English Communication Apprehension at the Workplace Among Private Malaysian Employees

[*1]Lyla Jaffree, [2]Faizah Mohamad, [3]Alia Julia Ali Jaafar, [4]Nur Farzana Rosli

[1,2,3,4]Universiti Teknologi MARA Shah Alam

*Corresponding Author

ABSTRACT

Although English is widely used, its role as a non-native language can cause communication apprehension among employees in carrying out their professional tasks, particularly those from the Malaysian private sector. Hence, this study sought to investigate the work-related English language anxiety among the employees through the lens of McCroskey's (1984) communication apprehension. Specifically, it explored how Malaysian private employees experienced their communication apprehension in their workplace and their coping strategies to manage this apprehension. Three respondents, selected through purposive sampling from different private sector organisations where English is used, were interviewed in collecting the data. The thematic analysis revealed that their English communication apprehension experience revolved around different types of communication patterns, English usage and its role in task performance. The findings also indicated that they employed a range of strategies consisting of their own initiatives and support from their organisations to manage their communication apprehension. It can be concluded that English communication apprehension poses challenges towards the employees' task execution, although they can be coped with strategically. The result of this study offered a deeper understanding of the struggles faced by private sector employees in using English within professional contexts.

Keywords: English, communication apprehension, workplace challenges, private sectors, coping strategies

INTRODUCTION

English has been recognised as the lingua franca and is used worldwide for various purposes. The language plays an important role in shaping the professional setting, especially in the Southeast Asian countries including Malaysia, and widely regarded as the key factor in the development of business and education (Mat Husin & Mohd Radzuan, 2021). This is due to the globalisation of businesses, where there is a demand for Malaysian graduates to have multilingual skills (Nesaratnam et al., 2020; Zainuddin et al., 2019). Additionally, in improving their chance for employability, the Malaysian government has initiated several programmes, including Graduate Career Accelerated Programme (GCAP), the Graduate Employability Management Scheme (GEMS), and the 1Malaysia Training Scheme (SL1M), to enhance their English proficiency.

However, English usage as a non-native language has been recognised as a significant determinant of communication apprehension (CA) which is also a concept proposed by McCroskey (1984) that highlights the sense of anxiousness that comes in the expectation towards and within involvements in communication. He further explained how this type of anxiety can appear across different contexts such as public speaking, group discussions or even in classroom interactions and when it arises, it may negatively impact one's willingness to communicate. Influenced by individual, social and linguistic factors (Daud et al., 2019), CA is commonly experienced by both students (Loureiro et al., 2020) and professionals (Mohd Diah et al., 2023) alike. One past study on CA among students (Malik et al., 2021) found that students' communication was hindered by language barrier and speakers' attitude, although being mediated through the strategic usage of language learning resources (Pabro-Maquidato, 2021) and assistance from the artificial intelligence tools (Shazly et al.,

2020). While these findings addressed English CA in educational settings, a notable research gap concerning English CA among employees in private-sector professional environments.

Bridging this gap, recent workplace-based studies revealed that there were moderate levels of English oral communication apprehension among Malaysian employees. For instance, using the PRCA-24 instrument, Mat Husin (2022) found moderate CA levels among 352 Malaysian employees. Notably, CA was higher during public speaking and meetings, and government employees showed higher apprehension compared to their private-sector counterparts. Gender, job sector, and education level were found to significantly influence CA levels, whereas age and years of service showed no significant effects. Another study conducted by Mat Husin and Khamis (2024) also discovered that administrative staff within a Malaysian public university had moderate levels of English oral communication apprehension, with public speaking causing the greatest anxiety.

These findings emphasise the need to have professional development interventions to reduce CA and improve communicative confidence in the workplace. However, studies focusing on private-sector employees are still under explored. Hence, the objectives of the study are:

1. To examine the experiences of Malaysian private sector employees in relation to English communication apprehension in the workplace.
2. To identify the coping strategies adopted by these employees to manage English communication apprehension.

LITERATURE REVIEW

McCroskey (1984) defined Communication Apprehension (CA) as a form of fear or nervousness that individuals feel when anticipating or engaging in communication. His concept of CA outlines four main situations where it typically emerges. Such situations are group discussions, organisational meetings, one-to-one conversations, and public speaking. In a typical workplace environment, these situations are commonly expected and highly relevant among employees, as they are often involved in collaborative, reporting, and presentational tasks. This feeling of anxiety that comes with communicating with others is not a rare phenomenon, as noted by Butler (2004). Additionally, the occurrence of CA is widespread across diverse populations, not limited to specific groups, and differs in level across individuals (Adeyemi et al., 2017; Campero-Oliart et al., 2024). Notably, employees who experience a high level of CA would often avoid any tasks that require them to communicate, which further results in compromised workplace connections, communication quality, career development and overall productivity.

Past studies had shown that employees' experiences with CA are closely linked to the communication context itself. In the workplace, where both formal and informal interactions take place, power distance plays a crucial role in determining communication effectiveness. The study by Dai et al. (2022) proved that a strong power distance belief, mediated by fear towards authority, could significantly compromise workplace communication. Meanwhile, Han (2023) discovered that work-related anxiety is influenced by employees' work demand and environment. This suggests that organisations need to develop a communication approach that encourages a positive communication environment across organisational hierarchical levels for seamless task execution. Further, employees' nativity towards the language used for their workplace communication is also related to the CA they experienced. English, as a non-native language to most Asian countries, including Malaysia, presents communication barriers that directly influence employees' anxiety level and, as a result, lower their confidence to communicate fluently (Lou & Noels, 2020). Felicita (2020) also added that their limited exposure to the language caused them to fear making mistakes, hence amplifying their CA. In the workplace setting, clear communication is necessary for task performance. With limited language proficiency to communicate effectively, employees risk decreased productivity, strained rapport, and hindered decision-making processes (Salih, 2024). Therefore, organisations and employees must be proactive in making use of available resources to adequately address the challenges in English workplace communication.

In addressing CA, scholars have identified a range of coping strategies that could help manage it, particularly in the workplace context. McCroskey (1984) highlighted that CA is linked to uncertainty and a perceived lack

of competence, suggesting that structured preparation can help reduce anxiety. As supported by Van den Boogaart-Agterberg et al. (2021), who noted that lowering cognitive demand through preparation enables individuals to feel less overwhelmed, in addition to Tayyab et al. (2023), who argued that repetition reduces uncertainty while strengthening communication skills. Similarly, self-directed learning has been acknowledged as a coping mechanism that promotes developmental and professional resilience (Morris, 2019). By enrolling in well-planned or strategic professional communication training, employees' CA level could be decreased even further, positively affecting their individual performance and the organisation's reputation (Mat Husin & Khamis, 2023). These scholars highlighted the importance of having mechanisms for preventing the CA from becoming even worse, either by self-initiation or support from external parties. Furthermore, Cardile et al. (2023) highlighted the importance of prompt feedback in promoting self-efficacy, while Kho and Ting (2023) stressed that communication training frequently addresses typical causes of anxiety, such as language structure and non-verbal signals. Given the significant impact that CA could have on an individual, it is crucial to be aware of these prevention measures.

METHODOLOGY

This study was approached qualitatively in observing the English CA experienced by private sector employees. The relevance of this approach lies in its focus on humanistic and social phenomena, which qualitative data gathered enables an in-depth interpretation of the studied issue (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Hignett & McDermott, 2019).

The data for this study were collected through semi-structured interviews with three individuals from various professional backgrounds in the private sector. Considering the qualitative nature of this study, the data collection focused on depth rather than breadth, hence it had undergone a thorough consideration towards participant selection to ensure that the small sample size would not compromise the quality for the report produced. Specifically, these individuals' appropriateness to participate in the study was determined by their fulfilment of the listed samples' criteria, including those working in the private sector, and communicating in English at their workplaces internally and externally in various situations. Purposive sampling, as the chosen sampling method, ascertains that the respondents were able to provide the needed information in addressing the research objectives, simultaneously establishing findings' credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability (Nyimbili & Nyimbili, 2024). Interview questions comprised ten main items, which were adapted from Mat Husin (2022). Specifically, five items were developed to address the first research objective of exploring the experiences of Malaysian private sector employees' workplace English CA, while another five were developed for the second research objective of analysing their coping strategies to cope with it. The instrument's reliability was assured through expert review, which guided its revision to achieve item clarity and appropriateness (Bhalla et al., 2023).

Table 1 Respondents' Profile

Respondent	Job Role	Industry	Self-assessed English Language Proficiency
1	Public health speaker	Healthcare	Intermediate
2	Digital marketing associate	Advertisement	Intermediate
3	Barista	Food and beverage	Low

Prior to their respective interview session, the research participants were briefed on the details related to the study, including the research aim, methodology, potential benefits and discomforts, and their rights, as suggested by Arellano et al. (2023), to ensure their acknowledgement and awareness of the study itself. These individuals were also informed about the scope of data usage before their consent was confirmed (Taherdoost, 2022). During their interview sessions, probing questions were used to complement the main interview questions to ensure that the desired data was gathered sufficiently, as participants were encouraged to thoroughly express their thoughts and opinions on the subject matter (Karatsareas, 2022). The data gathered were audio-recorded and typed for interpretation.

These data were thematically analysed, where appropriate themes were generated as guided by the research questions proposed (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The transcripts of the interviews were produced to enable the researchers to better analyse the data in written form. The NVivo 14 software was employed to generate the initial codes, which were grouped under potential themes. Then, these themes were reviewed and refined to ata's ensure that the research objectives outlined are appropriately addressed before the codebook was generated. The

reliability was also confirmed through an expert review and was finalised and reported.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the research findings for the established research questions and their discussion according to the emerging themes.

Experiences of Malaysian Private Sector Employees regarding English Communication Apprehension at Their Workplace

There were three themes found to fulfill the first research objectives: experience of different types of communication, experience with language usage, and experience with task execution.

Experience of Different Types of Communication

The finding revealed that all the respondents reported experiencing CA when formally communicating with their superiors in English. One of them also reported experiencing English CA while in casual conversation with her colleagues.

"I think have … during the first three months when I entering this job because I don't know, I don't know the full … view of my job scope … when they ask me in the meeting, I'm quite blur and I can say that I feel anxious like whenever I am meeting because I don't understand anything that's happening in the office." (Respondent 1)

"Um, for public speaking, maybe it's higher anxiety level … there's pressure to deliver, fear of missing of professional communication in front of … supervisor." (Respondent 2)

"I feel anxious in both situations, publicly and privately but of course, uh I am more comfortable with my colleagues" (Respondent 3)

English CA can be observed occurring in both formal and informal professional communication, with a notable difference in level between them, where CA is more prominent in the former. This specific communication situation suggested that CA is induced based on context, as noted by McCroskey (1984). In the cases studied, power distance and communication expectations played notable roles in influencing employees' level of English CA. In line with the findings by Dai et al. (2022), CA level is dependent on the sense of authoritative fear posed by organisational members of varying hierarchical levels. These findings are also supported by Han (2023), who discovered that professional communication comes with performance expectations that influence employees' anxiety levels. Therefore, this situation pressured lower-level staff to communicate as perfectly as possible to avoid negative judgement. At the same time, they were burdened by the need to practise English, a language non-native to them, hence presenting them with challenges in managing their CA (Lou & Noels, 2020). This discovery brings attention towards employees' performance evaluation involving their communication performance. Given that CA stems from the fear of judgement by the authoritative power and the non-native status of the English language among these respondents, employers should carefully consider the performance evaluation criteria and methodology when assessing their employees' performance, as language proficiency does not necessarily translate to professional capability. This consideration will allow for a fairer judgement towards their competence as professionals in their respective field.

Experience with English Language Usage

English proficiency is widely recognised as an important employment requirement in Malaysia (Mat Husin & Khamis, 2023). However, all three respondents admitted that using English at work reduced their confidence, intensifying their CA due to limited exposure to the language.

"When I make some mistake, I feel quite anxious because I don't know how they will react." (Respondent 1)

"Mispronouncing words or struggling to find the right terms which can make you feel self conscious." (Respondent 2)

"I don't feel confident to talk. I think the reason why I'm not confident is because English is not my first language." (Respondent 3)

The excerpts show that employees' self-doubt is strongly linked to their fear of evaluation in professional settings. Fear, shyness, and anxiety, especially since English is not their first language, make them reluctant to speak, affecting fluency (Adnan et al., 2024). While English is compulsory in schools, it is rarely practised after graduation, leaving individuals with limited confidence to apply it in workplace communication. This is in line with the study by Felicita (2020), which describes the lack of exposure not only hinders fluency but also creates a cycle where fear of mistakes prevents further practice, worsening apprehension. This supports McCroskey's (1984) view that communication apprehension reduces both the willingness to engage in interaction and the ability to communicate effectively. The implication here is that without consistent opportunities to practice English in real workplace contexts, employees' CA may persist and continue to affect both their confidence and professional growth. It is clear that poor English proficiency affects not only direct interaction but also the exposure and involvement of employees in meetings, team discussions, and networking events. This may eventually have a consequence on career advancement, performance reviews, and promotions. Organisations who use English extensively in the workplace may accidentally leave out qualified employees who have language barriers, which would limit diversity in leadership and contribute to prejudice.

Experience of Task Execution

The interviews revealed that limited English proficiency slowed employees' work progress and reduced their confidence.

"I feel like it reduce my confidence, slower work progress like spending extra times, formulating response" (Respondent 2)

"Sometimes when they ask me in English, I do not know how to answer back or give the appropriate answer lah." (Respondent 3)

The findings revealed that English CA occurred among employees when they executed their professional duties, with respondents finding tasks like email writing, report preparation and verbal communication were slowed down by the need to double-check language usage to ensure they gave an appropriate response. The decrease in performance speed may be accompanied by a decrease in confidence level, as employees doubt themselves before they can execute their tasks. This reflects McCroskey's (1984) standpoint that communication apprehension in individuals reduces the effectiveness of task performance when a language other than the individual's mother tongue is involved. According to Salih (2024), clear communication is important for collaboration and task efficiency, as language barriers can slow down workflow and lead to misunderstandings that cause missed opportunities. To address these issues, workplaces could benefit from language support programs, a more inclusive communication culture and assistive resources that will ease language challenges while at the same time help improve efficiency and boost employees' productivity. This suggests that communication anxiety has real effects on work performance, team productivity, and even to the speaker's psychological condition. In positions that require continuous interaction, it might result in high turnover, employee disengagement, or burnout if not addressed. Thus, it's critical for organisations to acknowledge language-related stress as a real productivity challenge.

Coping Strategies Employed by Malaysian Private Sector Employees to Manage Their English Communication Anxiety at Their Workplace

In fulfilling the second research objective, two themes were found, which were self-initiatives to manage anxiety and support to manage anxiety.

Self-initiatives to Manage Anxiety

The respondents admitted that taking the necessary initiatives helped them manage their anxiety in communicating in English.

"before I go to certain place, I will study first lah what is the background of my participant." (Respondent 1)

"Like review the agenda, so if the meeting has a agenda, go through it beforehand, it helps like anticipate of prepare response or question in advance or maybe you can, um, prepare the key point, make a list or key point what you want to contribute lah." (Respondent 2)

"I will plan out what I will have to say. … Also, during the meeting, uh, I will think first in my head before I say something. I will not directly say anything without thinking." (Respondent 3)

"I will practise more also speaking in English in front of my colleague and ask for their comments lah." (Respondent 1)

"practice what you plan to say or um maybe anticipate potential question on unprepare response" (Respondent 2)

The findings revealed that respondents relied on several self-initiatives, namely preparation and practice to manage their English communication apprehension (CA). Preparation emerged as the most common strategy, where respondents anticipated communicative exchanges through reviewing agendas, listing key points, or mentally rehearsing responses. These findings reflect McCroskey's (1984) perspective on CA which suggests that anxiety usually arises from uncertainty and incompetence when communicating but, by having preparation or rehearsal, there are several effective strategies that helps individuals to gain a sense of control and confidence. Furthermore, these findings also align with Mat Husin and Khamis (2023) who highlighted that preparation enhances self-assurance and grants a sense of control over anxiety-inducing tasks. Similarly, respondents' engagement in practice and feedback resonates with Tayyab et al. (2023), who noted that repetition reduces uncertainty and strengthens communication skills, suggesting that coping strategies can double as skill-building opportunities. Taken together, these strategies highlight that employees do not remain passive in the face of CA but actively adopt coping mechanisms that balance both emotional regulation and skill improvement. However, since the findings revealed that employees would have to have their own initiatives, this could also reflect a bigger problem at work. Employees who are less fluent or too busy at work might have less time to prepare and may be left out or be noticed. Therefore, organisations should also assist in helping employees by giving them meeting details earlier, trainings or creating safe spaces to practice. These would help everyone to feel included and confident in speaking up.

Support to Manage Anxiety

According to the respondents, they received support from their organisations in improving their English communication skills through formal training, which indirectly lowered their CA.

"I also have trainers to train me specifically in any health talk. … So that's really helped me like to calm myself and to reduce … my anxiety if I want to speak to public." (Respondent 1)

The data analysed confirmed that organisational support contributes to employees' English CA management. By receiving supportive feedback from communication training, employees are properly facilitated in improving their communication performance, which results in a lowered sense of apprehension. This aligns

with the study by Kho and Ting (2023), suggesting that communication training often addresses communication aspects that are commonly known to be the source of apprehension, such as language structure and non-verbal cues. The positive impact of timely feedback during training sessions has also been supported by Cardile et al. (2023), who encouraged recognition for areas of improvement and fostered a sense of self-efficacy. This finding demonstrated that organisational support significantly reduces communication anxiety and enhances performance by helping employees feel more confident and increasing their professional productivity. Therefore, it is crucial for organisations to consider making useful resources accessible for employees to improve their communication skills, as they would be better equipped to cope with challenges, reducing stress and improving their overall performance.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the experiences of Malaysian private sector employees with English communication apprehension (CA) and the strategies they employed to manage it. The overall findings showed that CA was most evident in formal workplace interactions, task execution, and language use, where it is often heightened due to limited English exposure and fear towards receiving negative judgment. These challenges faced by the employees cause slowness in task performance and reduce their confidence, highlighting the actual impact of CA on job effectiveness. Nevertheless, the study found that employees were not passive in facing CA. The findings indicated that they actively employed self-initiated strategies such as preparation, practice, and self-directed learning, while also making use of organisational support provided, like communication training. These approaches, in a way, helped anxiety while simultaneously enhancing general communication competence, demonstrating the dual function of coping techniques. By providing insight into employees' struggles and their coping mechanisms, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of the role of English in Malaysian workplaces.

One limitation of this study is the small sample size, which may not fully reflect the broader experiences of private sector employees across different industries in Malaysia. As such, the findings may have limited applicability. Future research could expand the sample to include a more diverse range of participants, allowing for a more comprehensive understanding of English communication apprehension in the workplace. Additionally, the scope of this topic could also be broadened by focusing on specific actions that may guide organisations in fostering a more supportive environment, which could strengthen employees' confidence and productivity at the workplace.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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