Exploring the Relationship between Communication Apprehension and English-Speaking Proficiency among University Students in Sabah

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Abstract
This study is conducted to explore the relationship between Communication Apprehension and English-Speaking Proficiency among the university students in Sabah. Mastering English language is very crucial for students at the higher education level, yet there are many students still face challenges in speaking fluently and confidently. One of the main factors contributing to this issue is communication apprehension. This research uses quantitative design with a survey method. A total of 100 university students in Sabah were selected as respondents using purposive sampling and convenience sampling techniques. Data were collected through a questionnaire that includes four main sections: demographic information, levels of communication apprehension, levels of English-speaking proficiency, and factors contributing to communication apprehension. Data analysis was conducted using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS), including descriptive analysis, reliability testing, and Pearson correlation analysis. The findings, indicate that the level of English-speaking proficiency among students is at a moderate to high level, while the level of communication apprehension is at a moderate level. The correlation results reveal a significant but weak negative relationship between CA and ESP (r = -0.238, p = 0.017). Additionally, the study also identifies factors contributing to communication anxiety, including lack of vocabulary, apprehension regarding grammar, pronunciation, and fear of negative evaluation. Overall, this study concludes that communication apprehension affects the speaking level proficiency of students. The implications of the study suggest that higher education institutions, lecturers, and educators provide psychological support and create interactive activities that can help students overcome nervousness and enhance their confidence in communicating in English.

Introduction

In today's globalized world, proficiency in English is crucial, especially for students in higher education institutions. English functions not only as an international lingua franca but also as the primary medium for academic communication, research, and professional interaction. In Malaysian higher education, it is a compulsory subject and an essential skill for producing graduates who are competitive in the global job market.

Despite its importance, many university students continue to struggle with speaking English fluently and confidently even after years of formal schooling. One of the main factors contributing to this issue is communication apprehension, a form of fear or anxiety experienced during communication in both formal and informal settings (McCroskey, 1977). Students who experience such anxiety often avoid class participation, hesitate to present, and struggle to articulate their ideas clearly. Consequently, even those with adequate language knowledge may demonstrate limited speaking proficiency due to reduced practice and exposure.

This situation is particularly evident in Sabah, where English is commonly a second or third language. The state's cultural and linguistic diversity means students arrive at university with varying levels of English exposure. Many experience heightened anxiety when required to speak, especially in academic or public contexts. However, the extent to which communication apprehension affects their English-speaking proficiency remains underexplored in the Sabahan context. Addressing this gap is important because persistent anxiety can reduce students' willingness to communicate, hinder language acquisition, and negatively affect both academic performance and future employability (Horwitz et al., 1986; McCroskey, 1977).

Given these concerns, examining the relationship between communication apprehension and English-speaking proficiency among university students in Sabah is timely and significant. Understanding this relationship not only helps students become more aware of their own proficiency levels and sources of anxiety but also empowers them to take proactive steps—such as practicing oral communication, participating in interactive activities, and using anxiety-management strategies—to improve their speaking confidence.

Moreover, insights from this study can support educators and language instructors in designing teaching approaches that reduce anxiety and foster oral confidence. Strategies such as collaborative tasks, communicative language games, and real-world speaking simulations have been found to help create a more supportive learning environment (Young, 1991; Liu & Jackson, 2008). At the institutional level, the findings may guide universities and policymakers in developing targeted interventions, including communication workshops, public speaking training, or mentoring programmes for students experiencing high levels of apprehension.

Overall, this study aims to deepen understanding of the psychological and linguistic challenges faced by university students in Sabah. By doing so, it contributes to improving

English-speaking instruction, enhancing student confidence, and supporting the development of graduates who are well-equipped for academic and professional demands.

Research Question
a) How proficient are university students in Sabah in speaking English?
b) How does communication apprehension relate to English speaking proficiency?
c) Which factors contribute to communication apprehension among students when speaking English?

Literature Review
Theoretical Framework
This study is supported by several key theories in the field of communication and language acquisition that explain the relationship between communication apprehension and English-speaking skills.

Firstly, McCroskey's Communication Apprehension Model (1977, 1984) defines communication apprehension as the fear or anxiety experienced by an individual either in formal or informal communication. This theory emphasizes that communication apprehension can occur consistently across various contexts such as interpersonal communication, group discussions, meetings, and public presentations. In the context of second language learning, the level of this apprehension can influence students' willingness to participate in oral activities, thereby affecting their speaking skills.

Secondly, the Foreign Language Anxiety Theory introduced by *Horwitz and Cope (1986)* classifies communication apprehension as one of the main components of "*foreign language anxiety,*" alongside test anxiety and fear of negative evaluation. This theory explains that high communication apprehension in learning a foreign language such as English can prevent students from engaging actively, even when they possess sufficient language knowledge.

Thirdly, this study also draws upon Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis (1982), which states that affective factors such as anxiety, motivation, and self-confidence can influence the extent to which language input is effectively processed. High anxiety acts as an "affective filter" that blocks language input from being well processed, leading to poorer oral performance.
In summary, these three theories provide a strong foundation for understanding how psychological factors such as communication apprehension can directly impact the mastery of English-speaking skills, particularly among university students in Sabah, who may have varying levels of exposure to the language.
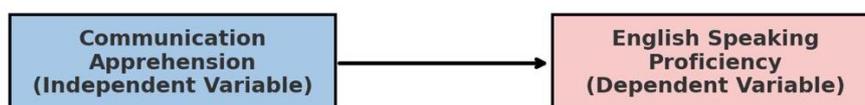
Conceptual Framework

Figure 1: Independent variable and Dependent variable of the study

In this study, Communication Apprehension serves as the Independent Variable. It refers to the level of anxiety or fear experienced by students when they engage in verbal communication, particularly when using the English language. This anxiety may arise from various factors such as a lack of self-confidence, fear of making mistakes, or concern about others' judgments. Meanwhile, English Speaking Proficiency serves as the Dependent Variable which refers to the level of students' proficiency in using the English language orally, which involves aspects of fluency, accuracy, pronunciation, vocabulary, and the ability to convey ideas effectively.

The relationship between these two variables is illustrated through arrows in the conceptual framework, indicating the direction of influence from communication apprehension to English speaking proficiency. This aligns with previous research findings that state high levels of communication anxiety tend to negatively affect students' proficiency in speaking English. Thus, this framework provides a basis for testing whether there is a significant relationship between communication apprehension and English-speaking proficiency among university students in Sabah.

Related Studies / Past Research
Several past studies, the relationship between communication apprehension and English-speaking skills has been examined internationallly and local levels.

In the international level, *Zeqiri (2022)* found that students with high levels of communication apprehension often demonstrated lower oral performance despite having good language knowledge. The study confirmed that its not only affects speaking fluency but also the effectiveness of message delivery.

In Malaysia, *Raj and AlSaqqaf (2024)* reported that communication apprehension in English has a negative impact on students' academic achievement and success in job interviews. In the other hand, *Hussin and Makmur (2021)* found that students with high communication apprehension reported lower levels of self-perceived communication competence. Meanwhile, a study by *Kho and Ting (2023)* on polytechnic students in Sarawak revealed that 71% of respondents were at a moderate level of communication apprehension, and that public speaking experience helped reduce their anxiety.

In the context of Sabah, *Suyansah and Gabda (2020)* conducted a study at Universiti Malaysia Sabah (UMS) and found that English proficiency, as measured by MUET scores and previous examination results, was a significant predictor of students' academic achievement. Although this study did not directly measure communication apprehension, the findings reinforce the argument that English proficiency is an important factor in the success of university students in Sabah. Another study in Sabah published by *RSIS International (2025)* highlighted the role of personality in determining the level of language anxiety, where traits such as extraversion and openness were found to reduce anxiety, while neuroticism increased it.

In addition, there are also studies that directly link English speaking proficiency to public speaking anxiety. *Khaidzir et al. (2024)* found that even when students had good English scores, they still experienced high levels of public speaking anxiety, indicating that linguistic competence alone is insufficient to overcome communication apprehension. *Abdul Latif*

(2019) reported that public university students in Malaysia rated their speaking proficiency at an intermediate level (B1–B2 based on the CEFR), and this self-assessment was closely related to their confidence in speaking in academic settings.

All these studies provide empirical evidence that communication apprehension and English-speaking proficiency are interrelated. However, research specifically examining this relationship among university students in Sabah remains limited. Therefore, this study aims to fill this gap by focusing on the linguistic and socio-cultural context of Sabah students.

Research Method
Research Design
This study employs a quantitative, survey research design as it is suitable for collecting data from a large sample within a short period of time. This design enables the researcher to measure the level of English-speaking proficiency and the level of communication apprehension among university students in Sabah, as well as to identify the relationship between the level of English-speaking proficiency and communication apprehension.

The use of a quantitative approach also allows for statistical analysis to be conducted to examine the significant relationships between the study variables, in line with the research objectives.

Location of Study
For this research, the study population consists of students enrolled in universities across Sabah. This group was selected because they are situated in an academic environment where English is used as one of the mediums of learning and communication.

Sample of Study
The phrase "Sample of Study" refers to a part of the population chosen to serve as a representative sample of the broader population for the purpose of gathering data for the study. 100 students who are presently enrolled in universities will make up the study's sample across Sabah. The university student population in Sabah is very large and involves various higher education institutions, the researcher cannot include the entire population. Therefore, sampling is used to select a portion of students that represents this population to facilitate the research process. The selected sample will consist of students from various faculties and study programs to obtain a more comprehensive picture of the level of communication apprehension and English-speaking proficiency.

Sampling Technique
This study employs a combination of purposive sampling and convenience sampling techniques to obtain respondents that align with the research objectives. These methods were chosen because they are practical and suitable for social research involving university students.

Purposive sampling was applied because the researcher selects respondents who met certain criteria, which is university students in Sabah who use English as a second or third language. This method is chosen to ensure that the respondents are genuinely related to the study variables, which are communication apprehension and speaking proficiency in English.

Through this technique, only students currently enrolled in higher education institutions in Sabah are chosen as the target group, as they are more relevant to answering the research questions.

In addition, convenience sampling was used, whereby samples were selected based on accessibility to respondents. The questionnaire was distributed online via platforms such as WhatsApp, Telegram, Facebook, Instagram and email, depending on the researcher's access to university students in Sabah. This method allows data collection to be conducted more efficiently, at lower cost, and with a larger number of respondents.

The combination of both techniques is suitable for this study as it balances the selection of respondents who are relevant to the research objectives while also facilitating the distribution process and ensuring a sufficient sample size.

Research Procedure
In this study, the researcher searched online for numerous journals and articles that addressed subjects that were like or related to the topic of the study. Next, to move forward with the selected topic, the researcher requests approval from the supervisor. The researcher begins the literature review as soon as permission is granted to delve further into the subject and better grasp the problems at hand. The researcher then uses Google Forms to create an online questionnaire with all the questions they are interested in learning more about based on the topic researcher have selected. The researcher then sends the questionnaire to researcher's supervisor for approval. The researcher then uses WhatsApp, Telegram, Facebook, Instagram and email to distribute the questionnaire to the respondents after receiving approval.

Data Collection
The data collection process for this study will be conducted using the survey questionnaire method through online distribution. This method was chosen because it is more practical, time-efficient, and allows for the collection of data from a large number of respondents within a short period. The research instrument will be prepared using the Google Forms platform to facilitate respondents' access and reduce printing costs.

The data collection period will last for two to three weeks. To ensure a high response rate, follow-up reminders will be sent periodically to respondents who have not yet completed the questionnaire. All data received will be stored securely, and only the researcher can access for analysis purposes.

Instrument of Study
The main instrument used in this study is a self-developed questionnaire design specifically to examine the level of communication apprehension and English-speaking proficiency among university students in Sabah. The questionnaire was designed using simple question, student-friendly language without excessive academic terms. This approach is important to encourage honest and sincere responses from participants, aligning with the study's aim of capturing their real experiences when communicating in English.

The questionnaire is divided into four main sections. The first section collects basic demographic information such as age, gender, university, year of study, and self-rated English level proficiency. This information helps the researcher identify background factors that may influence students' communication apprehension and speaking proficiency.

Section 2 evaluates students' English-speaking proficiency based on the CEFR framework *(Council of Europe, 2001),* covering five aspects which included fluency, accuracy, vocabulary, pronunciation, and comprehensibility. This is self-assessment measured, where students rate their own ability on a five-point Likert scale. Section 3 contains items related to communication apprehension, adapted from the Personal Report of Communication Apprehension (PRCA-24) by *McCroskey (1982).* This scale assesses students' communication apprehension in four contexts which is face-to-face conversations, small group discussions, meetings, and public speaking. Each item is rated on a five-point Likert scale. Section 4, the final section, evaluates the factors that contribute to communication apprehension. The questions are designed so that students can reflect their actual feelings during spoken interactions, rather than responding in general terms.

The questionnaire's design aims to combine clear quantitative measurements with opportunities for students to personally reflect on their experiences. By using friendly and relatable wording, students are more likely to provide genuine and thoughtful responses. Data collected from this instrument will not only provide statistical insights into the relationship between communication apprehension and English-speaking proficiency but also capture the authentic voices of students regarding the challenges and experiences they face when communicating in English.

Data Analysis
The data obtained from the questionnaire will be analysed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) to produce accurate and systematic findings. This analysis is divided into three main stages, aligned with the research objectives.
The first stage involves descriptive analysis to summarize data related to respondents' demographic information, such as age, gender, university, year of study, and self-rated English level proficiency. Descriptive analysis will also be used to assess respondents' English-speaking proficiency and their level of communication apprehension. The results will be presented in terms of mean, standard deviation, frequency, and percentage.

The second stage involves Pearson correlation analysis to examine the relationship between communication apprehension and English-speaking proficiency. This analysis will determine whether there is a significant relationship between the two variables.

The third stage applies multiple regression analysis to identify the factors that most influence students' communication apprehension when speaking in English. These factors may include language background, level of exposure to English, or prior language learning experiences.
All analysis results will be presented in tables and figures for ease of understanding. This method was chosen because it provides a comprehensive overview of the relationship between communication apprehension and English-speaking proficiency, while also identifying the key factors that influence this phenomenon.

Result and Discussion
The results of this study provide a clear picture of the level of English-speaking proficiency (ESP), the level of communication apprehension (CA), the relationship between the two, as well as the factors contributing to communication apprehension among university students in Sabah.

Firstly, the results show that the students' level of English-Speaking Proficiency (ESP) is at a moderate to high level (Mean = 3.56). Although students demonstrate confidence in casual situations and with friends, they are still less confident when involved in academic discussions or formal situations. These findings are consistent with studies by *JEE (2024) and Al-Nouh et al. (2015)*, which found that students in higher education institutions often struggle to speak fluently in academic contexts due to nervousness and lack of practical training.

Secondly, the level of Communication Apprehension (CA) is at a moderate level (Mean = 3.07). The main factors contributing to communication anxiety are concerns about grammar and vocabulary, followed by factors such as pronunciation, lack of exposure, and fear of being mocked. This finding aligns with the results of *Toubot & Seng (2018)* which emphasize that students in Sabah often face communication problems due to the limited use of English in their daily lives. The study by *Abdullah & Abdul Rahman (2022)* also states that linguistic aspects such as grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation play a significant role in determining students' confidence levels while speaking.

Third, the Pearson correlation analysis shows that there is a significant but weak negative relationship between CA and ESP (r = -0.238, p = 0.017). This means that the higher the students' communication apprehension, the lower their speaking skills. Although this relationship is significant, the strength is low, indicating that CA is one of many factors affecting ESP. These findings are consistent with *McCroskey's (1977)* theory which states that communication apprehension can hinder students' communication effectiveness, as well as supporting the study by *Luo (2014)* which found a negative relationship between communication apprehension and speaking skills.

Lastly, social and linguistic factors are clearly the main barriers for students in Sabah to improve their English-speaking proficiency. Linguistic factors such as grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation make students feel less confident, while social factors included fear of being mocked, lack of exposure, and formal situations further exacerbate their anxiety. Therefore, these findings emphasize that efforts to improve students' speaking skills should not only focus on linguistic development but also on psychological support and providing a safe and inclusive environment for language practice.

Implication of Study
This study provides several important implications that can be seen from theoretical, practical and pedagogical aspects.

Theoretical Implications
The findings of this study reinforce *McCroskey's (1977)* Communication Apprehension theory, which emphasizes that communication anxiety has a direct impact on the effectiveness of verbal communication. The significant negative relationship between CA and ESP among

university students in Sabah demonstrates that psychological factors should be given equal importance as linguistic factors in explaining students' speaking proficiency. Thus, this study adds new empirical evidence in the context of university students in Sabah that has been underexplored in the literature.

Practical Implications
In practical terms, the findings of this study provide a clear picture to universities, lecturers, and education policymakers regarding the need to support students in overcoming communication apprehension. For example, organizing interactive language programs such as debates, dramas, or language clubs can provide opportunities for students to practice in a more relaxed environment. Additionally, counseling or self-development workshops can also help students manage feelings of nervousness, shyness, or fear of being negatively evaluated.

Pedagogical Implications
From a pedagogical perspective, this study emphasizes the importance of teachers and lecturers adapting more communicative and student-friendly teaching strategies. Lecturers can use a student-centered learning approach by incorporating more verbal activities such as role-play, small group discussions, and presentations accompanied by constructive feedback. Additionally, language teachers should emphasize not only aspects of grammar and vocabulary but also strategies for building confidence, such as repeated practice, relaxation techniques, and positive encouragement. Teachers can optimize language learning strategies by having a thorough understanding of how motivation, comprehension, and language proficiency are affected (Mokhtar & Rahelan, 2024).

Limitation of Study
This study has several limitations that should be noted in assessing the overall findings. Firstly, the sample size used is limited to 100 university students in Sabah only. Although this number is sufficient for basic analysis, it may not fully represent the entire population of university students in Sabah who come from diverse institutional backgrounds, fields of study, and levels of language proficiency.

Secondly, the main instrument of this study is a self-reported questionnaire, where the responses of the respondents depend on their perceptions and self-assessment. This has the potential to create subjective bias, such as the tendency to provide answers that are perceived as 'correct' or 'appropriate' compared to actual experiences.

Thirdly, this study only focused on two main variables, namely communication apprehension and English-speaking proficiency. Although the results show a significant relationship, there are other factors that were not included, such as motivation, personality, socio-economic background, and the level of exposure to English in daily life, which may also influence students' speaking skills.

Finally, this study exclusively used a quantitative approach through questionnaires, without involving qualitative methods such as interviews or observations. Therefore, the findings of this study may not accurately reflect students' experiences in depth, particularly regarding emotional factors and the strategies they use to cope with communication apprehension.

Acknowledgement

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