

# Oral Communication Apprehension in a Small Group Discussion

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**Abstract:** This research investigated the level and range of communication apprehension (CA) in a small group discussion among polytechnic students. The research design used in the study was a quantitative approach. The sample in this study consisted of 97 diploma students of one polytechnic in Johor. The instrument used to collect the data in this research was the Personal Report of Communication Apprehension (PRCA-24). The findings of this study showed that in the context of small group discussion, a large number of the students were in the average CA level followed by the more than average CA group while one student was considered as high CA level and one student as low CA level. Consequently, the findings prove that the issue of CA in a small group discussion is not a trivial matter and should be further examined. Students should be educated that CA is common and happens to everyone while teachers should address the issue openly in oral communication lessons for it to be managed. Therefore, the findings of this research serve as a basis for future studies and give a significant contribution to the field of oral communication.

**Index Terms:** Communication Apprehension, ESL Students, Small Group Discussion

## I. INTRODUCTION

Possessing good oral communication skill, particularly in the English language is important to many students. In the course of communicating, it is natural for anyone to experience discomfort or anxiety during a conversation with someone else either in person or particularly a group. Nevertheless, when anxiety gets the best of someone, they would face difficulties in conveying valuable information. One of the reasons causing anxiety in communication is known as Communication Apprehension (CA). According to Richmond and McCroskey (1998), CA is the level of fear or anxiety of communicating or the idea of interacting. CA can occur in different contexts and settings of oral communication including small group discussion. Small group discussion has been utilised widely in education, workplace and social interaction. In Malaysia Polytechnic setting, small group discussions are regularly utilised due to the beneficial values in language learning and their importance and functions in workplace settings.

Hence, the Malaysia polytechnic curriculum structure introduces small group discussion as one of the component of oral communication skills in a Communicative English course (Communicative English 1) in which is a compulsory course for all Polytechnic students. However, a study on polytechnic students' attainment in a Communicative English course by Baizura and NurulFathiha (2016) reveals

that the students' average achievement in a small group discussion assessment is only at 58.6%. This rate is only slightly above the passing marks. Clearly, the finding signifies that polytechnic students do have issues in applying effective oral communication skill in a small group discussion regardless of their different levels of English language proficiency.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Communication apprehension (CA) derives from the term oral communication apprehension (OCA), and it has been used interchangeably over the years. McCroskey (1970) emphasises the earlier construction of the CA be in oral communication. CA is defined as "an individual level of fear or anxiety associated with either real or anticipated communication with another person or persons" (McCroskey, 1997:82). Since then, many studies on CA have been done. It is frequently referred to communication anxiety and performance anxiety, and it occurs in both native and second language (L2) contexts.

The constructs of CA in this present study are based on McCroskey (1997) communication apprehension (CA). Individuals with high CA report fear, tension, sweating, increased heart rate, whenever they have to face oral communication activities (Shanahan, 2013). It can be perceived as a concept that combines both internal emotions and observable behaviour. These behaviours appeared out of anxiety and apprehension of communication. Richmond and McCroskey (1998) state that CA is a type of anxiety experienced in an interpersonal communicative setting where students have little control of the situation. Horwitz (2002:1) describes CA as "the hidden communication disorder" because many individuals face a similar condition of anxiety and apprehensiveness, yet there is little to none who recognises, acknowledges or discusses the issue. Hence, it is common for a person to be apprehensive at least in one context of communication and concerning this study, it is possible for students to experience CA in small-group discussions.

## III. OBJECTIVES

The objectives of this study are as follows:

- 1) To identify the different levels of oral communication apprehension among students.
- 2) To determine the range of oral communication apprehension in a small group discussion among students.

**Revised Manuscript Received on May15, 2019.**

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#### IV. METHODOLOGY

In this study, the survey questionnaire adopted the Personal Report of Communication Apprehension (PRCA-24). It is a self-reporting instrument that measures the CA level in general and within the setting of a dyad, group discussion, meeting and public speaking. This instrument is composed of 24 statements concerning feelings about communicating with others. Respondents were asked to rate each item using a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly agree) to 5 (strongly disagree). Scores above 65 indicate a general apprehension more than an average person, above 80 indicates a very high level of CA and below 50 indicate a very low level of CA. PRCA- 24 is considered as the prominent (Renshaw, 2010) and widely used instrument (P'Rayan and Shetty, 2008). According to Rasakumaran and Indra Devi (2017), the instrument has been validated to have a high level of reliability (Cronbach alpha >0.90) and solid test-retest reliability of greater than .80 have been reported. Thus, PRCA-24 is a valid and reliable instrument to measure the CA level. The population for this study are 97 Semester One students, who enrolled in Communicative English 1 (CE1), of one polytechnic in Johor. The students were purposely chosen for this study as the course introduced and exposed them to oral communication skills in a group discussion.

#### V. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

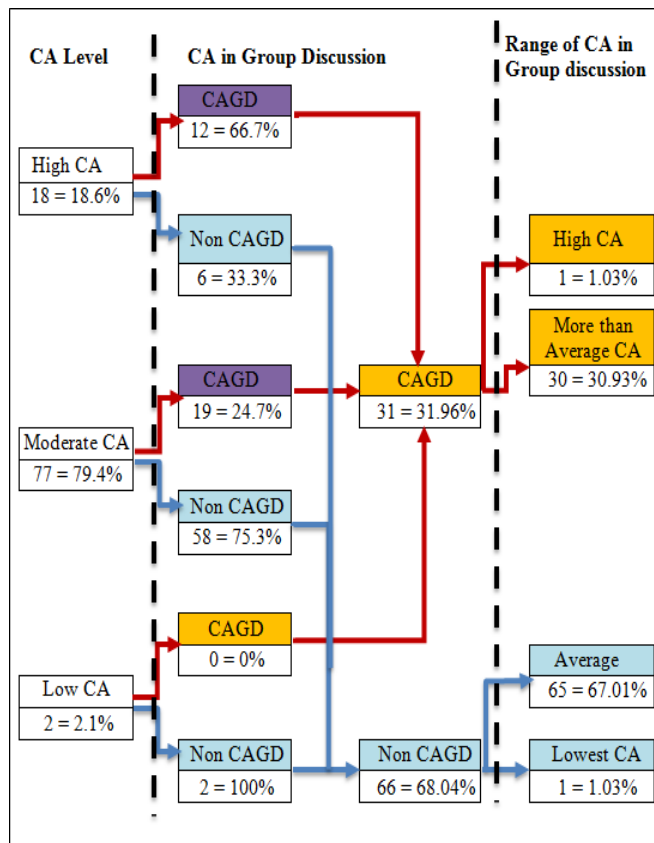


Fig. 1: CA Level and the Range of CA Level in Small Group Discussion among Semester One Students.

#### A. The CA Level

From the CA scores, all three different levels were established; Low CA, Moderate CA and High CA. Among the respondents, a great number of them were considered as Moderate CA level at 79.6 percent. At 9.2 percent, nine

respondents were in High CA, and only 2.1 percent or 2 respondents were considered as Low CA. The findings reveal that 53 out of 77 students in Moderate CA group, scores more than the mean value. This makes the total of 73.2 percent of the sample scored more than the average value. Also, the standard deviation of 10.3, shows a wide-ranging distribution of CA scores among the students. It is a consequent due to the variation of the students' English language proficiency. Nevertheless, at 18.6 percent of students with High CA level, the current study was almost equivalent to Richmond *et al.* (2013) estimation of one in five people suffers from high levels of CA.

#### B. The Range of CA in Small Group Discussion

The interpretation of the sub-scores is very crucial to give meaning to the figures, in which it outlines the magnitude of the apprehension level. McCroskey (1982) constantly states that any sub-score above 18 indicate some degree of apprehension. However, this study adopted the interpretation constructed by Morreale *et al.* (1993), in which aimed to provide students with a fundamental understanding of their level of communication apprehension in the specific setting and allows them to generate goals for improvement in desired areas. From the figure, students from the High CA level and Moderate CA level record a degree of apprehension in the small group discussion. From the total of 31 students or 31.96 percent of the students are considered as Communication Apprehensive Students in Group Discussion (CAGD). Only one of the 31 apprehensive students is considered High CA, while the remaining 30 students are regarded as More than Average CA.

This situation is closely related with their favour of communicating in small group discussion. 83.87% of the students experience tense and nervousness communicating in small group discussion. The engagement of new acquaintance in group discussions afflicted most of the CAGD students as the percentage of students who are tense and nervous engaging with new acquaintance escalated to 90.32 percent. This information concurs with the study conducted by Wrench *et al.* (2008) and Muhammad Shahbaret *et al.* (2016) who found out that interaction with an acquaintance produces more apprehension than with a friend. Hence, based on the interpretation, stakeholders may be able to draw and execute immediate or future proactive measures to moderate and lessen the problem.

#### VI. CONCLUSION

This paper has presented some findings regarding the CA level and the range of the level within a specific population of students and in a particular setting of a small group discussion. Overall, the findings have indicated that there are different levels of communication apprehension as well as the specific range of CA level in the context of group discussion. In the effort to reduce communication apprehension in general, it is very crucial for teachers and students to initially acknowledge the condition and how it

affects their oral communication production. Once the condition is acknowledged and examined, activities and strategies that are conducive towards reducing CA in a small group discussion can be established. In addition, a positive and supportive environment should also be instilled to ease the high CA students' communication experience in a small group discussion. A positive and supportive environment would form of healthy peer relationships, mutual trust among students and teachers and opportunities for peer instruction and peer support. Error in students' speech should be anticipated based on their limited knowledge of vocabulary hence any punishment or ridicule towards any communication efforts by students should be forbidden and any communication efforts and attempts should be recognised and encouraged. While this is just a preliminary study investigating CA in small group discussion, the findings prove that the subject is not a trivial matter compared to other contexts. Instead, it should be further examined. Conclusively, the findings from this research give a significant contribution to the growing knowledge of communication apprehension.

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