

## English Proficiency, Public Speaking Experience, and Communication Apprehension in Oral Presentation of Polytechnic Students

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### ABSTRACT

Oral presentation apprehension plagues people when they communicate orally, especially when they make oral presentations in public. This study examined the relationship between English proficiency, public speaking experience, and communication apprehension in polytechnic students during oral presentations. The study involved 62 students from a polytechnic in Sarawak, Malaysia, who filled in the PRCA-24 questionnaire that focused on the elements of public speaking. The results showed that 6.4% of the students had a low level of communication apprehension, while 71% had a moderate level of communication apprehension. For 22.6% of the students, the level of apprehension was very high. The students felt anxious and uncomfortable when asked to give an oral presentation. The t-test showed that the male students significantly differed from the female students regarding their communication apprehension. The mean scores showed that the male students experienced greater communication apprehension ( $M = 2.19 \pm 0.52$ ) than the female students ( $M = 2.00 \pm 0.44$ ). There was a significant negative relationship between oral presentation experience and the level of communication apprehension. These results may suggest that extensive training in public speaking can improve public speaking skills and enhance employability opportunities.

**Keywords:** communication apprehension, polytechnic students, oral presentation, PRCA-24, English proficiency, public speaking experience

### INTRODUCTION

Social interaction depends on effective communication at the verbal and non-verbal level. Communication aims to share an idea or information with a specific audience to achieve a communication goal. Communication is a two-way process of sending messages to the target audience and receiving appropriate feedback on the message conveyed (Bhasin 2022). Good communication skills are needed in daily interactions and formal communication, such as in the workplace. For example, as aspiring accountants, accounting students need to be able to communicate information to users in operations, finance or management (Tabassum and Hossain 2020). Cerezo-Narváez, Bastante-Ceca, and Yaguee-Blanco (2018) stated that professional success depends on synthesising three core competencies: Communication, intellectual, and interpersonal skills.

One obstacle to effective communication is anxiety. Regardless of age or developmental level, people affected by anxiety in communication will inevitably experience emotional and behavioural changes (Baroi et al. 2020). Anxiety and fear are common uncomfortable situations that all people face during communication, whether it is a presentation, a conversation with an honourable person, or formal or informal feedback (Razawi, Zulkornain, and Razlan 2019). This state of worry and anxiety in communication affects a person's behaviour, thinking and reasoning, and leads to severe depression (Amir et al. 2022).

In the context of education, communication apprehension is a psychological disorder such that students need the help of teachers or counsellors to address it.

Researchers such as West and Turner (2008) have defined communication anxiety as communication apprehension or anxiety regarding negative feelings that individuals experience when communicating, typically in tension, anxiousness or panic when speaking. For some people, anxiety arises from fear of contact with others (Sellnow, 2005). The anxiety these people feel when communicating with others manifests in nervousness (Weiten, Dunn, and Hammer, 2009). McCroskey (1982) sees anxiety as situational and linked to direct or indirect interpersonal communication experiences. An example of an anxiety-provoking situation is an oral presentation where students present tasks to the class for grading purposes and are the centre of attention.

Studies have shown that various factors lead to communication apprehensions, such as personality, audience, fear of making mistakes, lack of confidence, and lack of preparation, but language proficiency seems to be the most prevalent factor (Benraghda, Radzuan, and Ali 2017; Grieve et al. 2021; Naser and Isa, 2021; Prastiwi, 2012; Razawi, Zulkornain, and Razlan, 2019). Better mastery of the language would likely reduce the fear of making mistakes and give students more confidence. However, some researchers (Naser and Isa, 2021; Yaikhong and Usaha, 2012) found that students with good academic performance are still nervous when speaking in public. We assume that experience in public speaking may influence the level of communication apprehension, but this has not yet been investigated based on our literature review.

This study investigated the influence of English proficiency and public speaking experience on communication apprehension in polytechnic students during oral presentations. The objectives of the study are to (1) determine the extent of students' communication apprehension during oral presentations; (2) determine the relationship between students' communication apprehension and their English proficiency; and (3) determine the relationship between students' communication apprehension and public speaking experience. In this study, the term "public speaking experience" refers to past experiences in making oral presentations.

**LITERATURE  
REVIEW**

**Factors  
Contributing to  
Communication  
Apprehension**

Communication apprehension in oral presentations is influenced by various factors, such as personality, audience, fear of making mistakes, lack of confidence, and lack of preparation, but language proficiency seems to be the most prevalent factor in different groups of students and environments (Benraghda, Radzuan, and Ali 2017; Grieve et al., 2021; Naser and Isa, 2021; Prastiwi, 2012; Razawi, Zulkornain, and Razlan 2019).

In general, students have moderate levels of communication apprehension. For example, Aeni et al. (2017) studied marine students and showed that 20%, 60% and 20% had low, moderate and high levels of apprehension, respectively. Data were collected through Adapted Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) questionnaires from 10 first-year students of the nautical programme at AIPI Makassar of Akademi Maritim Indonesia (Indonesian Maritime Academy). Overall, the students were often nervous when communicating orally in English as a foreign language. Speaking in public caused the most anxiety among the students. Students in the high apprehension category showed more symptoms than those in the moderate and low apprehension categories.

Prastiwi (2012) conducted a case study among five first-year students taking the Interpersonal Speaking course at the English Department of Satya Wacana Christian University in Indonesia. The study found that language proficiency was the most critical

factor in students' anxiety in the Interpersonal Speaking course. The results showed that students were anxious because of their weak language skills (limited vocabulary, grammatical problems). However, the audience factor also contributed to their anxiety (the presence of friends and embarrassment). They also feared making mistakes, lacked confidence and felt that their lack of preparation contributed to their discomfort when giving individual presentations.

Weak language skills have also been identified by Benraghda, Radzuan, and Ali (2017) as a contributing factor to anxiety during oral presentations. In this study, Benraghda et al. (2017) collected questionnaire data from 234 local and international students studying English for Professional Communication at Universiti Malaysia Pahang to investigate their attitudes towards oral presentations in English and their associated challenges. Although most students were strongly inclined and willing to make an excellent oral presentation in English, most reported being nervous about it. Their biggest obstacle was overcoming anxiety. Students had difficulty communicating their ideas and the content of their chosen subjects to their classmates and lecturers because of their poor command of English. Other students struggled with pronunciation and their limited vocabulary. In addition, the environmental conditions for presentations were not always ideal due to background noise and audience inattention, which affected their confidence in presenting.

Language proficiency and the audience factor also accounted for the anxiety of another group of Malaysian university students when making oral presentations in English. In this study, Razawi, Zulkornain, and Razlan (2019) involved 342 students taking English subjects at the UiTM Dungun Campus in Pahang, particularly those enrolled in ELC270 (English for Workplace Communication) and ELC590 (English for Oral Presentation Skills). In these two courses, oral presentations were a compulsory assessment component. Razawi et al.'s (2019) findings revealed four factors influencing student anxiety: language proficiency, personality traits, preparation and audience interest. Based on their findings, Razawi et al. (2019) suggested that student anxiety could be reduced if lecturers could foster a positive attitude towards the audience and create a friendly and stimulating classroom environment to meet students' diverse learning needs. In addition, it is essential to provide students with the grading rubrics in advance to inform them of grading priorities so that students are better prepared. The researchers also recommended that shifting the priority in grading from accuracy to fluency may ease students' anxiety about speaking under assessment conditions.

Grieve et al. (2021) provided empirical evidence that clarity about scoring rubrics can help reduce communication apprehension. Grieve et al. (2021) used qualitative data from interviews with 46 university students at West of England University in Bristol. Thematic analysis revealed that public speaking anxiety stemmed from fear of assessment, ambiguity about assessment, and insufficient practice and preparation. These assessment conditions had a negative impact on university students' experiences and learning. The findings also indicated that more practical support through student encouragement could create a better experience for students with public speaking phobia. Most of the students in their study confirmed that rehearsals and preparation were essential and would help them to give an excellent oral presentation.

To better understand the relationship between language proficiency and communication apprehension, some researchers have moved away from examining the factors that influence communication apprehension in oral presentations and have examined the relationship between oral presentation apprehension and overall oral

communication skills. Using the Public Speaking Classroom Anxiety Scale (PSCAS) adapted from Yaikhong and Usaha (2012), Naser and Isa (2021) found that 150 students at Universiti Teknologi MARA Shah Alam, Malaysia, exhibited moderate levels of apprehension. Pearson correlation results showed a negative relationship between students' anxiety about oral presentations and their performance in English language classes. In other words, their language performance drops when their anxiety level increases. Nevertheless, students with high academic performance were still nervous when speaking in front of an audience.

In a recent study, Abu Taha and Aburezeq (2018) investigated the extent of oral communication apprehension among English language students in their final year at Al-Quds Open University in Palestine. The Personal Report of Communication Apprehension Measurement (PRCAM) was used as the primary data collection instrument among 64 English students in the Rafah and Khan Younis branches of Al-Quds Open University in Palestine. Oral communication apprehension was moderate among students majoring in English at Al-Quds Open University in Palestine. No statistically significant difference ( $P > 0.05$ ) was found between gender and oral communication apprehension.

Thus far, research has shown that most university students in various settings experience moderate communication apprehension when making oral presentations (Abu Taha and Aburezeq 2018; Aeni et al. 2017; Naser and Isa, 2021). Researchers have pinpointed inadequate language proficiency as the leading cause of anxiety (Benraghda et al., 2017; Grieve et al. 2021; Naser and Isa 2021; Prastiwi 2012; Razawi et al. 2019). Another pertinent factor is assessment conditions and the pressure of performing well in front of an audience (Grieve et al. 2021; Prastiwi 2012; Razawi et al. 2019). In the recommendations based on their findings, several researchers (Grieve et al. 2021) suggested that practice can lessen communication apprehension, but they did not study it. It is essential to have empirical evidence to know whether experience in public speaking can alleviate communication apprehension. If a practice can lessen communication apprehension, then instructors have a strategy that can be implemented. Implementing rehearsals is more accessible than eliminating assessment conditions and improving the student's language proficiency.

**Communication  
Apprehension  
Anxiety Measured  
Using PRCA**

A literature review on communication apprehension studies found that PRCA and other closely related instruments are consistently used to assess the challenges students face in oral presentations (Charlesworth 2006; Kho and Ting, 2021; Patil and Karekatti 2012).

In an early study by Charlesworth (2006), public speaking elicited the most anxiety compared to meeting and group speaking, while private speaking was anxiety-free. The results suggest the anxiety of speaking in front of an audience. Charlesworth (2006) studied 52 information systems students enrolled in a small, private university in the mid-Atlantic, taking a three-credit advanced computer course offered by the Computer and Information Systems Department. Respondents were instructed to complete a 24-item PRCA questionnaire. Overall, the information systems students were found to have reasonably high levels of communication apprehension, but this was not statistically different from the national averages.

Patil and Karekatti (2012) studied oral communication apprehension in English among 100 engineering students at an engineering institution in Western Maharashtra. These English for Specific Purposes (ESP) students were administered the PRCA-24 questionnaire (McCroskey 1982). Most engineering students (48%) rated themselves as very communication-shy when communicating in English, while only 9% rated

themselves as not very communication-shy. More than a third (43%) of students had moderate communication apprehension. Students were also more anxious when giving oral presentations or public speaking. In contrast, they were relatively less anxious during group discussions, which were conducted among themselves.

Kho and Ting (2021) investigated the factors contributing to oral communication apprehension among polytechnic students. Three hundred and seventy-three polytechnic students participated in this study by answering a 24-item PRCA questionnaire on a Likert scale. The study revealed that they had a moderate level of anxiety about oral presentations. The unfriendly facial expression of the audience and uncomfortable looks influenced the students. Other factors influencing communication apprehension were preparation, language proficiency, personality traits and self-confidence. The results suggest that the communication apprehension associated with an oral presentation could be alleviated by teaching students to objectively assess audience emotions, rehearse and use audience engagement techniques.

#### Demographic Factors and Communication Apprehension

Several studies highlight the crucial role of demographic factors, particularly family background and socioeconomic status (Ariani and Ghafournia 2015; Baroi et al. 2020; Elmenfi and Gaibani 2016; Zakaria et al. 2007;). For example, studies in China and Iran (Ariani and Ghafournia 2015; Kuşçu 2017;) found significant differences in foreign language anxiety depending on students' grade level, parents' education and occupation.

The findings on whether gender influenced communication apprehension have been inconsistent. In Malaysia, Zakaria et al. (2007) found that male students showed more communication apprehension than female students. On the other hand, Dellah et al.'s (2020) study in Malaysia found that female students showed higher levels of apprehension, especially during oral presentations in English. Interestingly, Rauf et al. (2021) found that gender and year of the study did not significantly influence students' oral communication apprehension in Malaysia, highlighting the complex interplay between apprehension and demographic factors. The inconsistent findings on whether female or male students experience more communication apprehension may be due to the setting.

In a comprehensive systematic review and meta-analysis, Tahir et al. (2017) found that male students generally show less communication apprehension and third-year students have significantly less communication apprehension than first-year students. This could be linked to accumulating practice in oral presentations during university studies. These findings suggest understanding the influences of demographic factors on communication apprehension, language proficiency, and speaking practice.

#### METHODOLOGY

This descriptive study collected data from a cohort of 62 students from a polytechnic institute in Sarawak, Malaysia. The gender distribution within this cohort was predominantly males (82.26%), while females accounted for the remaining 17.74% of the students.

Table 1 provides background information on the language skills of Semester 1 students from the Electrical Engineering Department (JKE) at the Kuching Polytechnic located in the Sarawak state in Malaysia. The student's English proficiency was measured using their scores in the *Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia* (Malaysia Education Certificate) public examination administered at the end of their secondary education. Approximately 53.2% (33 students) had good language proficiency, with 21% obtaining

an A and 32.3% obtaining a B. Of the remaining participants, 25.8% (16 students) obtained a C, and 17.7% (11 students) received a D. A minimal number of students either passed with an E grade (1.6%, 1 student) or failed the English paper (1.6%, 1 student). These English grades were classified into three performance levels based on the classification proposed by Awang, Maros, and Ibrahim (2015), as shown in the last column of Table 1.

*Table 1: The English Language Results in Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia (Malaysia Education Certificate) Public Examination (N=62)*

Grade	Mastery Level in the SPM Exam	Frequency	Percentage	Grouped Percentage
A+	Super Distinction	0	0	21.0
A	High Distinction	10	16.1	
A-	Distinction	3	4.8	
B+	Super Credit	16	25.8	32.3
B	High Credit	4	6.5	
C+	Upper Credit	7	11.3	25.8
C	Credit	9	14.5	
D	Upper Pass	11	17.7	21.0
E	Pass	1	1.6	
G	Fail	1	1.6	

The PRCA-24 instrument (McCroskey 1982) was used to collect data on communication apprehension. In line with the focus of the study, the researchers specifically adapted the items related to public speaking. Certain adjustments were made to six items on the instrument, replacing the term "speech" with "oral presentation". This was done because of the observed tendency of students to associate the term 'speech' mainly with guest speakers at organised events.

The PRCA-24 questionnaire consists of two sections. The first section collects information about the participant's background, including gender, English proficiency and previous public speaking experience. The second section contains items on communication apprehension, and students responded on a Likert scale (1, strongly agree to 5, strongly disagree).

The questionnaire was distributed after the lecture at the beginning of the semester. Notably, the students had not yet given any oral presentations in their course at that time. Both oral and written consent was obtained from the students before they completed the questionnaire. They were assured that their information would be kept confidential and that no personal data would be collected.

After data collection, SPSS statistical software was used to generate descriptive statistics summarising the demographic profile. In addition, an independent t-test was conducted to examine the relationships between the independent variables (demographic factors, English proficiency and anxiety) and the resulting level of communication apprehension.

McCroskey's (1982) formula was used to determine the level of communication apprehension. Accordingly, scores below 14 were classified as 'low', scores between 15 and 23 were classified as 'moderate', and scores above 24 were classified as 'high'. The procedure for calculation included the following:

1. Add 18 + Items 1, 3, & 5: \_\_\_\_

2. Add items 2, 4, & 6: \_\_\_\_
3. Subtract Line 2 from Line 1: \_\_\_\_
4. Oral Presentation Sub-score – Line 3: \_\_\_\_

**RESULTS**  
**Experience**  
**in Public**  
**Speaking**

Regarding experience with public speaking, 6.5% (4 out of 62) of the students reported that they had never spoken in public. However, a significantly higher percentage, 93.5%, reported giving oral presentations during their secondary education. Based on these results, students were divided into two groups, and their communication apprehension was compared (results reported later).

**Communication**  
**Apprehension**  
**Level**

Table 2 presents the mean and SD of students' scores for items assessing communication apprehension during an oral presentation. Table 2 shows that most participants (71.0%; 44 out of 62) reported moderate communication apprehension (mean=1.29). Almost a quarter of the participants (22.6%; 14/62) had high levels of communication apprehension, and only 6.5% were free from communication apprehension during the oral presentation. The results show that the polytechnic students felt anxiety and discomfort when asked to give an oral presentation.

*Table 2: Participants' Level of Communication Apprehension (N=62)*

Level	Frequency	Percentage	Mean
High	14	22.6	1.77
Moderate	44	71.0	1.29
Low	4	6.5	1.94
Total	62	101.1	

\*The total does not add up to 100% due to rounding off

Table 3 shows the means for the individual items of the PRCA-24. Further analysis of the means showed that the highest mean score was obtained for the sixth item, "while giving an oral presentation, I get so nervous and forget the facts I know," with a mean score of 3.65 ( $\pm 1.07$ ). This result highlights the severity of the anxiety, which affects the ability to present as planned. The second highest mean score was for the second item, "Certain parts of my body feel very tense and rigid while giving the oral presentation", with a mean score of 3.48 ( $\pm 1.03$ ). These were physical signs of communication apprehension experienced by the students. The third item, "I feel relaxed while giving the oral presentation", had the lowest mean score ( $2.56 \pm 0.89$ ). The mean score was below the mid-point of three. Many students disagreed with this statement, showing they felt tense during an oral presentation.

*Table 3: Mean of PRCA-24 Items on Communication Apprehension during an Oral Presentation*

No	Item	Mean	Standard Deviation
1	I have no fear of giving an oral presentation.	2.70	1.02
2	Certain parts of my body feel very tense and rigid while giving the oral presentation.	3.48	1.03
3	I feel relaxed while giving the oral presentation.	2.56	0.89
4	My thoughts become confused and jumbled when I give the oral presentation.	3.43	1.06
5	I face the prospect of giving the oral presentation with confidence.	3.11	0.74
6	While giving the oral presentation, I get so nervous I forget facts I know.	3.65	1.07

**The Relationship between Communication Apprehension and Demographic Factors, Anxiety Levels, and Public Speaking Experience**

Table 4 summarises the results on factors influencing communication apprehension. For demographic factors, gender and SPM English Grade were correlated with communication apprehension level. The Pearson correlation test shows no significant relationship between communication apprehension scores and SPM English scores was found. As for gender, the t-test shows significant differences ( $p=0.05$ ). The mean scores show that male students tended to have higher communication apprehension scores ( $2.19 \pm 0.52$ ) than female students ( $2.00 \pm 0.44$ ).

*Table 4: Comparisons of the Mean Communication Apprehension Scores Based on Students' Demographic Factors and Public Speaking Experience*

Category	Frequency	Mean scores	Standard Deviation	P-value
<i>Gender</i>				
Male	51	2.19	0.52	0.05
Female	11	2.00	0.44	
<i>SPM grade</i>				
A	13	2.30	0.48	0.43
B	20	2.05	0.60	
C	16	2.25	0.44	
D, E and F	13	2.07	0.49	
<i>Public speaking experience</i>				
Yes	58	2.12	0.49	0.018*
No	4	2.75	0.50	

*Notes:* Independent T-test was used for factors comprising two and more than two levels, respectively.

\*P-values less than 0.05 was considered statistically significant

However, the t-test results showed the influence of public speaking experience on communication apprehension. Students with public speaking experience and students without public speaking experience had significantly different apprehension scores ( $P =$



0.018). The mean score for students with public speaking experience is higher ( $2.75 \pm 0.50$ ) than for students without public speaking experience ( $2.12 \pm 0.49$ ).

**DISCUSSION** This study determined the level of communication apprehension among polytechnic students in Sarawak, Malaysia, and the association with demographic factors, anxiety levels and public speaking experience. The study revealed that most students (71.0%) reported moderate levels of communication apprehension. Regarding factors influencing communication apprehension, the study found that students experienced anxiety and discomfort when engaging in an oral presentation. There was a significant relationship between public speaking experience and the level of communication apprehension.

The moderate level of communication apprehension observed in this study is similar to the findings of other studies using PRCA-24, such as Naser and Isa (2017), who studied undergraduate students at UiTM Shah Alam, Malaysia. Kho and Ting (2021) also found moderate anxiety about oral presentations among another group of polytechnic students.

Students were asked to respond to relevant items related to challenges in oral presentations to understand better the reasons for the communication apprehension found in this study. The items with the highest mean scores indicated that students were nervous during an oral presentation, reflected in their body movements, facial expressions and tense body.

The above results are unsurprising as only 6.5% of the students never had public speaking experience during their secondary school years. These students had not been asked to make oral presentations. However, most (93.5%) of the students had given an oral presentation before, but they may not be facing a larger group of people at such events. In schools, oral presentations may not always be for assessment purposes, unlike in universities, where the coursework is a continuous form of assessment.

As for the relationship between demographic factors and communication apprehension, t-tests show that male students had significantly different scores from female students in communication apprehension ( $p = 0.05$ ). The mean scores show that male students had greater communication apprehension in oral presentations than female students. The results showed no significant relationship between English proficiency and communication apprehension level.

However, students with public speaking experience had lower levels of communication apprehension than those without the experience. The Pearson correlation result was negative, meaning that students with experience in delivering oral presentations had significantly lower (negative association) scores on communication apprehension than students without such experience and vice versa.

**CONCLUSION** The study on communication apprehension of polytechnic students showed moderate apprehension. Communication apprehension is not significantly associated with English proficiency (measured using SPM English grade). There is a significant relationship between communication apprehension and public speaking experience, showing the usefulness of practice in lowering apprehension. There is also a gender difference in communication apprehension, where male students faced greater communication apprehension than female students when making oral presentations. In general, the findings of this study are significant because they provide educators with a basis for implementing programmes to address oral presentation apprehension and for planning

effective instructional strategies to reduce students' oral presentation apprehension. Educators can improve their student's public speaking skills through frequent public speaking programmes on campus and incorporate aspects of public speaking into the curriculum (Balakrishnan, Abdullah, and Sui 2022). In addition to inspiring students, educators should provide adequate opportunities to develop good oral communication skills. Therefore, training is needed to help students remove obstacles to good presentations (Amir et al., 2022). Educators should also encourage students to use communication strategies to improve their oral presentation performance (Ibrahim et al. 2021).

Despite the critical findings of this study, there are limitations. This study is a preliminary investigation with a relatively small, purposively selected group of students (N = 62). Therefore, the findings cannot be generalised to the entire population of students in polytechnics in Malaysia. In addition, only a few items of the PRCA-24 were considered in assessing the challenges faced by students during an oral presentation.

Future research could investigate oral presentation apprehension among other levels of students, such as in secondary school, technical and vocational education and training (TVET) institutions, community colleges, and universities. This is indirectly an investigation into the influence of public speaking experience, based on the assumption that students acquire more public speaking experience with more years of education. Other factors that hinder the effectiveness of oral presentations could also be the subject of future research. Interviews should be conducted with students to find out how they perceive the environment for effective oral presentation so that pedagogical strategies can be formulated to help them overcome communication apprehension. Such studies will provide empirical evidence for developing interventions to improve students' oral presentation skills, enhancing their academic performance and future career prospects.

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