, which found that people who received tertiary education showed a moderate level of CA. One possible explanation behind this finding is that since the job entry requirement for officer level in Malaysian public universities is Bachelor's Degree and above, they had learnt and were exposed to the English language during their tertiary education and subsequently at the workplace, they experienced moderate CA level using English

The Administrative Staff CA Levels in the Four Workplace Communicative Events

In terms of the four communicative events, the findings showed that public speaking recorded the highest apprehension level, followed by a meeting, conversation, and group discussion. Jusoh *et al.* (2018) also recorded similar findings where most officers were more apprehensive about using English during meetings and public speaking. Likewise, several studies reported the highest CA level in public speaking compared to meetings, conversations and group discussions (Amogne & Yigzaw, 2013; Frantz *et al.,* 2005; Hussin & Makmur, 2021; Nantanawanich, 2017). Public speaking within the context of a public university typically involves delivering a speech in English in front of small or large audiences of different job grades, gender and job schemes, including academicians. The context is intimidating where evaluation, or the perception of being assessed, occurs (Hussin & Makmur, 2021), causing officers to experience anxiety and fear, which turn into stage fright (Wan Mustapha *et al.*, 2010).

However, data from the interview results provided different views on the four communicative events. Five interviewees confessed to a fear of using English the most during meetings. For example, R1 said, "during meetings because some meetings use English." R2 admitted fear of making mistakes because it could lead to embarrassment by mentioning "*tapi* during meetings, *if dia salah,* grammar *dia salah,* word, vocab[ulary] *dia, dia akan* feel ashamed. *Malu lah*." On the other hand, only one interviewee fears using English in delivering public speaking because the event is usually attended by foreign staff. This finding

concurred with Loureiro *et al.* (2020), who reported meetings caused the most CA compared to other communicative events.

The Correlation of CA and Workplace Variables

Correlation between workplace variables and CA levels

All null hypotheses were accepted based on the Pearson correlation coefficient tests. There is possibly not enough evidence at the $p = 0.05$ level to conclude a linear relationship in the population between workplace variables and CA levels. There is a weak correlation between the two variables; the relationship is not significant. In a broader view, the staff CA level is associated with their workplace as some staff might become less apprehensive as they get promoted or serve longer. The institution can lower the staff's CA levels by continuously supporting and implementing skills enhancement training, particularly in enhancing the staff's oral communication skills.

Gender

Even though the findings showed no significant differences between genders, the ladies experienced higher apprehension than the male respondents. Batiha *et al.* (2016), Jusoh *et al.* (2018), Loureiro *et al.* (2020), Rafek *et al.* (2014), and Zulkifli (2007) corresponded with this discovery, stating that female respondents tend to be more apprehensive than male respondents. In contrast, Fitriah and Muna (2019) reported that foreign male students have higher anxiety levels than their female counterparts. The females feel more apprehensive in the workplace due to local social norms. Asian women are naturally shy and talk less in the presence of men. De Paola *et al.* (2021) supported the notion that women are unlikely to engage in public communication activity.

Two participants agreed; R3 specified, "I think, in my opinion, the female staff is more, a little bit shy." Correspondingly, R6 also added that "*Tapi kalau tengok pada kecenderungan tu, nampak macam staf perempuan lebih sedikit daripada staf lelaki mungkin sebab faktor buli* kot." (But, if we look on the level, it seems like female staff are a little shy compared to male staff, possibly due to bullying factor).

Job Grades

The respondents share similar views on the relationship between jobs grade and CA using English at the workplace. Though the finding showed no significant difference between the two groups of job grades, the staff in the 41 to 44 group showed a higher mean than those in the 48 to 54 group. One possible explanation would be the uneven population ratio between the two job grade groups. Conversely, Nantanawanich (2017) reported the differences that existed in terms of CA between senior and officer position groups. Nevertheless, the findings proved the administrative staff is a Community of Practice. They work together to achieve the top management's KPIs, influencing their communication apprehension. They shared the same English language to convey their meanings (Li *et al.*, 2009). Additionally, three participants stated that job grades influence the CA level in using English. In the interview, R1 remarked, "job grade, I think one of the factors." R3 also highlighted job grades:

"yes, the higher grade has more confidence than the lower grade. But English usage, for example, in my workplace, 41 also can speak English because they are fresh graduates, so during their degree, they use English, so they can use English but the level of confidence because of the culture at the workplace. For example, [N]48 or [N]52 [officers] still have vocab[ulary] of English in their minds, but because they are in higher grades, they use it. Compared to lower grades [N]41 and [N]44, they have English in their mind. They can use English, but, because of the lack of confidence, in this culture, they are not as good as the higher grade."

Year of Service

Another interesting finding is about the year of service. The CA level did not show significant differences, but the officers in service for less than five years recorded the lowest CA scores compared to another group. Similarly, Jusoh *et al.* (2018) revealed that officers serving less than five years were least apprehensive. The study suggested that novice officers are more confident communicating using English than experienced officers. As well, this study finding is supported by Winiecki and Ayres (1999), who discovered that the duration of an individual working in a particular organization did not affect the CA level. Nonetheless, Nantanawanich (2017) asserted that employees with more than 15 years of servicing experience had lower CA scores because they have more working experience, enabling them to be more confident in communicating using the language and resulting in lower CA levels.

Education Level

The study disclosed no significant difference in education levels and English OCA levels. Molnar and Crnjak (2019) reported a similar finding, which concluded that undergraduate and graduate students experience no difference in terms of apprehension in speaking. Hypothetically, a higher education level should equip individuals to be more confident. In other words, the individuals should experience lower CA. It could also mean the education level serves explicitly as a core element for job entry requirements. After the job is secured, the need to communicate proficiently has lost its importance and depends on the staff's interests, environment, and job requirements. Nevertheless, when the level of education is insignificant to the ability to communicate in the workplace especially using language, this opens up a new discussion on the relationship between anxiety and confidence.

From the qualitative data, CA levels' correlation with workplace variables (i.e., gender, job grade and level of education) revealed some new findings. Four participants provided evidence that education level influences the CA level at the workplace. R2 said,

Orang cakap level of education *memang* reflect. *Kita tengok jugak, kalau staf ada diploma, dalam* certain cases, *kalau* degree and above, yes, mostly we learn in English. Usually, *mana-mana* [local] higher learning institutions *pun*, *kita akan belajar dalam Bahasa Inggeris. Tapi bagi* diploma and below, *sijil, macam sijil, IKBN, yang* practical, mostly *rasanya dia tak akan pakai lah* English. Maybe *dia punya buku dalam* English, *tapi dia* communicate *dalam BM. Dia ada* effect, level of education *memberi impak*.

Similarly, R3 expressed that:

Level of education, of course, higher grade, higher level of education influence their confidence, and for example, their vocab[ulary] is more wide and then. They are very confident to speak in English compared to the lower grade, lower level of education staff."

English Language Proficiency (based on MUET Bands)

An interesting finding was identified concerning MUET bands and CA levels. The result indicated a significant difference between CA levels and the staff's English proficiency based on MUET bands. Subatira *et al*. (2018) also reported a negative correlation between an individual's CA level and performance in MUET. Molnar and Crnjak (2019) found that respondents with lower scores in the English language tend to reveal a higher level of CA. The officers with lower MUET bands probably had lower confidence in using English at the workplace, thus contributing to feeling more apprehensive in communicating. In contrast, those who obtained higher MUET bands possess more confidence to communicate in English hence the lower apprehension level.

5.0 CONCLUSION

Several remarkable findings can be deduced from this study. The results revealed that administrative staff at the level of officers experienced reasonable apprehension. Therefore, it is plausible that the Malaysian public university administrative staff were not significantly affected by anxiety or fear of speaking in English. Most officers are not hesitant to communicate in English in the four workplace events: group discussions, meetings, daily conversation, and delivering speeches. In other words, the current English language criteria for hiring administrative staff positions at public universities are sufficient requirements for recruitment.

Nevertheless, opportunities for using English at the workplace must be made more frequent or plausibly mandatory for the staff to be more proficient than when they first joined the institution. The university should provide a supportive environment and incentive to encourage the staff to continuously enhance their skills which can simultaneously reduce the CA level. It is cautioned that without a structured or planned professional programme, this average CA level could deteriorate, which is foreseen to jeopardize the staff's personality and productivity in the long run.

The findings also implicate the need for serious attention from the institution's top management in encouraging and setting priorities for good English communication skills for the administrative staff. Mastering the English language by administrative staff would enhance their daily tasks. The talent is particularly pertinent in dealing with foreign members of the institution, international experts, clients and students in the wake of achieving the university's key performance index (KPI), embracing the internalization of the higher education sector in Malaysia. Within the context of workplace learning, situated learning can be applied to improve the administrative staff's English communication skills as they can improve their perception of learning English by learning in a typical, familiar environment at their workplace (Matyakhan & Sukavatee, 2021).

Lastly, this study corresponds with the need for more research on CA in organizational contexts to provide more insight into challenges experienced by workers in actual workplace settings (Burk, 2001; Jusoh *et al*., 2018; Russ, 2013). Future studies may explore writing apprehension, as writing is also a productive skill and an integral part of communication in the workplace. In addition, studies are recommended to be carried out with different approaches, such as ethnographic or a clinical way of gathering data to understand better this subtle yet complicated language phenomenon, which will contribute significantly to organizations' community of practice.

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