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Language Apprehension among Non Native Speakers of English

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Language plays a central role in everyday communication activities. Therefore, an individual need to be able to use language to communicate with confidence and without fear. One of the major fears that people have is the fear of communication. This fear is most of the time due to a lack of confidence in communicating in a particular language or due to poor proficiency in the language. In some cases it can also be due to attitudinal problems. In the context of teaching and learning English as a second or foreign language, students can have a great fear of using English with confidence. This fear can be an acute one and thus students may avoid using English to communicate. However, non native speakers of English need to be highly competent in the use of the English language for a variety of communicative purposes particularly in meeting the challenges of globalisation and that of the digital age. This article presents some insights on language apprehension found among communication undergraduates who are non native speakers of English.

I . Introduction

1.1 Background and Literature Review

This paper presents findings based on a small scale study on English language apprehension among communication undergraduates and the dilemma the students

face with regard to using the English language for communicative purposes.

1.2 Role of English language in communication

Language plays a central role in everyday communication activities. In today's borderless world the language for international communication is English. Thus, non native speakers of English whose mother tongue and national language is not English are expected to be highly competent in the use of the English language for a variety of communicative purposes particularly in meeting the challenges of globalisation and the digital age. The language, which non native speakers (NNS) of English select for communicating, would depend on their competence and confidence in using that language. Using language for communication definitely involves making choices. These choices will depend very much on our attitudes towards the language as well as how confident we feel about using the language to express ourselves. Those who consider themselves to be bilinguals and who perceive themselves as being able to speak well in their mother tongue as well as in English would also to a large degree make choices with regard to which language they might use in different situations. The language use for communicating at a professional and international level would be a language that a person feels he/she can use without any apprehension. In the Malaysian context for example, this choice may be the Malay language or Bahasa Malaysia (BM), which are the national and official language as well as the medium of instruction in schools and in public institutions of higher learning. Those who choose to communicate in English are usually those who are highly confident in using the language and have no fear in using it.

Many Malaysian students feel inadequate about using English all the time and they do not have the confidence of communicating effectively in the language. This leads to apprehension in using the English language for communicative purposes.

1.3 English in Malaysia

In Malaysia, English is a second language. Bahasa Malaysia (BM) or Malay is the official and national language. English is taught as a subject in all primary and secondary schools. All other subjects are taught in Malay. Public universities too have to use Malay as the main medium of instruction although the use of English

is allowed. In most of the urban areas English is widely used as a second language. However, in the rural areas English is more of a foreign language.

In The Malaysian corporate world or business sector, English functions as the main language of communication. Thus, undergraduates upon graduating from universities seeking employment in the corporate sector are required to be highly competent in the use of English for business and international communication (Nair-Venugopal, 2000) and within the Malaysian context they would have to be competent bilinguals conversant in both the Malay and English language.

1.4 Other research

Research have shown that in some cultures, non-native speakers of English suffer from communication apprehension when they have to speak, read, write and listen in English (McCroskey, 1984; Lucas, 1984; McCroskey et al., 1985; Holbrooke, 1987; Greigo-Jones, 1994; Kivela, 1996; Rafik-Galea & Siti Yasmin Mohd. Zain, 2001). Most of these studies focused on written apprehension and oral communication apprehension or basically communication apprehension. This fear or apprehension is much higher degree than when speaking, reading, writing or listening in their own native language. It is suggested that high levels of language or communication apprehension will act as a barrier for non-native speakers of English to use English willingly to communicate. This may lead to attitudinal problems with regard to the use of the English language and thus impedes effective language learning.

1.5 Communication apprehension (CA) in the context of English as a second or foreign language

In today's world the international language of communication is English. Most countries in the world have their own native language, which is most often than not the official language of the country and the medium of instruction at school and in all institutions of higher learning. English is very often taught as a second or foreign language depending on a country's language policy. When people are NNS of English, and are forced to communicate in English, their encounter becomes so difficult and unrewarding that they either consciously or unconsciously avoid situations where communicating in English is required. Thus setting the stage for communication apprehension.

McCroskey (1984) defines communication apprehension as an individual's level of fear or anxiety associated with either real or anticipated communication with another person or persons. In the context of this study, this definition was expanded to include language and called language apprehension which is defined as an individual's level of fear or anxiety associated with either real or anticipated communication in English as a second or foreign language in speaking, listening, reading and writing and in communicating with another person or persons (modified from McCroskey, 1984). In the context of this study English language apprehension is considered to be a situation where there is a fear of communicating in the English language due to poor English language proficiency, which can affect the use of the English language in all aspects of communication. Language apprehension is considered to be the same as communication apprehension, which involves reticence, unwillingness to communicate, shyness and predisposition to communicate. These have been extensively researched and have received much theoretical attention over the past two decades by scholars in communication and psychology. Payne and Richmond (1984) listed over 1000 in a bibliography of publications and papers in this area.

In the field of second language learning, some attention has been directed toward CA in second language communication (Fayer, McCroskey and Richmond, 1984) and in second language instruction (Lucas, 1984; McCroskey, Fayer and Richmond, 1985; Young, 1990). It is suggested that since CA has been well established as a primary reason for communication avoidance and communication disruption in a first language, it may prevent people from communicating in a second or foreign language and at times impede their communication when they do. CA may further inhibit the learning of a second or foreign language because the apprehensive individual may be unwilling to participate in the practice and learning of the language.

1.6 Types of communication apprehension

There are several types of communication apprehension. A person may be apprehensive in one situation but not in another. Furthermore, communication is not just confined to talk, an individual may, for example, be apprehensive about communicating when he/she is engaged in a conversation or discussion but may feel extremely comfortable about writing. McCroskey and Richmond (1987) identify four types of communication apprehension: trait like, context based, receiver or

audience-based, and situational. Trait like CA concerns mainly oral communication and refers to a relatively stable and enduring predisposition of an individual towards experiencing fear and/ or anxiety across a wide range of communication contexts. Context based refers to a relatively enduring, personality type CA that an individual experiences in a specific context. For example a person may experience high levels of CA when speaking in groups but be not in dyadic (two) interactions or when speaking to others who are from a different cultural group. Receiver or audience based CA depends on the person or type of person or group that is involved in the communication. For example, being fearful or anxious when communicating with the boss or with strangers but not with friends (McCroskey and Richmond, 1987). Situational CA depends upon changes in the environment in which communication takes place.

II. Methodology

2.1 Purpose and Research questions

The purpose of this small scale exploratory study was to gather initial data on the viability of carrying out such a study with modifications and to further develop an instrument for identifying language apprehension among NNS of English in the context of English as a second or foreign language. In this study, the researcher was interested to see whether language apprehension did exist among NNS of English and what was the extend of this apprehension. At the same time the researcher was also keen to identify the reasons behind such apprehension. The study aimed at obtaining an insight about how students feel about their competency in using English which is a second language the kinds of communication apprehension they faced in using the language.

2.2 Subjects

The subjects of the study were 30 final year undergraduates from the Department of Communication, Universiti Putra Malaysia majoring in Communication studies. The subjects consisted of 18 Malay students, 10 Chinese students and 2 Indian students. There were 12 males and 18 females. These students were the first batch of the Bachelor of Communication programme. Seventy percent of the lectures are

conducted in Bahasa Malaysia(BM). Instructors would use both languages depending on their own competency in either language. Assignments and examinations are in BM. However students who are comfortable in using English may turn in the assignments in English.

2.3 Instrument

In order to gather data, a thirty item questionnaire adapted from Borzi et al's (2001) study was adapted for use to suit the needs of this study. The questionnaire consisted of closed questions.

III. Discussion of Findings

The analysis of this exploratory study revealed some interesting patterns and developments with regard to English language apprehension. The findings also showed some matters of concern. Table 1 presents the findings based on students report of their CA in terms of language use. The students were asked to respond to the questions by simply stating **Yes** or **No**.

TABLE 1

N = 30					
Ques. No.	Question	N Yes	%	N No	%
1	While participating in a conversation in English with other people, I feel very nervous	28	93.33%	2	6.67%
2	I have no fear of facing an audience and speaking in English	2	6.67%	28	93.33%
3	I talk less in English because I am shy	22	73.33%	8	26.67%
4	I have great difficulty in expressing myself in English	20	66.67%	10	33.33%
5	I am afraid to express myself in English in a group	17	56.67%	13	43.33%
6	I look forward to an opportunity to speak in public in English	10	33.33%	20	66.67%
7	I find the prospect of speaking in English pleasant	12	40%	18	60%

8	When communicating formally in English to others I feel tense and unnatural	15	50%	15	50%
9	I am tense and nervous while participating in group discussions using English	19	63.33%	11	36.67%
10	Although I may feel comfortable speaking in English with my close friends, I am at a lost for words in expressing myself to people who are good at English	22	73.33%	8	26.67%
11	I always avoid communicating in English	20	66.67%	10	33.33%
12	During my practical training I was always fearful of using English	20	66.67%	10	33.33%
13	I was mostly tensed and stressed out during my practical training because I had to communicate in English all the time	20	66.67%	10	33.33%
14	I feel self-conscious when I am called upon to answer a question or give an opinion in English	18	60%	12	40%
15	I avoid tasks that involves communicating in English	18	60%	12	40%
16	My thoughts become jumbled and confused when I speak in English before an audience	16	53.33%	14	46.67%
17	Conversing in English with people who hold positions of authority causes me to be fearful and tense	20	66.67%	10	33.33%
18	I feel relax when I have to listen to discussions in English	14	46.67%	16	53.33%
19	It is often difficult for me to concentrate on what others are saying in English	19	63.33%	11	36.67%
20	I would rather not have to listen to other people speaking in English at all	17	56.67%	13	43.33%
21	I am generally able to read and understand simple literature in English	30	100%	-	-
22	I am unable to understand literature using complex English, example journals	20	66.67%	10	33.33%
23	I avoid tasks that involves writing in English	20	66.67%	10	33.33%
24	I rather get someone else to write for me in English	16	53.33%	14	46.67%

25	I have no confidence in writing simple memos in English	14	46.67%	16	53.33%
26	I will not send an e-mail in English to someone who is more fluent in English than me	19	63.33%	11	36.67%
27	I think I have more confidence in communicating in BM rather than English in non international situations	18	60%	12	40%
28	I think I have more confidence in communicating in English rather than BM in non international situations	14	46.67%	16	53.33%
29	I think I am confident in communicating in both English and BM in any situation	12	40%	18	60%

Responses to questions in table 1 clearly indicates that CA and anxiety in the use of English does exist. The students show greater fear in using English for communication purposes within a field that demands fluency in English. Generally it could be seen that students faced high levels of apprehension in speaking in English to or with others, listening to spoken conversations in English, reading and writing in English.

3.1 Communicating in English orally

Responses to questions 1–17 showed that the students had high language or communication apprehension (CA) in speaking in English. More than 70% of the students indicated that they do feel uncomfortable when they had to speak in English. Only two students clearly indicated that they had no fear of facing an audience and speaking in English. When the researcher probe them further the students maintained that they were very fluent and highly confident in using the English language in all situations. Incidentally this two students are Malaysia Indians and besides speaking English they also speak Tamil and BM. 56.67% of the students maintained that they were afraid to express themselves in English even in a group and 43.33% said that they were alright when speaking in groups. Responses to question 8 is interesting in that half the students stated that when they had to communicate formally in English to others they felt tense and unnatural and the other half said no. This is interesting as in other instances 66.67% of the

students indicated that they had great difficulty in expressing themselves in English and it is the same as responses to question 10. It can only be suggested that for question 8 students contradicted themselves. However, a closer look at who the subjects are revealed at interesting situation. Twelve of the students are non Malays. These students use English a lot more than the Malay students. The non-Malay students speak more than two languages. That is, they speak their mother tongue which for the Chinese students would be one of the Chinese dialects or Tamil for the Indians, BM and English. The Malay students on the other hand are bilinguals speaking mainly Malay/BM and English. A large number are however monolinguals.

3.2 Apprehension in listening in English

Questions 18-20 required the respondents to indicate how they felt about listening to conversations or communication in English. There appears to be high levels of apprehension in listening to communication in English.

3.3 Reading and writing in English

Responses to questions 21-26 shows the same pattern of high levels of apprehension for both reading and writing although for question 21 all thirty subjects(100%) maintained that they could read and understand simple reading materials in English. What is interesting and is of concern are the responses to question 24 where 53.33% of the students indicated that they would probably get someone else to write for them in English. At the same time responses to question 23 showed that 66.67% of the students will avoid tasks which involves writing in English. However, responses to question 25 clearly suggests that there is less apprehension to write simple memos in English, thus suggesting that complex written tasks in English would create high levels of apprehension.

3.4 Communicating in English in different situations

Approximately 40% of the students maintained that they have more confidence in communicating in BM rather than English in on international situations. This is not surprising as BM is the official language of Malaysia and the medium of instruction in all schools and public institutions of higher learning. On the other hand 53.33%

maintained that they do not have more confidence in communicating in English in non-international situations with 46.67% saying that they were comfortable in using English in this situation. Responses to question 27 and 28 suggests that the students think that they would feel extremely uncomfortable in communicating in English in international situations. Interestingly 60% of the students said that they do not think that they are confident in communicating in both English and BM in any situation.

IV. Conclusion

The findings of the study suggests that high levels of apprehension does exist among the students when they have to communicate in English. Thus there is a connection between CA and language use for communicative purposes. This might also be true of other non English speaking situations in other cultural contexts. This simple exploratory study revealed high CA levels in using or communicating in English which is considered by some linguists to be a second/ foreign language in Malaysia. It appears that some of the CA exists due to personal traits which are inherent in the environment. For example some students when being interviewed maintained that they are looked down upon when they speak in English or people make fun of them when they speak in English. Thus, the environment or context reinforces the individuals experiences in either a negative or positive way. Other causes appear to be due to lack of confidence in terms of status in using the English language particularly in formal situations. It also appears that some of the causes of high levels of CA stem from reticence due to inexperience and/or communicative incompetence within certain contexts and due to the expectations and norms within the specific field of study, in this case communication. The findings appear to agree with that of McCroskey, (1982: 1) where high levels of CA are viewed as a potential inhibitor of the development of both communication competence and communication skill and as a direct precursor of negative communicative affect. Low CA, on the other hand, is seen as a facilitator of the development of communication competence and communication skill and as a precursor of positive communication affect.

Finally, when communicating with others in English, individuals are influenced and affected by many variables and CA may be the result of any number of different causes. The degree of CA that an individual experiences can vary

depending on their personality and the context of situation and this would to a degree influence language use in communicating. At the same time it is suggested that high levels of language and or communication apprehension will influence an individuals view of the language and create a negative or positive attitude towards mastering the language as a second language.

It is also suggested that for future studies the questionnaire need to be further expanded to include open-ended questions. The study further showed that there is also a need to develop a Likert scale questionnaire. In order to compliment the questionnaire it would be best to conduct interviews to enhance questionnaire findings.

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