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Oral communication apprehension, competence and performance among maritime engineering trainees

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It is apparent that oral communication skills are of a paramount importance in peoples’ workplace performance. English is taught in Ethiopia largely as a foreign language with the aim of enabling graduates cope with communication challenges in the workplace. All university students learn English; so do maritime engineering students who are presumed to work for industries abroad. Their ability to communicate in different situations is a crucial point. This study was, therefore, carried out with a view to measuring maritime engineering students’ level of communication apprehension and its relationship with their communication competence and performance in an EFL context. 76 second year students of the department of maritime engineering took part in the study. Data were gathered through questionnaires and oral communication tests. The findings indicate that students were generally apprehensive in EFL oral communication. The participants showed the highest apprehension to public speaking. It was also found out that communication apprehension was negatively correlated with both communication competence and oral communication performance of the trainees, and the trainees’ self-reported communication competence was found to have been positively correlated with their communication performance. In the light of the findings of the research, pedagogical implications and recommendations have been forwarded.

Key words: EFL (English as a Foreign Language) maritime engineering students/trainees, Bahir Dar University (BDU), Oral communication, communication apprehension (CA), communication competence (CC), communication performance (CP).

INTRODUCTION

As English Language is increasingly becoming an important lingua franca, which is adopted as a communication medium between two or more parties from different linguistic backgrounds, countries have shown interest in promoting the English Language education in academic and professional contexts. Ethiopia is neither an exception; it has English Language curricula in almost all stages of education. The Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia has given English a status of medium of instruction in secondary and higher education (Ethiopian Education and Training Policy, 1994). Besides this, English is used as a means of communication in various business firms in Ethiopia. all curricula there are English Language courses aiming towards developing the English Language communication skills of students. One of the fields of study that started operating in Bahir Dar University is Maritime Engineering. As described in the curriculum itself, in addition to other engineering courses, English Language communication courses were added with the belief that the graduates would be joining the international job industry with the premise that they will directly be consumed by the international market where the use of English Language as a principal means of workplace communication will likely be there (BDU, Maritime Engineering Curriculum, 2011).

Graduates in various fields should be competent in communication skills in order to succeed in their workplace tasks effectively (Charlesworth, 2008; Crosling...
and Ward, 2002). Engineering students should notably be equipped with oral communication skills which help them perform their technical duties (Grant and Dickson, 2006; Devi and Feroz, 2008). In the increasingly globalised job market, maritime engineering graduates need to possess excellent English Language communication skills without which it could perhaps be very hard for them to deal with workplace duties.

Difficulties in communicating in English among students are experienced as the language is primarily taught in a foreign language context where students have limited access to it outside the classroom context. Regardless of this, English Language teaching is still one of the central businesses of higher education in Ethiopia.

Research demonstrates that various psychological variables affect communication performance. A case in point is the effect that communication apprehension may have on students’ overall academic performance (Bennett and Rhodes, 1988; Bourhis and Allen, 1992; McCroskey, 1984). Frymier (2005) also found out that the students’ communication apprehension affected their learning outcomes. All in all, communication apprehension is a crucial academic success determinant although there could be factors that would be responsible for it. “The person with a high level of CA will avoid communication much of the time in order to avoid experiencing the fear or anxiety the person has learned to associate with communication encounters” (McCroskey, 1977).

This article presents the results of an investigation of maritime engineering students’ level of communication apprehension, competence in English Language oral communication and their oral communication performance. It also attempts to show the relationships among these variables.

Communication apprehension (CA) is defined as “an individual’s level of fear or anxiety associated with either real or anticipated communication with another person or persons” (McCroskey, 1977, 1984). Lucas (2009) and McCroskey (1977) contend that some level of fear (nervousness) that we experience in speeches is a normal one that could be experienced by everyone, yet it may harm or help the communicator.

Foreign language communication apprehension (FLCA) is defined as “the special communication apprehension permeating foreign language learning [derived] from the personal knowledge that one will almost certainly have difficulty of understanding others and making oneself understood” (Horwitz et al., 1986). The foreign language apprehension is important because it will not be experienced the same way as in the case of communicating in L1. Studies (Richmond et al., 2008; McCroskey et al., 1983) indicate that students’ level of communication apprehension in L1 is significantly lower than their apprehension in L2 (English, in that case). We can, therefore, draw a lesson that the students who are in Help his/her students overcome or control over communication apprehension through creating conducive an EFL classroom for practising various oral communication tasks before their own classmates should do more so as to manage their apprehension feeling and transform it into positive consequences.

Although, communication apprehension is apparently seen as a dichotomy which encompasses trait and situational (state), McCroskey (1984) highlights that the distinction is a kind of false dichotomy and researchers should target on communication apprehension as defined earlier as these categories may be put in a continuum where it could be tough to come up with clear differences. Dyad, group, meeting and public speaking are the different situations wherein people may do their communication, and it is likely for the communicators to be more apprehensive in one and less in another as the situations demand different demonstrations (McCroskey, 1984, 1977). It is presumably understood that general personality traits such as quietness, shyness, and reticence frequently precipitate communication apprehension (Friedman, 1980, cited in Thaher, 2005). When one desires to make a successful oral presentation, but the process of verbalizing is inhibited, shyness or reticence is occurring. However, the degree to which individuals fear such types of performance as public speaking or dialogue/conversation differs from individual to individual.

Buss (1980), mentioned in McCroskey (1984), identifies factors that may contribute to increased communication apprehension that include novelty, formality, subordinate status, conspicuousness, unfamiliarity, dissimilarity, and degree of attention from others. The most important factors that could lead an oral communicator’s performance into a failure are low intellectual skills, speech skill deficiencies, voluntary social introversion, social alienation, communication anxiety, low social self-esteem and ethnic/cultural divergence in communication norms (McCroskey, 1980; Bond, 1984).

The Negative Cognitive Appraisal Model (Glaser, 1981), on the other hand, mentions that a child attempts to avoid inter-personal oral communication situations when he/she is made to grow quiet at home (Bond, 1984). Bond explains that the child keeps quiet because he/she wants to avoid the chance of being punished for making mistakes. This seemingly is true in quite many cases in the Ethiopian context. As one of the researchers remembers, one of his students who attended his spoken English class did stand before the class but failed to deliver anything to the audience. When the teacher talked later to that student as to why he ‘failed’, he confirmed that his oral ability, even in the mother tongue [Amharic] was restricted, for he used to be rewarded, mainly by the parents, not to speak in front of others.

Lucas (2009) yet argues that communication apprehension [nervousness, in his book] is a normal feeling that individuals can systematically control it while avoidance is almost entirely impossible. A teacher may
classroom environments that can promote communication at ease using lifelike situations and language learning strategies (Friedman, 1980, cited in Thaher, 2005) and providing students with sufficient practice sessions that can allow them to see models and demonstrate their speeches on subjects they are most familiar with (Suid, 1984).

Researchers continued investigating how communication apprehension could hamper attainment in communication skills. So far, research tells us varied findings about communication apprehension and its consequences on students’ academic outcomes. Researchers (Thaher, 2005; Horowitz, 2001; Allen and Bourhis, 1996), for example, report that students showed a significant level of communication apprehension which negatively affected their language learning outcomes. In a similar vein, Mustapha et al. (2010) observed a high level of communication apprehension in most EFL students while Radzuan and Kuar (2010) found a moderate level of communication apprehension in most of the students in a classroom communication course. In another study, Pitt et al. (2010) report communication apprehension to have had a significant negative effect on sales students’ performance. By way of contrast, Devi and Feroz (2008) found out that communication apprehension did not show any linear relationship with students’ oral presentation performance.

This study, therefore, was carried out in an attempt to finding out if students had a communication apprehension level that could be correlated to their oral communication performance and competence. As stated before, the study focused on trainees of maritime engineering at Bahir Dar University.

Trainees in the Maritime Engineering programme at BDU take a number of courses in their own field; yet among the expectations stated in the modules, a statement goes as follows:

Maritime engineers can express their ideas and present their projects successfully only if they are good in (sic) communication and good in preparation of technical proposals and presentations. If they fail to communicate their ideas or project properly, they may not be understood (well). The entire gamut of knowledge and skills they have acquired over the period of their education will not be useful if they are not good in communication (Maritime Engineering Curriculum, Bahir Dar University, 2011).

To this end, the trainees are supposed to take three English language courses as stated in the curriculum. These are Sophomore English (FLEN 1021), Communication Skills (FLEN 2032) and Use of English in Written and Oral Form (FLEN 3023).

It is, therefore, emphasized that maritime trainees, because they will presumably be consumed by the inter-
national market, should be able to use English as a means of international communication. It is also underscored in the curriculum document that the maritime engineers should be equipped with strong communication.

Local Research indicates that factors like motivation (Mulugeta, 1997), anxiety (Abate, 1996) and efficacy belief (Yalew, 1997; Dawit, 2008) affect the performance of students’ English language performance. It is also presumed that most students fail academically partly because they have high levels of communication apprehension (Allen and Bourhis, 1996; Horowitz, 2001). To date, researchers found insufficient research in the area of communication apprehension and communication skills performance in the Ethiopian context.

Thus, this study aims at examining the level of maritime engineering trainees’ oral communication apprehension and its correlation (if any) with their self-perceived communication competence and oral communication (speech) performance. This study specifically intends to answer the following questions:

1) What is maritime engineering trainees’ level of communication apprehension towards each of the oral communication tasks (dyad/inter personal conversation, group discussion, meeting and public speaking) and all together?
2) What relationship (if any) does exist among the trainees’ level of communication apprehension, their self-perceived communication competence and speech performance?

Objectives

The study attempts to find out if communication apprehension exists among maritime engineering students. It explores the trainees’ communicative oral English apprehension feeling in group, dyad, meeting and public speaking sessions. It also examines the correlation among trainees’ oral communication apprehension, communication competence and speech performance in the course Communication Skills (FLEN 2032). More specifically, the objectives can be expressed as follows:

1) To gauge maritime engineering trainees’ level of communication apprehension in the dyad (conversation), group discussion, meeting and public speaking sessions and all together in an EFL classroom context.
2) To examine how oral communication apprehension correlates to the trainees overall oral communication competence and performance.

Significance

This study will be beneficial in different ways. On the one
hand, teachers can look into the report and relate it to their own classroom contexts where many communication challenges in foreign language learning could be exhibited. On the other hand, the employers which consume the graduates could enhance their awareness about the potential communication threats and resulting consequences among novice professionals in their organizations. Further, researchers can evaluate how important are the points and arguments made in this article and they can come up with studies in various other contexts. It is, therefore, believed that the study will have implications about practical oral communication challenges in and outside the EFL classroom, and it will provide additional information to the existing body of knowledge in the area.

**METHODOLOGY**

This study, mainly designed to be correlational, has tried to investigate the correlation among maritime engineering students’ level of oral communication apprehension, self-perceived communication competence and actual oral communication performance. To this end, it has passed through the steps explained as follows:

**Participants**

The participants of the study were 76 randomly selected second year Maritime Engineering trainees at Bahir Dar University, Ethiopia. They were all males as the programme admitted only male students. These students were taking the course ‘Communication Skills’ during the academic period from September 2011 to January 2012 for four months. Prior to the course, the students took a general English course called ‘Sophomore English’. These trainees were housed in the main campus of Bahir Dar University where they also attended other courses in their field.

**Instruments**

**Questionnaires**

The questionnaire which was used to measure students’ oral communication apprehension comprised 24 items measuring oral communication apprehension. This instrument was the latest version for assessing Personal Report of Communication Apprehension (PRCA-24) (McCroskey, 1984). The items are statements aiming to assess a person’s reactions to communicating in four different settings (dyad, group, meeting and public speaking). Leary (1991) advises researchers to use overall CA scale rather than the sub-scales so as to arrive at a conclusion. Accordingly, this research attempted to correlate the overall CA to trainees’ self-perceived oral communication competence and actual oral communication performance in oral presentation settings. McCroskey (1984) found the instrument to have a high level reliability (Cronbach alpha = 0.94). Similarly, Beatty (1994) found the alpha reliability of the PRCA – 24 to be between 0.93 and 0.95 which guarantees the researchers to use it as a standardized scale. Others (Richmond et al., 2008; Mustapha et al., 2010) similarly reported the instrument to have shown a very high reliability (>0.90).

The other questionnaire, a 12 items scale (a standardized one), was also adopted to measure the students’ oral communication competence in different situations (that is communicating with strangers, friends, acquaintances). This was also a measure of students’ feelings towards their competence in different oral communication settings.

The participants were presented with the statements and were instructed to indicate their agreement or disagreement to each statement on a five-point scale ranging from strongly agree (5) to strongly disagree (1) to the oral communication scale, and they were instructed to gauge their level of communication competence in different situations.

**Tests**

Two oral communication (speech) tests were conducted. The oral communication tests were rated using standard oral presentation measurement rubrics which had five components (content, organization, language, adaptation to audience and context and use of paralinguistic features). Each component was evaluated out of 5. Each of the two oral tests was evaluated out of 25 and the results were summed up to indicate achievements out of 50 points. The course lecturer was given the rubrics to evaluate students’ oral presentation tasks in the classroom and the evaluation was made together with one of the researchers. The inter-rater reliability was 0.89. It was also to guarantee reliability that the oral assessment was made twice and by two experts.

**The research procedure**

Data were gathered through two instruments: questionnaires and oral tests. As this study is mainly exploratory, it shows the trainees’ self-reported level of oral communication apprehension to each of the sub skills – dyad (interpersonal conversation), group discussion, meeting, and public speaking. The results were coded and summed up, and this stage was repeated to recheck the results coded. Descriptive statistics was used at this stage of the investigation. Later, the results were correlated to the trainees’ self-perceived oral communication competence and actual performance in two oral presentation settings. Following these, the data were analyzed and interpreted, which ultimately led the researchers to come up with possible conclusions and recommendations.

**DATA ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION**

**Measure of students’ communication apprehension**

In the self-reported communication apprehension questionnaire, students’ answers were coded and recorded. The oral communication tasks towards which students were asked to rate their level of apprehension were group discussion, meeting (class), interpersonal conversation (dyad) and public speaking. Table 1 shows the communication apprehension measure for each as well as the overall communication apprehension level of students (that is when the results of all are taken all together).

Accordingly, it is seen in the table that students were found to be most apprehensive in public speaking situations for which they had a mean apprehension level of 14.49 with a standard deviation (SD) of 3.93. Public speaking was the most trouble creating oral communication task towards which students showed a high sense of fear. This was followed by interpersonal
Table 1. Descriptive statistics for students’ level of CA.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of oral communication</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Minimum</th>
<th>Maximum</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std. deviation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CA in group discussion</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>11.38</td>
<td>3.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CA in meeting</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>12.66</td>
<td>4.53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CA in interpersonal conversation</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>14.38</td>
<td>3.96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CA in public speaking</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>14.49</td>
<td>3.93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall CA level</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>52.91</td>
<td>13.06</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

CA: communication apprehension.

Table 2. Correlations among CA, CC and CP.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Parameters</th>
<th>Overall CA level</th>
<th>CC</th>
<th>CP</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pearson correlation</td>
<td></td>
<td>-0.326**</td>
<td>-0.346**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sig. (2-tailed)</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.004</td>
<td>0.002</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N = 76</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communication competence</td>
<td>Pearson correlation</td>
<td>-0.326**</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sig. (2-tailed)</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.004</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N = 76</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oral communication performance</td>
<td>Pearson correlation</td>
<td>-0.346**</td>
<td>0.402**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sig. (2-tailed)</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.002</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N = 76</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Correlation is significant at p<0.01.

The overall average oral communication apprehension was found to be 52.91 where 27 and 81 were the minimum and maximum scores, respectively. Taking the maximum possible level of apprehension (120) and the minimum possible (24) into consideration, one can see that the possible range is 96 whose average is 48 which could be expected from a student who is moderately apprehensive. Although, the mean communication apprehension level, 52.91, slightly exceeds that benchmark, it can be understood generally that the students had a moderate level of communication apprehension. It then implies that students were generally apprehensive towards performing oral communication tasks.

These findings confirm Pitt et al.’s (2010) results which indicated the highest level of public speaking apprehension, and an overall high communication apprehension among students. Correspondingly, Charlesworth (2008) found out the highest level of oral communication apprehension in the task of public speaking.

Correlations among CA, CC and CP

The correlations among the three, oral communication apprehension, communication competence, and communication performance are important because lessons and implications can be drawn for pedagogical applications.

On one side, it can be seen from Table 2 that communication apprehension is negatively correlated with both communication competence and performance. Students’ oral communication apprehension and their oral communication performance were found to correlate at $r = -0.346$, $p = 0.002$, and the communication apprehension had also shown a negative correlation ($r = -0.326$, $p = 0.004$) with oral communication competence. Both correlations were found to be significant at $p<0.01$. It is, therefore, implied that increased communication apprehension will likely negatively affect communication performance and competence.

On the other side, another important point that should be discussed here is the relationship between trainees’ self-perceived oral communication competence and the corresponding actual performance in oral communication (oral presentation). The results in Table 2 show that the
two (CC and CP) were positively correlated. As can be anticipated, there existed a significant positive correlation ($r = 0.402, p = 0.000$) between communication competence and communication performance of the maritime engineering trainees. It means as students showed better sense of oral communication competence, it would be likely for them to have improved oral communication performance. The average self-reported communication competence of students was $79.28\%$ with a SD of $12.48$ indicating that students had roughly moderate sense of overall oral communication competence.

The findings are in agreement with the literature and other research findings. Studies confirm the view that language oral communication apprehension affects perception of communication competence (McIntyre et al., 2002; MacIntyre and Noels, 1997) and performance (Allen and Bourhis, 1996). However, the findings partly contrasted with reports made by Devi and Feroz (2008) who found university students’ oral communication performance not having been influenced in anyway by sense of communication apprehension. Another contrasting finding was also Rojo-Laurilla (2007)’s which reported no significant relationship between students’ EFL communication apprehension and their competence in oral communication.

**CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

Research findings in the area of communication apprehension, competence and performance are characterized by dichotomies which reveal out different conclusions in different situations. This study also tried to show the level of communication apprehension among maritime engineering trainees and its correlation with the trainees’ sense of oral communication competence and their oral communication performance.

Results of this study have shown that the students were found to have experienced moderately high levels of CA towards oral communication tasks in the EFL context.

They reported that they had higher level apprehension in public speaking tasks than in the rest of oral communication events (personal conversations, meetings and group discussions).

With regard to the correlations among self-perceived CA, CC and CP (as evaluated by the lecturer and one of the researchers), it was found out that CA was negatively correlated with CC and CP; the findings also revealed that CC had a positive relationship with CP which implied that the belief students possess about their capability could determine their ultimate success in academic tasks. In other words, the higher the students’ perception of their communicative competence, their performance in oral communication task could rise up.

The researchers finally recommend that in order to cope with anxiety, learning situations and context, efforts should be made to make the EFL learning context less stressful. The EFL classroom should not be a place causing a lot of uneasiness and anxiety. Real life tasks such as role plays, dramas and simulations could be adapted in the classroom so that students may have access to cultivate their competence up in various situations and cope with multifarious oral communication situations.

As research in the area is still budding, researchers should investigate more on issues connected to oral communication apprehension. A possible focus of the future research can also be exploring the psychological, instructional, and socio-cultural factors that lead EFL students to CA.

**REFERENCES**


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