Are Female Freshmen of Arts Apprehensive?
A Study Based on Faculty of Arts, University of Jaffna, Sri Lanka

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Abstract:
Oral communicative competence among undergraduates in Sri Lankan universities is expected to be very high. There are many factors that influence the development of oral communicative competence (OCA). One of the factors that hinder the development is communication apprehension. However, no studies have yet been conducted in Sri Lanka on the oral communication apprehension of undergraduates. Therefore, this first ever study in Sri Lanka attempted to find out if oral communication apprehension existed among the freshmen of Faculty of Arts, University of Jaffna. The study was conducted with randomly selected 124 female freshmen of the Faculty of Arts. A mixed method approach was applied. A questionnaire - Personal Report of Communication Apprehension (PRCA-24) - and semi structured interviews were employed to collect data and the study revealed OCA existed moderately.

Keywords: oral communication apprehension, shyness, stage fright, reticence, anxiety

1. Introduction

The importance of English as the link language has been increasingly felt in almost all the fields of study. It has become a necessary but not sufficient condition to excel in the medical field. English as the international language of scientific dissemination is drawing the interest of many researchers (Burgess & Cargill, 2008; Ferguson, 2007; Hyland, 2009; Swales, 1997). However, the use of English as a link language in the research arena jeopardizes non-native speakers of English when they attempt to get the results of their work published in the international forums (Lillis & Curry, 2010; Mauranen, 2011). Rodrigo, (2015) states that "the role of English as one of the languages for international academic and scientific exchange is currently acknowledged by scholars". But this has been a gruesome waddle for many non-native English-speaking scholars when communicating in English to disseminate knowledge.

All those who pass out from universities in different fields should be communicatively competent in order to be successful in their workplace tasks effectively (Charlesworth 2008; Crosling and Ward 2002). At the same time job providers price excellent oral communication skills since: employees need to interact efficiently and productively within, and for, the organisation; listening to and conveying information accurately is crucial; giving instructions and explanations clearly is essential; and engaging in constructive debate and contributing to meetings and committees is fundamental to the success of the organisation.

As this is the global trend, it has become paramount important to our medical students to be competent in oral communication. However, developing oral communicative competence in these students-at least for a majority of them-is an uphill task for the language instructors. So many factors including social and cultural restrictions and demands hinder the acquisition of oral communication competence.

2. Review of Related Literature

Among the many factors that negatively act upon the realisation of oral communicative competence, shyness, stage fright, reticence, apprehension and anxiety are a few.

2.1. Shyness

Shyness does not represent a single construct. It is a label that has been applied to a variety of disparate constructs. Most importantly, the construct does not seem to have any property that is either universal across writers in this area or that is unique from other related constructs.

According to Zimbardo (1977), "Shyness is a fuzzy concept." However, the literature in the area of shyness indicates that there is no consensual definition of the construct. Zimbardo carefully and explicitly avoids defining what he means by "shyness." However, his writings on shyness indicate that he is referring to a feeling of discomfort in a variety of communication situations. Thus Zimbardo can be considered to be approaching shyness primarily from a cognitive orientation. He also acknowledges the trait/state distinction in

shyness when he notes that some people are generally shy while others experience situational shyness. If one restricts his view of shyness to that enunciated by Zimbardo, there appears to be no meaningful distinction between this construct and that of communication apprehension (CA), which will be discussed later in this paper.

Buss views shyness as "the relative absence of expected social behaviors" (Buss, 1980, p. 184). Shyness can be seen as a subset of the reticence construct.

2.2. Stage Fright

Stage fright is a response to either the participation in or the anticipation of a public performance, such as a public speech, an oral reading, singing before a group, or even performing in an athletic competition before an audience. It is experienced at least to some degree by nearly everyone.

2.3. Reticence

Reticence has been a popular term in the scholarly field of interpersonal communication. A reticent person, according to an early classification, is a person "to whom the anxiety outweighs his projection of gain from the situation" (Phillips 1968, as cited in McCroskey 1977: 78). People avoid communication because they believe they will lose more by talking than by remaining silent (Phillips 1984). They avoid social situation in which they feel inept. Burgoo (1976) describes reticence as unwillingness to communicate (p. 62).

Kelly and Keaten define reticence as "the behaviour that people avoid communication because they believe it is better remain silent than to risk appearing foolish"(2000:168).

According to Dwyer & Heller-Murphy, (1996) students become reticent due to various reasons such as fear of public failure, fear of being ridiculed for making mistakes, insufficient proficiency in English language, lack of self-confidence, and lack of familiarity with the culture and the rules and norms of English conversation. Reticence moved from being viewed as a cognitive construct to being viewed from a strict behavioral perspective. The contemporary view of reticence is the reverse of communication competence (Phillips, 1980).

Reticence and OCA once were twin constructs; their relationship today is markedly different. Reticence is the much broader of the two constructs. If reticence is viewed as a construct representing the broad range of communicative incompetence, as it is viewed by Phillips (1980), then CA is a subset of that broad construct (McCroskey & Richmond, 1980).

2.4. Anxiety

May (1950) defines anxiety as diffuse apprehension, differing from fear in its vagueness and objectlessness, and as a state that is associated with feelings of uncertainty, helplessness and threat to the core or essence of personality. Spielberger (1972) included appraisal into the concept of anxiety and considered it as "an emotion based on the appraisal of threat, an appraisal that entails symbolic, anticipatory and other uncertain elements"(p.12). Epstein (1972) added emotional arousal to anxiety and posited that anxiety was

> A state in which the individual experiences diffuse arousal, but is unable to direct that arousal into purposive action for any of a variety of reasons, including repression, failure in discrimination, a waiting period between perception of threat and possible action, indecision, conflict between opposing response tendencies, and external restraints (1972:311)

Beck (1972) perceived anxiety as an unpleasant emotional reaction to real or imagined dangers that were accompanied by automatic discharge and subjective experiences such as "tension", "fright" or "nervousness". To Catell (1972) anxiety was "centrally a suspension of behavioural expression paradoxically combined with a heightening of dynamic readiness"(p.159). Izard confined anxiety to "an unstable and variable combination of interacting fundamental emotions"(1972:76).

According to Rachman (1998), anxiety is "diffuse, objectless, unpleasant and persistent"(p.3) in its purest form. To Goodwin it is "an emotion that signifies the presence of danger that cannot be identified or, if identified, is not sufficiently threatening to justify the intensity of the emotion"(1986 :3)

2.5. Oral Communication Apprehension

McCroskey (1970) introduced, oral communication apprehension (OCA) as a "broadly based anxiety related to oral communication." Later, McCroskey himself modified the definition of communication apprehension to be regarded as "an individual's level of fear or anxiety associated with either real or anticipated communication with another person or persons" (1977: 78).

Oral communication apprehension (OCA) consists four different subcategories: trait-like, context-based, audience-based and situational CA (McCroskey and Richmond 1995: 42). The trait-like CA, according to Booth-Butterfield and Booth-Butterfield (1992), is synonymous with personality. To make a distinction between the actual traits and consistently appearing aspects of personality, McCroskey and Richmond (1995) used the term "trait-like". Trait-like CA variables hardly change. The Personal Report of Communication Apprehension (PRCA-24) of McCroskey and Richmond (1995) is frequently used by researchers to measure the Trait-like CA.

Context-based CA is "a relatively enduring, personality-type orientation toward communication in a given type of context" (McCroskey and Richmond 1995: 45). This type of CA differs from context to context. A person may have high Context-based CA in classroom but low in the playground with peers. McCroskey and Richmond (1995) state that this CA may be as high as 70 percent.

McCroskey and Richmond's (1995: 46) define Audience-based CA as "a relatively enduring orientation toward communication with a given person or group of people". In the Tamil culture in Sri Lanka, for a daughter-in-law, the Audience-based CA will be higher

when she speaks to her father-in-law compared to speaking to mother-in-law. That is the audience-based CA is not personality based, but rather a response to situational constraints created by the other person or group.

McCroskey and Richmond (1995: 48) state that situational CA is: "a transitory orientation toward communication with a given person or group of people". This is a passing sensation of apprehension with certain combinations of people (or groups of people) and situations. Like Context-based CA and Audience-based CA, situational CA is not personality based.

2.6. Impacts of OCA

CA affects the performance of students and teachers as well. A general decision can be made from the above discussion that CA affects the communicative ability of the learners. However, there are other impacts of CA.

Students with high CA will try to avoid communicative situations or may either give a minimal response or choose to withdraw from communicating altogether. McCroskey and Beatty (1998: 225) state that the individual may exhibit disruptive communication behavior as a result of CA. They further state that it is a typical product of CA, and encompasses such flawed forms of expression as disruptions in verbal fluency and unnatural communication behavior. Additionally, the individual is more prone to poor choices of communication strategy, which can lead to subsequent self-reprimand and self-mocking.

High CA can, according to McCroskey (1997: 103), negatively impact on knowing and understanding appropriate communication behavior, the physical skill of communication, and positive communication affect, which refers to the desire an individual has to produce appropriate communicative behavior.

Further, dissatisfaction towards his school may develop (McCroskey 1977: 151). This might result in poor performance. Their assignments were evaluated more negatively by trained observers than those of others (Bourhis et al. 2006: 217).

A feeling of guilt because of their shortcomings in the target language, especially when compared to their peers (Bekleyen 2001: 80).

2.7. Handling OCA

OCA can be handled in two ways: 'behavioural interventions and pedagogical interventions' (Simons, Higgins & Lowe 1995). They state that "tapping on an individual's physiological and/or psychological state, that is, on his/her attitude to communicating and the underlying fear associated with the apprehension" is behavioural intervention which includes "systematic desensitization, cognitive modification and visualization. Systematic desensitization involves relaxation exercises and is associated with lower levels of both state(situational) and trait OCA (Simons, Higgins & Lowe 1995, p. 164). Here the person trained is made to perceive public speaking as 'non-threatening' rather than 'threatening' (Ayres, Hopf & Will 2000, p.24).

Cognitive modification is altering "the way a person views the communication task and decrease any perceptions of threat of punishment" (Allen, Hunter & Donohue 198, p.:62) and visualization makes the student to imagine that he has successfully completed the communication assignment.

Pedagogical interventions attend to the expected communicative competence. Two of the pedagogical interventions are skills training and actual public speaking. Robinson (1997) found that skill training is the most common intervention. However, there are studies (Allen et al., 1989; Stanga & Ladd, 1990; Ruchala & Hill, 1994; Thomas et al., 1994; Kelly & Keaten, 2000) that reveal skills training impacted negatively on high apprehensive.

Providing a learning that supports positively environment is also important in handling OCA. This can be done by providing a rich context which supports interpersonal dyadic conversation, group discussion, and simulations of public speaking), by 'motivating the students' through providing rewards for even small improvements, and 'making the setting more friendly-grouping with a friend or stranger' (Shanahan, 2013).

Previous studies on OCA

Everett (1999) found that there was no correlation between CA and academic achievement. Everett measured using GPA.

Frantz, Marlow, and Wathen (2005) examined the differences in communication apprehension (CA), regarding the learners' gender. The students were asked to complete the Personal Report of Communication Apprehension (PRCA), a self-report measure of communication apprehension. It was found that females had a statistically significant higher level of CA.

Liu (2006) conducted a study on anxiety in Chinese undergraduate non-English majors at three different proficiency levels employing different methods such as survey, observations, reflective journals, and interviews. The study revealed that there was a negative correlation between anxiety and proficiency.

Indra Devi and Feroz (2008) conducted a study with 32 Special Semester undergraduates of the Electrical Engineering Faculty in UTeM in Malaysia to find out if communication apprehension existed among electrical engineering students, and the correlation between communication apprehension and performance in the oral presentation skills. They found that the participants had a moderate amount of communication apprehension. However, in contrary to Liu's (2006) study, their study did not reveal any correlation between CA and performance.

A study conducted by Matsuoka (2008) on communication apprehension of Japanese college students also found a negative correlation between proficiency level and OCA.

A study conducted by Amogne and Yigzaw (2012) to find out if OCA existed among maritime engineering trainees in Bahir Dar University, Ethiopia found that the students indicated that they were generally apprehensive in EFL oral communication. The participants showed the highest apprehension to public speaking. It was also found that communication apprehension was negatively correlated with performance.

Patil and Karekatti (2012) conducted a study among 100 engineering students of the Faculty of Engineering in Western Maharashtra. The results showed that that majority of the students who participated in the study perceived themselves to have high and only 9%

perceived to have low communication apprehension while communicating in English. 43% students had moderate communication apprehension. It was also found that during oral presentation or speech the students were more apprehensive. However, in group discussion they were lower apprehension compared to other situations.

2.8. Research questions (RQ)
Main RQ1. Does oral communicative apprehension exist among freshmen of the Faculty of Medicine?
Sub RQ1. If OCA exists to what degree does it exist?
Main RQ2. Does level of OCA impact on the achievement in English language in the university?

3. Methodology
A mixed method approach was employed where both qualitative and quantitative methods of analyses were done. For quantitative data collection McCroskey's (1984) Personal Report of Communication Apprehension (PRCA 24) was used and for qualitative data semi structured interviews were employed.

3.1. Participants
One hundred and twenty four female freshmen from the Faculty of Arts took part in the study. These students were admitted to the university during the academic year 2015/2016. They were in their second semester of their first year in the university. They all had English learning experience of at least 9 years at school level.   All the participants fell in the age group 20-22 years. Consent of the relevant authorities (Dean/Faculty of Arts) and the participants was obtained in writing.

3.2. Instruments
The questionnaire which was used to measure students' oral communication apprehension comprised 24 items measuring oral communication apprehension. This instrument was the latest version for assessing Personal Report of Communication Apprehension (PRCA-24) (McCroskey, 1984). The items are statements aiming to assess a person's reactions to communicating in four different settings (dyad, group, meeting and public speaking). Researchers (McCroskey, 1984; Beatty, 1994; Richmond et al., 2008; Mustapha et al., 2010) found the instrument to have a high-level reliability (Cronbach alpha > 0.90). The PRCA-24 contains 24 items designed to assess an individual's level of apprehension regarding communication in four speaking contexts – dyad, small group, meeting, and public– and is a Likert-type self-report measure. The PRCA-24 offers the advantage of "(1) easiness and inexpensiveness, (2) usefulness to assess anxiety response across various communication contexts, and (3) high reliability" (McCroskey, 1970, p. 70). The PRCA-24 was selected because it is one of the most widely used measures of communication apprehension and has well established reliability and validity rates. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with a randomly selected limited number (11) of participants. The PRCA results were compared with the grades obtained in the oral examination.

4. Results
The results were quantified as per McCroskey's and analysed to calculate the OCA for each of the components: dyad, small group, meeting, and public speaking. Then the overall OCA for all participants was calculated. Table 1 below summarizes the results. Pearson's correlation coefficient was calculated to see if the grades obtained by the participants for English during the end semester examination of the first year first semester.

Type of oral communication	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. deviation
OCA in dyadic conversation	124	7	23	14.13	4.10
OCA in small group discussion	124	8	23	15.61	5.26
OCA in meeting	124	9	23	16.74	5.67
OCA in public speaking	124	10	23	17.01	5.92
Overall OCA level	124	27	81	61.92	13.06

Table 1: Descriptive statistics - participants' levels of OCA

Table 1 shows that the mean OCA of all the participants for dyadic conversation, small group discussion, meeting and public speaking as 14.13, 15.61, 16.74, 17.01 respectively whereas the overall mean OCA of all the participants is 61.92.
The Pearson's correlation coefficient between the overall OCA level of all participants and the grades achieved by the participants was - .361(r = - .361).

5. Results of Interviews
79.16 % of the participants said that due to fear they could not speak well, while 45.83% referred evaluative and stressful classroom settings. 37.50% stated poor educational and economic background and limited exposure to L2 as reasons for OCA. Fear was brought in different ways as one of the factors that contribute to the OCA. 66.67% said their vision became blurred and they trembled while 62.50% mentioned the presence of even a few people made them tremble. 95.83% of the interviewees said that their hearts beat fast, hands sweat and shook and they felt falling sick. 87.50% participants revealed that they were alright until the previous day but on the day of presentation they began to shake. 79.16% came out with the fact that they got upset and afraid once they were to stand up in

front of the examiners. These students said had the same lecturer who taught them been on the panel of examiners they would have done better. The interview also revealed that 75.00% of the participants were apprehensive in total.

6. Discussion and Conclusion

As we can see from Table1 the mean OCA increases when students move from dyadic through small group and meeting to public speaking. The overall mean OCA of all the participants 61.92 which is medium in McCroskey's terms (<55=low; 55-83= medium; >83=high).

In relation to the Main Research Question 1, the study reveals that OCA do exist among the female freshmen of the Faculty of Arts. The answer to sub-research question 1 is that OCA exists moderately among the participants. It is medium in McCroskey's terms.

The qualitative data also reveal that OCA does exist among the participants and it was a little higher than the results obtained from the PRCA questionnaire.

The Pearson's correlation between the overall OCA level all participants and the grades achieved by the participants was (r = - .361). This answers the Main Research Question 2 positively. There is a relation between the OCA and the performance the participants in the oral examinations. However, the relationship is negatively correlated, that is the higher the OCA, the lower the grade attained in the oral examination. This may be interpreted as the presence of OCA will impact negatively and reduce the performance of the learners.

7. Recommendation

As the study reveals that OCA exists moderately, methods like task-based teaching and content language integrated learning, which reduce OCA have to be adopted in the language classes.

A friendly atmosphere has to be created by the teachers concerned in the classrooms.

Simulations of every day real world activities like conversations between a receptionist at a hotel and a guest, booking a flight ticket over the telephone have to be included in the lessons.

Acting short scenes of plays, if possible, will eliminate OCA.

8. Further Research

Further research has to be carried out with a larger sample as well as with other Faculties of this university, which might shed light on how we can overcome OCA and improve the speaking ability of our undergraduates.

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