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Needs Analysis for the Development of a Counseling Module as an Intervention to Reduce Communication Apprehension among Students of Higher Learning Institutions

Nor Hernamawarni Abdul Majid¹, Najah Mat Rafae¹, Nor
Shafrin Ahmad² & Rahimi Che Aman²

¹Pusat Pengajian Dan Perkhidmatan Kaunseling & Psikologi (UniSHAMS), ²Pusat Pengajian
Ilmu Pendidikan (USM), Malaysia

Abstract

Communication apprehension can hinder communication skills among higher learning institutions students in their employment. Communication apprehension refers to an inability of a person to communicate effectively as a worker. Therefore, this article aims to identify the level of communication apprehension problems in various situations and the needs analysis to develop a counseling module to be used by counselors to reduce communication apprehension among higher learning institutions students. The study was conducted using a quantitative cross-sectional survey. A total of 384 students from six universities of different programs were selected to participate in this study. The findings from each item using the Personnel Instrument Communication Apprehension (PRCA 24) revealed that there is a need to design a counseling module. In addition, the findings from the descriptive statistics indicated that the majority of the participants had a moderate to a higher level of communication apprehension. Meanwhile, the analysis of the activities to be included in designing a counseling module should focus on the components of thoughts and feelings. Due to this, the cognitive behavior therapy is suitable as the basis for designing a module to reduce communication apprehension among students. The findings from this study have a significant contribution to counselors and lecturers who are dealing with students' affairs in helping them solve this issue once they register as universities students. Therefore, it can be concluded that there is a need for one strategy or action to assist tertiary students who have problem in communication apprehension.

Keyword: Communication Apprehension, Counseling Module

Introduction

Communication is an important part of life that involves a process of generating meaning through the transmission and acceptance of verbal or non-verbal symbols influenced by the various contexts (Jones, 2016). However, Richmond and McCroskey (1995) explained that communication process can be affected by the presence of sounds externally and internally.

An external noise is a noise disturbance that occurs outside the room and can disturb students in delivering speeches in classrooms. An internal sound, on the other hand, is known as psychological referring to the fear of delivering speeches, conversations or sedation. Noise is a nuisance that occurs in a communication system when an order is delivered and received differently. This disorder is a psychotic disorder, psychology, or misinterpreting of meanings. Interruptions in communication are unstoppable and unavoidable. All communications that contain such distractions can be reduced by using better language, learning how to send and receive nonverbal messages, and improving the skills of receiving and sending. The communication disorder in communication is known as communication apprehension (Wood, 2009). Communication disorders that include anxiety disorder among individuals are different from one another (Kamaruddin, 2020) and this can interfere with daily routines, work functions and social life.

Communication apprehension has been studied in various fields including communication, psychology, and education. The study of communication apprehension was pioneered by McCroskey and Richmond in early 1970s. Communication apprehension is commonly known as stage fears (McCroskey, 2001). Subsequently, communication apprehension is also known as speech anxiety, anxiety, shame, silence and reluctance to communicate (Hartman & LeMay, 2004). Communication apprehension has become the most common label for anxiety related to oral communication (Alley-Young, 2005). Besides, Horowitz (2002) described communication apprehension as the anxiety or fears experienced by groups or individuals that affect their oral communication, social skills and self-esteem. As a result, communication apprehension can be termed as shy, quiet or evasive to communicate in addition to speech anxiety, stage fear and fear of public speaking. Moreover, communication apprehension can be described as experiencing feelings of nervousness, fear and worry to communicate orally. Therefore, communication apprehension emphasizes more on feeling experiences than behaviors that cause communication to be ineffective, meaning to be incomprehensible and failure in communication.

Problem Statement

The problem of communication apprehension among students is not considered as a problem, especially in the public speaking (Beidel & Turner, 2007). A study conducted by Beidel et. al (2007) revealed that only 13% of students asked help from a counselor and realized they had trouble in communication. Besides, the students also mentioned that they did not know how to communicate their problems, in particular lack of communication, to counselors. The students might think that campus is a place to develop their intellectual rather than emotional and psychological health.

Hassani and Rajab (2012) stated that communication apprehension among students produces less effective learning sessions when they tend to remain silent and do not participate in group discussions or presentations whereby this situation indirectly affects their mental health and academic excellence. This is supported by Bastida and Yap (2019) by asserting that their reluctance to communicate is to avoid their anxiety from being noticed publicly. They also stressed that this has caused students not to ask questions or respond during lessons, thus reducing their understanding of what were learned. Some past studies also found that students with high communication apprehension obtained unfavorable results in academia compared to students who were low in communication apprehension (Nik Mahmood, 2010).

Taha and Rezeq (2018) explained that high levels of communication apprehension involve avoidance behaviors by avoiding communication, not engaging or refusing to respond, and disruption by showing abnormal non-verbal behaviors while speaking. This leaves them ultimately inexperienced in creating good interactions and in fear to remain in such situations even at times that require them to communicate professionally in the future. Furthermore, Taha and Rezeq (2018) also elaborated on the effects of communication apprehension from the social aspects that resulted in individuals not having good social skills and tend to narrow the scope of career selection towards careers that do not require much communication needs.

Communication apprehension among students will result in less effective learning sessions when students tend to remain silent and are not engaged in group discussions or presentations. This situation indirectly affects their mental health and academic excellence (Hassani & Rajab, 2012). In fact, their reluctance to communicate with the intention to avoid their anxiety being noticed by the public causes them not to ask questions or respond in the classroom, thus reducing their understanding of what they learn (Bastida & Yapo, 2019).

Skills training such as preparations and practices given to students with higher communication apprehension levels will make their anxiety symptoms grow (Kelly & Katen, 2000). The statement was also supported by Alley-Young (2005) who mentioned that communication skills provided to students with communication apprehension would add to the level of anxiety, worries and disruptions of the learning process. Therefore, a treatment should begin by focusing on reducing the communication anxiety before focusing on improving communication skills (Gradireland, 2012). The combination of effective approaches such as systematic desensitization, cognitive modification and skills training help in reducing communication apprehension (Kelly & Katen, 2000).

In a student's life, communication apprehension is quite harmful as it is likely to undermine soft skills and influence academic achievements (Davis, 2012). Indirectly, most subjects offered at the tertiary level that highlight communication are less attractive and avoided by students. The issue of communication apprehension seems endless, especially when the teaching and learning process involves assessments in communication skills (Taha & Abu Rezeq, 2018).

Counselors need to be aware of this and should improve their students' communication strategies and help them overcome communication apprehension. Therefore, a counseling module that uses appropriate approaches to overcome communication apprehension problems should be developed and used by all counselors in universities.

Literature Review

Most tertiary students face problems with communication apprehensions. A study conducted by Gillani et al (2010) in Universiti Sains Malaysia and Universiti Utara Malaysia yielded findings that revealed communication apprehension was at a critical level among their respondents. Their findings showed that a significant number of students, 402, experienced a high-level communication apprehension, while 583 others were at the medium level and only 94 students did not have communication apprehension. Communication apprehension also affected the social interactions among students at the tertiary level.

Several studies showed that the dimensions of public speaking and meetings ranked the highest compared to the dimensions of group discussion and interpersonal conversations in communication apprehension. A study by P'Rayan and Shetty (2008) was conducted with 120 students from engineering programs revealed that the highest communication apprehension

scores were the dimensions of public speaking and meetings. A similar study was also conducted by Soonthornsawad (2009) with 151 Thailand students. The findings showed that the dimensions of public speaking and meetings were at a higher level of communication apprehension than the dimensions of conversation communication and group discussions.

Another study conducted by Wrench et al (2002) involving 204 students in University Mid-Atlantic, Mid-Western University, and University Mid-Western System showed a positive relationship between communication apprehension with anxiety and social interactions. The students were reported to have difficulties in their interactions, especially in group discussions. In specific, communication apprehension affects the students' level of confidence and academic results. Therefore, their confidence and ability in giving opinions or interacting in class are directly related to their self-concept.

Yahya et al (2002) conducted a study with 320 secondary school students in Johor revealing a link between conversation communication skills with self-concept. Students with communication apprehension will have difficulties to interact with their peers especially during the process of discussions. This indirectly results in having low self-confidence or self-concept and ultimately affects the academic achievements. Therefore, the confidence and ability of students in giving opinions or interacting during lectures are related to their self-concept.

Many treatments have shown positive results in reducing communication apprehension. A study conducted by Francis and Miller (2007) using the communication-orientation motivational therapy (COM Therapy) explained that this therapy considers communication involves the thoughts of a person speaking, the assessment of oneself, the content in a person's conversations and feelings. Therefore, COM's goal helps individuals change their perceptions which is to make tagging a conversation instead of performing. Thus, a combination of techniques such as intrapersonal communication (talking to yourself about positive things), preparations (planning and practice), skills training (basic speaking learning), physical response reparer (relaxation technique), visualization techniques (implying success) and cuteness are applied in this therapy.

Beck and Dozois (2011) stated that using the cognitive behavioral theory as an approach for anxiety disorders is more effective. This is because the theory aims to reduce anxiety and other negative emotions by encouraging clients to identify irrational thoughts and modify them into positive statements. Some commonly used techniques in this theory are building strong therapeutic relationships, developing strategies for change of behavior, using cognitive restructuring techniques, changing core beliefs and preventing recurring problems (Beck & Dozois, 2011). According to Heimberg and Becker (2002), cognitive restructuring used before and after exposure activities helped clients to address their concerns. Prior to performing the exposure activities, the cognitive restructuring technique was used to encourage clients to face their fear, while using the cognitive restructuring technique after the exposure activities was intended to motivate them.

Research Objective

This study aims to examine the problem faced by students of higher learning institutions in Malaysia on communication apprehension. In addition, it also investigates the needs to develop the contents of a counseling module to overcome communication apprehension among students.

Based on the aims mentioned, the following research objectives are formed:

- i. to examine the level of communication apprehension among students of higher learning institutions.
- ii. to identify communication apprehension by dimensions.
- iii. to identify the needs to design and develop a counseling module to overcome communication apprehension.

Methodology

In this study, the needs to develop a counseling module were identified based on a survey method. The survey was employed to collect information on variables and also to measure related variables to a phenomenon (Konting, 2004). In addition, the survey method was used to gain public opinions on a current issue and to review the effectiveness of a product or plan (Piaw, 2006).

The first process conducted was to collect information about a module requirement from the views of the target users. The collection of information about the needs of a module from the user's point of views is one of the ways to ensure that the module has good validity and is developed according to the needs analysis. According to Siraj (2008) needs analysis is the first phase of a study aimed at identifying several aspects related to the target group. This aspect includes information about the module specifications required by students. Therefore, needs analysis studies are important in determining the appropriate products for students so that existing problems can be solved and communication becomes more effective.

Population and Sample Study

According to the Ministry of Higher Education, Higher Learning Institutions are divided into 6 zones: the Northern Zone, Southern Zone, Eastern Zone, Central Zone, Sarawak Zone and Sabah Zone. In selecting the sample, the method of random sampling was used. Through this method, it can reduce the cost of obtaining samples due to the factors of location and large population size (Neuman, 2003). Krejci and Morgan sampling tables were used (Krejci & Morgan, 1970) to determine the sample size. From the students' population, there are 22 766 students from 5 higher learning institutions in the northern Zone of Malaysia offering a bachelor degree of Higher Education program. The total samples required based on Krejci and Morgan's schedule were 384.

Table 1: Number of respondents from Higher Learning Institutions in the Northern Zone.

Bill	Higher Learning Institutions (IPT)	Number of Respondents
1	UniSHAMS	270
2	USM	53
3	UUM	34
4	UNIMAP	10
5	KITAB	17
TOTAL		384

Table 2 illustrates the no of students for each institution: UniSHAMS (n= 270), University Sains Malaysia (n= 51), University Utara Malaysia (n= 53), Universiti Malaysia Perlis (n=10) and KITAB, Penang (n=17).

Table 2: Students Demographics details and their frequency

Variable	Frequency	Percentage
GENDER		
Female	242	63
Male	142	37
Total	384	100
AGE		
19	135	35.15
20	102	26.6
21	81	21.1
22	25	6.5
23	24	6.3
24	17	4.35
Total	384	100
FIELD OF STUDY		
Arts	153	39.8
Social sciences	90	23.4
Technical & technological	42	10.9
Pure science	53	13.8
Financial	46	12.1
Total	384	100

Table 2 shows the number of participants involved in the study based on age, gender and degree programs. The female participants exceeded the male participants with 242 and 142 respectively. The age categories of the participants include 19 years old (n= 135), 20 years old (n= 102), 21 years old (n= 81), 22 years old (n= 25), 23 years old (n= 24) and 24 years old (n= 17). The categories of the degree programs are namely literature (153), social sciences (n=90), technical & technology (n=42), pure science (n=53) and finance (n=46).

Instrument

The instrument used in this study was a questionnaire. According to Ghafar (1999), a questionnaire is a tool or an instrument uses to measure respondents' behaviors. Moreover, by using a questionnaire, a lot of data can be obtained from the respondents in a short period of time and the answers obtained are more consistent (Wiersma, 1995). Some other reasons include cheaper in terms of cost, time and energy (Abu Bakar, 1991).

Table 3: Number of Items According to Communication Apprehension Dimension

	Dimensions of communication apprehension	Item number	Negative items
1	Group Discussions	1, 2, 3, 4, 5, and 6	2, 4, 6
2	Meeting	7, 8, 9, 10, 11 and 12	8, 9, 12
3	Interpersonal Conversation	13, 14, 15, 16, 17 and 18	14, 16, 17
4	Public Speaking	19, 20, 21, 22, 23 and 24	19, 21, 23

The questionnaire used was the Personal Report Communication Apprehension (PRCA-24) developed by James McCroskey (1982). This questionnaire consisted of 24 items that examined the level of communication apprehension in four dimensions: group discussions, meetings, Interpersonal conversation, and public speaking. Table 3 illustrates the item number and negative item number for each dimension of communication.

Table 4: Level of Communication Apprehension and Dimension of Communication Apprehension

Variables	Range of score	Level of score
Communication apprehension	24-59	Lowest
	60-84	Moderate
	85-120	Higher
Dimension of communication apprehension	6-12	Lowest
	13-17	Moderate
	18-30	Higher

Table 4 illustrates the scores of communication apprehension and their levels. Firstly, the scores between 85 and 120 indicate a high level of communication apprehension. Secondly, the scores between 60 and 84 indicate a moderate level of communication apprehension. Finally, the scores between 24 and 59 indicate a low level of communication apprehension. Each dimension of communication apprehension has the scores from 6 to 30 (McCroskey, 1982).

Pilot Study

The purpose of the pilot study is to obtain the validity and reliability of a questionnaire. Piaw (2006) concluded that, pilot tests are small-scale studies conducted before the actual study is conducted. It is conducted to know the reliability or reasonableness of a study to be conducted. Before conducting the pilot study, the back translation was conducted by 6 experts. The number of samples used for this pilot study was 30 students from higher learning institutions. Table 4 shows the value of the Cronbach alpha coefficient obtained i.e.; all dimensions of communication apprehension have good reliability values.

Table 5: The Overall Reliability of Communication Apprehension and Dimensions of Communication Apprehension

No.	Variable	Value of <i>Alpha Cronbach</i>
1	Communication apprehension	.923
2	Group discussion	.789
3	Meeting	.805
4	Interpersonal conversation	.757
5	Public speaking	.824

Table 5 shows the value of the reliability coefficient above .70. According to Hair, Black, Babin, & Anderson (2018) the value of the reliable and reliability coefficient is 0.70 to 1.0. The value of the reliability coefficient 1.0 is very good, the value of less than 0.6 is considered weak, the value of the coefficient 0.7 is acceptable and the value of the coefficient 0.8 is considered good. The reliability results showed that the Personal Report Communication Apprehension, PRCA-24 (McCroskey, 1982) questionnaire could be used as a research instrument in the study. To ensure that this questionnaire is suitable to be used in the Malaysian academic and cultural environment, an initiative was taken to interview the participants in the pilot study. The findings from the interview confirmed that the participants understood each item presented according to the dimensions. Additionally, the participants also stated that all the dimensions included in the questionnaire should be passed by all IPTA students throughout their tertiary level.

Findings and Discussions

A needs analysis was used to design and develop a module. The findings from the needs analysis provided important information to develop a module that is suitable for the target users. Based on the findings, the contents of modules related to the counseling intervention modules activities need to be developed as required by the students.

Table 6: Level of Communication Apprehension and The Dimensions of Communication Apprehension among Students of Higher Institutions

Communication Apprehension	Level	N= 384	Percentage
	Lower	20	5.3
	Moderate	278	72.3
	Higher	86	22.4
Group Discussion	Level	N= 384	Percentage
	Lower	76	30
	Moderate	173	45
	Higher	99	25
Meeting	Level	N= 384	Percentage
	Lower	0	0
	Moderate	64	9.99
	Higher	320	90.1
Interpersonal Conversation	Level	N= 384	Percentage
	Lower	21	54.6
	Moderate	125	32.2
	Higher	238	61.9
Public Speaking	Level	N= 384	Percentage
	Lower	0	0
	Moderate	63	16.7
	Higher	321	83.3

The findings showed that the majority of students at the tertiary level has a moderate level of communication apprehension that are 278 participants (72.3%). Only 86 students had high levels of communication apprehension (22.4%). The findings for the dimensions of communication apprehension revealed that the dimension of public speaking obtains the highest level (n=321), followed by the meeting dimension (n= 320), interpersonal conversation dimension (n=238) and finally the group discussion (n=99). These results confirmed that students experienced fears in public speaking rather than fears in other dimensions.

The findings were also supported by a study conducted by Wan Mustapha, Ismail, Ratan Singh and Elias (2010). The study reported that most students were not interested in public speaking activities compared to group discussion activities. The results from a study conducted by Mustapha et al (2010) on the selection of activities in lectures showed that students preferred group discussion activities over public speaking to improve communication skills. In addition, a study by Rogers and King (2012) reported very high results of anxiety in communication after students responded to the PRCA-24 inventory, particularly in the public speaking and meeting dimensions. Several studies on meetings showed communication in meetings and public speaking gave a new fear compared to communication in general (Heuett et al., 2003).

Another study conducted by McCroskey and Richmond (2001) also reported that overall, over 70% of students reported higher communication apprehension in the context of public speaking, while 50% in the dimension of meetings, 25% in the group discussions and only 10%

in interpersonal conversation. A study by P'Rayan and Shetty (2008) also pointed out that the mean value of communication apprehension in public speaking was the highest compared to group discussions, meetings and conversation interpersonal.

Table 7: The Frequency (Number of Participants) of Analyzing Scale Data

	Items	DS	D	U	A	SA	TOTAL
Communication Apprehension in Group Discussion							
1	I dislike participating in group discussions.	87	133	103	41	20	384
2	Generally, I am comfortable while participating in group discussions.	8	27	99	161	89	384
3	I am tense and nervous while participating in group discussions.	25	109	108	105	37	384
4	I like to get involved in group discussions.	10	41	121	135	77	384
5	Engaging in a group discussion with new people makes me tense and nervous.	19	86	124	93	62	384
6	I am calm and relaxed while participating in a group discussion.	16	48	152	133	35	384
Communication Apprehension in Meeting							
7	Generally, I am nervous when I have to participate in a meeting.	20	40	114	148	80	384
8	Usually, I am calm and relaxed while participating in a meeting.	34	113	157	16.8	12	384
9	I am very calm and relaxed when I am called upon to express an opinion at a meeting.	63	112	123	72	14	384
10	I am afraid to express myself at meetings.	6	48	127	128	75	384
11	Communicating at meetings usually makes me feel uncomfortable.	19	92	152	77	44	384
12	I am very relaxed when answering questions at a meeting.	39	99	178	55	13	384
Communication Apprehension in Conversation Interpersonal							
13	While participating in a conversation with a new acquaintance, I feel very nervous.	20	82	115	107	60	384
14	I have no fear of speaking up in conversations.	28	89	145	98	24	384

15	Ordinarily I am very tense and nervous in conversations.	21	104	122	85	52	384
16	Ordinarily I am very calm and relaxed in conversations.	27	66	133	127	31	384
17	While conversing with a new acquaintance, I feel very relaxed.	16	48	156	122	42	384
18	I'm afraid to speak up in conversations.	4	32	100	136	112	384
Communication Apprehension in Public Speaking							
19	I have no fear of giving a speech.	89	137	105	43	10	384
20	Certain parts of my body feel very tense and rigid while I am giving a speech.	13	58	118	108	87	384
21	I feel relaxed while giving a speech.	70	132	126	46	10	384
22	My thoughts become confused and jumbled when I am giving a speech.	5	49	116	113	101	384
23	I face the prospect of giving a speech with confidence.	54	91	163	67	9	384
24	While giving a speech, I get so nervous I forget facts I really know.	8	41	121	114	100	384

Note: strongly disagree (SD), disagree (D), undecided (U), agree (A), strongly agree (SA)

Table 7 shows the majority of students have moderate to high levels of communication apprehension. Although the students showed satisfactory levels of communication apprehension, the results of this study revealed that there were efforts taken to reduce communication apprehension in public speaking situations and meetings among the students. The modest level of overall communication apprehension exhibited by the students indicates that some of them have to reduce the level of communication anxiety in themselves because if they are not confident and afraid to communicate, this will affect their performances as employees in the future.

The results clearly showed a very high number of students chose agree and strongly agree to the items about the fear and anxiety in communication especially in the dimensions of public speaking and meetings. The findings revealed that a counseling module based on activities focusing on students' thoughts and feelings needs to be developed. This is confirmed based on the responses to the items related to feelings such as tense, nervous, calm, relaxed, afraid, uncomfortable, no fear, thoughts, confused and jumbled.

Thus, the combination of thoughts, feelings and communication skills is a contributing factor how individuals react to the communication environment and leads to a decrease or increase

in the level of communication apprehension among individuals. The Cognitive Behavior Theory is an appropriate and effective approach in helping individuals with communication apprehension (McCroskey, 2009). This is because the Cognitive Behavior Theory can help individuals re-improve negative thoughts by re-establishing positive thoughts (Prochaska & Norcross, 2006).

A study by Ishikawa et al (2012) on children and adults who experienced anxiety problems using cognitive behavioral theory showed 60.91% of the participants were able to reduce anxiety and 48.48% were free from anxiety problems.

Therefore, counseling or psychotherapy approaches are seen to help in building self-confidence and the ability to adapt by reducing anxiety among students. The beginning of a treatment should focus on reducing anxiety in communication before focusing on improving communication skills. The combination of effective approaches such as systematic desensitization, cognitive modification and skills training help to reduce communication anxiety (Kelly & Keaten, 2000). This is because, the combination of these approaches involves treatments that include symptoms of anxiety in communication.

Conclusions

It can be concluded that the needs analysis has provided important information on the reasonableness of developing a counselling module based on the cognitive behavioural theory. One of the recommendations for further studies is to create a complete module as a guide for counsellors to help students to overcome communication apprehension. The impact of a developed module can help students to embark into the real working environment with good communication skills.

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Corresponding Author

Nor Hernamawarni Abdul Majid, Malaysia, Malaysia

Pusat Pengajian Dan Perkhidmatan Kaunseling & Psikologi, Universiti Islam Antarabangsa Sultan Abdul Halim Mua'zam Shah (UniSHAMS).

Email: norhernamawarni@unishams.edu.my

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