

## RESEARCH ARTICLE

# English Oral Communication Apprehension: A Quantitative Inquiry on Malaysian Administrative Staff in an Educational Institution

Mohd Zulfadli Mat Husin<sup>1\*</sup> and Nor Yazid Khamis<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Deputy of Vice-Chancellor (Academic and International) Office, Universiti Malaysia Kelantan, 16300 Bachok, Kelantan, Malaysia.

<sup>2</sup>Centre for Modern Languages, Universiti Malaysia Pahang Al-Sultan Abdullah, 26600 Pekan, Pahang, Malaysia.

**ABSTRACT** – Even when employed, proficiency in English oral communication skills remains an asset. Mastering the skill is an advantage or could plausibly cause communication apprehension at the workplace. Comprehensive studies have covered English oral communication apprehension, yet the focus on workplace contexts still needs to be improved. Hence, this study investigates the oral communication apprehension levels of the administrative staff at a Malaysian public university. Utilising the Personal Report of Communication Apprehension 24 items (PRCA-24) instrument and a purposive sampling technique, the quantitative methodology of the study sampled one hundred fifteen administrative staff of the institution. The staff generally demonstrated moderate communication apprehension, with the highest in delivering public speeches using English. In addition, the t-tests and ANOVA scores showed no significant difference between the apprehension levels and investigated workplace variables, namely gender, education level, year of service and job grade among the staff. Nevertheless, the results provided sufficient evidence of English oral communication apprehension among the staff, which could intensify and jeopardise their job and productivity in the long run. The study implicates the need to strategies communication professional development training for the administrative staff to improve workplace English communication.

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## INTRODUCTION

Even after employment, English oral communication continues to be one of the most valued skills. The skill is a sought-after competency for employability (Chen, 2021; Kamil & Muhammad, 2021), and mastering it will mutually benefit employers and employees. Employers highlight oral communication as the most vital skill because it cultivates competitive workplace competence (Karachedee, 2017; Rimkeeratikul, 2018). Employees are expected to maximise their skills when engaging in various teamwork collaborations with other English-speaking clients or stakeholders (Hussin & Makmur, 2021). Hence, it is pertinent for employees to master oral communication or speaking skills in English. However, verbal communication is the most daunting skill to be developed and learned for many ESL learners (Jusoh et al., 2018). One possible reason is the lack of proficiency in speaking skills wherein speakers are concerned their image might be tarnished in front of other individuals and, 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).

Since the 1970s, many studies on L2 speakers have explored anxiety's effect. 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 others or anxiety about language use. Lucas (2012) explains that CA is a problem related to psychological elements commonly found in all human beings.

Since 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 systematised to transform the country HE by bolstering competition and enhancing national productivity and innovation. Malaysian HE internationalisation 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 internationalisation as one of the ten shifts to enhance the Malaysian HE system (MOE, 2015). As globalisation continues, university associates that comprise academic and non-academic (administrative) staff firmly need to be effective with their English oral communication. The administrative staff, which involves officers and support groups responsible for managing the institutions and related affairs, should possess linguistic ability in the language. 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. Those staff are expected to deliver and portray the best possible service and image of the institution.

Considering the increased frequency of language use at local tertiary educational institutions, proficient oral communication skills have indirectly become a highly sought-after criterion for administrative staff. The demand makes English verbal communication an essential skill to master in the workplace (Al-tahtamoni, 2019). Accordingly, 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). Staff may eventually experience a variety of behaviours before, during, or after verbally using the language in certain communicative events at the workplace. 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 jeopardise the individual’s job performance or reputation.

Moreover, it is understood that 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 characterised 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 they differ 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) also reinvigorates 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). Also, contrary to the investigation of language learners’ CA or anxiety, numerous studies expand from SLA in the secondary (Bastida Jr. & Yapo, 2019) to the tertiary levels (Ghazali et al., 2020; Kimberley et al., 2020; Razawi et al., 2015). Hence, much literature is needed to find out the 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. Based on the mentioned objectives, the research questions 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: conversation, group discussion, meeting, and public speaking?
3. Do the administrative staff CA levels differ according to workplace variables, i.e., gender, education level, year of service, job grade, and Malaysian University English Test (MUET) band?

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### English for Occupational Purposes

This study on CA 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.

EOP is part of the ESP branch. EOP is about the English language used by professionals and non-professionals (Carlin, 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 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, 201; Kenayathulla et al., 2019) in meeting the industry’s needs 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, i.e., meetings, group discussions, conversations, and public speaking.

### **Situated Learning Method in Community of Practice**

A workplace can form a community that consists of constantly engaging in the 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 (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, p.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. In a community of practice, learning involves participation that is not simply in events of employment 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 about these communities" (Wenger, 1999, p.4). A person's intentions to learn are formed through becoming a full participant in a socio-cultural practice, including knowledgeable learning skills (Lave & Wenger, 1991).

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 staff needs to learn with people in the institution 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 and Workplace Setting**

The general term related to anxiety among second language learners or speakers is communication apprehension (CA). 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 communicating or interacting with others (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). Context-based CA, also known as 'generalised-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 show a low level of CA outside the classroom when they communicate with different or the same peers.

Audience-based CA is "a relatively enduring orientation towards communication with a given person or group of people" (McCroskey, 1997, p.86). This type of CA 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 final one, situational CA, is "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 communicating 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.

This 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 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 lower-level CA in another context

(such as conversation or meeting) (Russ, 2013). Researchers are also interested in reasons that can predict the levels associated with the four communicative events (Kho & Ting, 2021).

Some jobs require employees to communicate more frequently based on their positions, pay grades or other factors. In Malaysian contexts, generally, public servant employees must be able to communicate in Malay, the official and national language. On the other hand, most private sector stressed on the significance of English language and most employers highlighted English communication skill as required skills to succeed in workplace (Ting et al., 2017). 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.

Several experts found an apparent connection between CA and variables in a workplace context. Winiiecki 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. 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).

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 motivated to use English in conversation. Still, male respondents showed more avoidance behaviour in terms of anxiety. Yet, as Rafek et al. (2014) highlighted, gender is an insignificant factor in CA, supported by McCroskey (1984), who explained that CA has minimal connection with gender. Based on the findings from several studies on different contexts towards gender roles in the CA (Abdullah, 2014; Kimberley et al., 2020), a common trend was found where females present a higher level of CA than males. However, most studies needed to test an extensive enough number of respondents to generalise this assumption. Although we can link the significance of genders in CA, other essential factors need to be considered, like upbringing, educational background differences, cultural differences, and context setting (Loureiro et al., 2020).

Likewise, concerning years of service and its relationship with CA, Winiiecki and Ayres (1999) reported that individuals with a high level of apprehension tend to become problematic regarding teamwork. Eventually, they quit that organisation. 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 (Winiiecki & 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 determines whether one can sustain in an organisation or has to develop coping strategies to adapt to certain situations and involve others in making decisions or prefer one person's show.

Regarding language proficiency, OCA significantly correlates with language learners' linguistic background and proficiency levels (Molnar & 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) and 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 socio-cultural 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.

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 English CA level (Ireland, 2020; Miskam & Saidalvi, 2018). Moreover, concerning gender and CA level, most studies reported that females were more apprehensive than males (Kimberley et al., 2020; Loureiro et al., 2020). 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 studies were conducted in classroom contexts among secondary and tertiary students, research was scarce 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 displayed average levels of CA. Similarly, Jusoh et al. (2018) also employed PRCA-24 to examine categories of OCA among 150 administrative officers from various department in a Malaysian public university and differences between the level of CA, gender and year of service. The female staff presented higher CA levels than the males, and those 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 the engineers' job performance. Interestingly, engineers with high CA levels express 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.

## METHODOLOGY

This study employed a quantitative approach and descriptive design in providing answers to research questions. The quantitative data in the form of questionnaires was collected. The study adopted a purposive non-probability sampling wherein the respondents in this study were 115 administrative staff at Universiti Malaysia Kelantan. 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 to specify their job descriptions and responsibilities at the public institution. Regardless, the staff are primarily involved in the four communicative workplace events in their daily job specifications.

### Research Instrument and Procedures

A specific instrument was designed and developed to gather the respondents' data on CA levels. It was a questionnaire developed by McCroskey & McCroskey (1988). The instrument had the Malay translated version to cater to the respondents' varied English proficiency levels. It was designed to be bilingual so that it is well-understood by the targeted (Bhar, 2016), hence more effective in optimising the reliability of the data. The questionnaire comprised two sections of 30 items:

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.

Section B: Adopted 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.' It consists of four events with six items: group discussion, interpersonal conversations, meetings and public speaking. The average of its Cronbach alpha scores is over 0.8 (Jusoh et al., 2018; Ka-kan-dee & Al-Shaibani, 2018; Nantanawanich, 2017). This study achieved an alpha value of 0.9 for all 24 survey items.

The questionnaire was emailed to all staff and after two weeks, 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. A review of comprehensive quantitative data was conducted to check for data entry errors and cleaned if necessary. Descriptive and inferential statistics in comparing frequency, mean scores, standard deviation, t-tests, and 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 McCroskey and McCroskey (1988) guidelines. PRCA sub-score analysis for each communicative event is detailed in Table 1. The overall CA score is a sum of all the communicative event scores.

**Table 1.** Circulation of PRCA sub-scores for communicative events.

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

As depicted in Table 2, 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 2.** 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

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

### Respondents' Demographic Profiles

Table 3 showed the frequencies and percentage of the respondents' demographic variables. According to the descriptive statistics, the frequency of the gender was approximately equal with 61 (53%) respondents were male and 54 (47%) were female. Majority of the respondents aged between 30 to 39 years old (85 or 73.9 percent). Most respondents accumulated years of service between the group of 6 to 10 years (54) and 11 to 15 years (39). Also, overwhelming, most respondents were in the grade of 41 to 44 with 94 or 81.7 percent. Similarly, 93 respondents obtained Bachelor's degree compared to Master and PhD. For MUET variables, 47.8 percent of respondents obtained Band 3 and none of them obtained Band 6.

**Table 3.** Respondents' profiles.

Profile	Categories	F	%
Gender	Male	61	53
	Female	54	47
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
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
Job Grade	41 to 44	94	81.7
	48 to 54	21	18.3
Education Level	Bachelor's degree	93	80.9
	Master's degree	21	18.3
	PhD	1	0.9
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

**RQ1: What are the Administrative Staff's Overall CA Levels in Using the English Language at the Workplace?**

Fifty-two respondents (45.2%) recorded a moderate CA level, and another 47 (40.9%) reported a low level, whilst sixteen respondents (13.9%) revealed a high CA when using the language (Table 4).

**Table 4.** 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

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 needed to be more responsive about communicating using English. The results also supported Batiha et al. (2016), who 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 a 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.

**RQ2: What are the Administrative Staff CA Levels in the Four Workplace Communicative?**

Table 5 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 5.** 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

Regarding 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, genders 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.

**RQ3: Do the Administrative Staff CA Levels Differ according to Workplace Variables?*****Communication Apprehension Scores and Gender***

Table 6 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). Both genders had the lowest anxious moments during group discussions.

**Table 6.** 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 7.** 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				

Table 7 indicates no significant difference in CA levels between genders,  $t(113) = -0.83$ ,  $p = .041$ . Both groups recorded a moderate CA level. Although the findings showed no significant differences between genders, the ladies experienced higher CA than the male respondents. Batiha et al. (2016), Jusoh et al. (2018), Loureiro et al. (2020), and Rafek et al. (2014) 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 a public communication activity. However, Mat Husin & Khamis (2023) suggested that gender is not associated with the CA levels among officers in a tertiary education institutions.

#### **Communication Apprehension Scores and Job Grades**

Job grades 41 to 44 officers reported higher CA levels (62.45), while those in 48 to 54 grades reported lower CA levels (61.10) (Table 9). Furthermore, the t-test results indicated no significant difference in the CA level and staff's job grades,  $t(113) = 0.27$ ,  $p = .079$ .

**Table 8.** CA scores based on job grades.

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

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 or small samples. Conversely, Nantanawanich (2017) reported the differences in 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.

#### **Communication Apprehension Scores and Year of Service**

Before the analysis, initially, five categories were combined into three as respondents were unevenly distributed between categories. The three new categories are less than five (5) years, six to 10 years, and more than 11 years, as showed in Table 9. 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, the study conducted ANOVA to compare the mean of the three groups on the score of English CA. In **Error! Reference source not found.** 10, a one-way ANOVA revealed no significant difference in the English CA level on years of working experience,  $F(56,58) = .802$ ,  $p = .796$ .



**Table 9.** 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 10.** 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			

Findings revealed that the CA level did not show significant differences, but the officers in service for less than five years recorded the lowest CA scores than other groups. 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. Also, this study finding is supported by Winiecki and Ayres (1999), who discovered that the duration of an individual working in a particular organisation did not affect the CA level. Nonetheless, Nantanawanich (2017) asserted that employees with more than 15 years of working experience had lower CA scores because they have more working experience, enabling them to be more confident in communicating using the language, resulting in lower CA levels.

#### **Communication Apprehension Scores and Education Level**

In analysing the CA score based on the 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 Ph.D. Table 11 showed no significant difference in the level of CA using English based on respondents' level of education,  $t(113) = -0.86$ ,  $p = 0.39$ . Data showed that those with Master's and PhDs recorded the highest CA level (65.60), in contrast to staff with bachelor's degrees who had the lowest CA level (61.40).

**Table 11.** T-test for CA scores 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				

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 speaking apprehension. Hypothetically, the higher education level should equip individuals to be more confident. In other words, the individuals should experience lower CA. It could also mean that education level is a core element for job entry requirements. After securing the job, 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.

#### **Communication Apprehension Scores and MUET Bands**

Seven MUET band variables were initially 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 as showed in Table 12. 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 13). 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 12.** Descriptive analysis of CA scores based on MUET bands.

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

**Table 13.** ANOVA for CA scores by MUET results.

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

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.

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

Several remarkable conclusions can be deduced from this study. The results revealed that administrative staff at the level of officers experienced a 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. In other words, most officers are not afraid of using the English language in the workplace. They can use English within the four communicative events: group discussion, meeting, conversation, and group discussion. The outcome is as predicted since the officers (respondents) have the required qualifications based on their levels of education. In other words, the current English language criteria for hiring administrative staff positions at public universities are sufficient requirements for recruitment. Nevertheless, opportunities or at least a few occasions using English at the workplace to communicate must be given for the staff to practice the skills, or it will deteriorate. This scenario will cause CA among the staff in the long run.

This study recommends that top management to focus on improving English communication skills among administrative staff. Mastering the English language by administrative staff would enhance their daily tasks (Mat Husin & Radzuan, 2021). 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 internalisation of the higher education sector in Malaysia. Within 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.

This study corresponds with the need for more research on CA in organisational contexts to provide more insight into challenges experienced by workers in actual workplace settings. Future studies may explore writing apprehension as writing is considered an integral part of communication at the workplace besides oral communication. In addition, studies are also recommended to be carried out with different approaches, such as ethnographic or clinical ways of gathering data to understand better this subtle yet complicated language phenomenon, which will contribute significantly to organisations.

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