

**Overcoming Communication Apprehension
with Emotional Intelligence skills**

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Abstract:

Good communication skill in the English language is a necessity for graduates in a second language learning environment to ensure that they can secure employment upon graduation. To be successful communicators, learners must be able to deal with their apprehension appropriately which can be difficult especially for learners with low self-esteem and those who fear that they are incompetent in the English language. This study explores the potential of emotional intelligence as a means to overcome communication apprehension among tertiary learners. The instruments used to measure these two variables are the Emotional Skills Profile (ESAP) by Nelson and Low (2011) and the Personal Report of Communication Apprehension (PRCA24) by McCroskey (1982). The results indicate a significant negative association between emotional intelligence and communication apprehension. The regression analysis shows that intrapersonal, self-management and personal leadership are important predictors in determining communication apprehension levels. Hence, it is vital for language educators to incorporate emotional intelligence within the language curriculum to enhance learners' confidence in using the second language.

Keywords:

emotional intelligence, communication apprehension, Communication skills.

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1.0 INTRODUCTION

Effective oral communication includes the ability to not only convey meaning but also the confidence to use the language in a variety of situations for different purposes. In the second language environment, learners face difficulties in acquiring this sort of competence and confidence in the language as they are bound by internal mechanisms such as motivation, personality types and learning behaviour as well as external factors like socio-cultural and socio-economic backgrounds and exposure to the language. (Young, 1991; Francis & Thomas, 2005). These variables continue to have an impact on the language learning efforts of second language learners and cause them to suffer from anxiety when learning the second language and in using the language for communicative purposes. Learners who fail to equip themselves with the confidence to communicate effectively in the English language will have to face the challenge of being rejected for job offers.

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

Goleman (1998) highlights that emotional quotient or emotional intelligence is the determiner which distinguishes a successful individual from a less successful one. He states that, “(We) are being judged by a new yardstick: not just how smart we are, or by our training and expertise, but also by how well we handle ourselves and each other” (p.3). Low and Nelson (2005) state that there is growing evidence on the need and value of incorporating personal skills and emotional intelligence into academic and student development programs. A consistent indicator emerging from research with college students is that improving emotional intelligence contributes towards achievement, college success, personal health, career performance and leadership (Nelson, Low & Vela, 2003). Students with a strong foundation in both academic and emotional aspects are generally successful in demonstrating positive behaviour which eventually results in attainment of goals and overall success in life. According to Howard (2009) emotional intelligence offers so many benefits that he postulates that those with high emotional intelligence would be less prone to suffer from communication apprehension in comparison to those with low emotional intelligence. Additionally, he adds that people with high EI would promote an environment where others also experience low levels of communication apprehension.

A market research on industrial needs in terms of English competency for entry level employment by Prestariang Systems (2011) revealed that Malaysian employers rated English competency as the most critical skill lacking among local graduates. In addition, the employers indicated that apart from knowledge and specific technical competencies most jobs require workers who have good “communication, social, emotional and critical thinking skills”. The same report also stresses that during the recruitment process, the skills of speaking (98%) and listening (77%) are the two main language skills assessed. This research report by Prestariang (2011) is a clear indicator of the pressing need for language educators specifically in institutions of higher learning to find ways and means to improve the confidence of tertiary learners to communicate in the target language.

One of the reasons identified for the poor performance in English language communication is the problem of communication apprehension (CA). CA is a feeling of discomfort when communicating in the foreign or second language. According to McCroskey (1984), many students even at higher levels of study experience some level of fear and anxiety when asked to communicate, especially in public. MacIntyre and Gardner

(1991) identified speaking skill as the agent that arouses anxiety in learners and that students with high anxiety perform worse than those with low anxiety. According to McCroskey (1983) in Francis and Miller (2008) high CA can impede the development of communication skills and affect the social skills of individuals within a community. In the Malaysian context, the problem of communication apprehension is especially evident among Malay learners who hail from rural areas where there is a lack of qualified teachers, instructional materials and general exposure to the English language (Baharum and Tretiakov, 2007). In addition, Rajadurai (2009) reports that Malay students have limited opportunities to speak in the English language within the community as speakers who attempted to do so were considered “rude, offensive, showing off, patronizing and arrogant” (p. 78) .

In dealing with the lack of communication skills, tertiary institutions would usually introduce subjects that help develop overall communication skills. However, Hassall, Joyce, Ottewill, Arquero & Donoso (2000) highlight that when individuals experience high anxiety levels, application of communication building techniques will not result in improved communicative performance. Therefore, there is a need to first identify what should be done to reduce communication apprehension. Improving learners’ emotional intelligence (EI) levels as a means to lower CA seems to be a viable option because experts on emotional intelligence skills claim that with EI skills, learners would be able to monitor their own feelings and those of others more effectively and use their judgment and reasoning to deal with stressful situations (Mayer and Salovey, 1990)

3.0 RESEARCH OBJECTIVE

The main goals of the study are to establish if there is a correlation between emotional intelligence and communication apprehension and identify the significant predictors of communication apprehension among Malay tertiary learners.

4.0 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

A total of 80 students were administered with two sets of questionnaires namely; the Emotional Skills Assessment Process (ESAP) questionnaire to chart the profile of the emotional intelligence levels of Malay tertiary learners and the Personal Report of Communication Apprehension-24 (PRCA-24) to identify the communication apprehension level of this same group of learners. The ESAP instrument measures learners’ emotional intelligence in four domains: interpersonal skills, leadership skills, self-management skills and intrapersonal skills. Each domain consists of its own sub-categories. These sub-categories provide scale specific measurement of 10 emotional intelligence skills and when combined they give a total EI score for the individual. The ESAP also identifies three potential problem areas (Aggression, Deference, and Change Orientation.) The total number of items in the ESAP is 213. Based on their experiences, participants are asked to circle each statement with three responses (M – *most like or descriptive of you*, S- *sometimes like or descriptive of you and sometimes not*, and L-*least like or descriptive of you*). There are 13 subscales under four categories and “each subscales indicate whether a particular skill (variable) needs to be developed, strengthened, or improved, and whether a potential problem area is presented with a low, normal, or high score in a profile of emotional skills.

The PRCA 24 questionnaire consists of two sections. The scale consists of 24 Likert items ranging from 1 *strongly disagree* to 5 *strongly agree*. The scores relate to four communication contexts – group discussions, meetings, interpersonal conversations and

public speaking. The scores in this instrument can range from 24 to 120. Scores below 55 represent people who have very low CA. Scores that fall within 56-83 represent people with average CA. Scores above 83 represent people who have high levels of trait-like CA.

5.0 FINDINGS

a. What is the EI skill level of Malay tertiary learners?

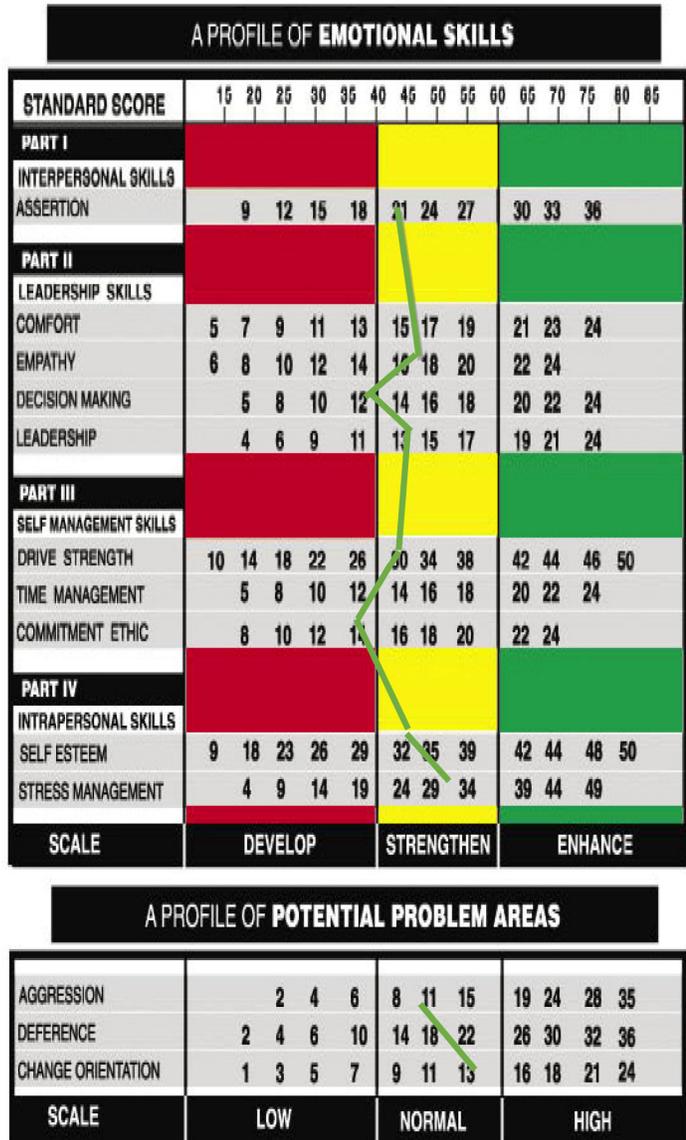


Figure 1: Emotional Skill Profile of Malay Learners

The graphical display in Figure 1 shows the emotional skills and potential problem areas as measured by Nelson and Low's ESAP (Emotional Skills Assessment Profile) for the overall sample of Malay Learners ($N=80$) who participated in the study. For these research participants out of the ten EI skills, eight of them fall in the 'Strengthen' area of the profile. These include the EI skills of Assertion (mean=20.95), Comfort (mean=15.19), Empathy (mean= 17.75), Leadership (mean=13.20), Drive Strength(mean=30.94), Time Management(mean=13.69), Self Esteem(mean=34.51), and Stress Management (mean=31.46), while the remaining two EI skills of Decision Making(mean= 12.80) and Commitment Ethic(14.18) fall in the area of 'Develop'. The EI potential problem areas of Aggression (mean=10.98), Deference (mean= 20.95) and Change Orientation (mean = 14.85) fall in the 'Normal' range. Based on the chart, the 2 skills that need serious attention to be developed further are decision making and commitment ethic. Poor decision making skills means that Malay tertiary learners are unable to implement effective problem-solving or conflict resolution procedures which is a category of leadership skills. In addition, their self- management skill of commitment ethic is also in the 'develop' region which indicates that their ability to complete tasks and personal responsibilities in a successful manner under difficult circumstances is still not effective. As for the problem areas, the plot shows that they are within the normal range with aggression being the lowest of the three and change orientation being the highest of the three potential problem areas. The potential problem areas signify that Malay tertiary learners have an average level of control of their anger management skill and self-imposed anxiety to communicate with others. Although change orientation falls within the normal range, the mean score is in the verge of entering the high region. This means that these learners recognize the need to change in certain areas of their life and they should work towards achieving that positive change in life.

b. What is the communication apprehension level of Malay tertiary students?

This question was answered by analysing the scores obtained through the PRCA 24 instrument and calculated as stipulated. Table 2 illustrates the number and percentage of participants classified as high, moderate or low in PRCA-24 scores.

Table 1 Classification of communication apprehension level based on PRCA24 scores

Scale	Number	Percentage
High communication apprehension	6	7.5%
Moderate communication apprehension	62	77.5%
Low communication apprehension	12	15%

Table 1 shows that the majority of participants (77.5%) reported moderate communication apprehension, 15% reported low communication apprehension while 6% stated that they experienced high communication apprehension. Participants' apprehension level in the different communication contexts were also analysed. Based on the interpretation of PRCA24 scores, those who scored 18 and above perceived themselves as having some degree of apprehension in that particular communication context. Table 4.14 displays the results of the PRCA sub-scores.

Table 2 Descriptive statistics of communication apprehension level in the different communication contexts

Sub scores	High Above 18	Low 18 and below
Group Discussion	12 (15%)	68 (85%)
Meetings	34 (42.5%)	46 (57.5%)
Interpersonal Conversation	37 (46.25%)	43(46.25%)
Public Speaking	55 (68.75%)	25 (31.25%)

Based on the data in Table 2, it is evident that the majority of participants (68.75%) experience high communication apprehension in the context of public speaking but apprehension level is low in the context of group discussions.

c. Is there any significant relationship between communication apprehension levels and emotional intelligence among Malay learners at tertiary level?

In order to answer this research question, student's communication apprehension levels and emotional intelligence were scored to determine if there is a correlation between the variables of emotional intelligence and communication apprehension as shown in Table 3 below.

Table 3: Correlation between the Domains of Emotional Intelligence and Communication Apprehension

	CA	INTE	PL	SM	INTRA	TEI
Communication Apprehension(CA) Sig. (2-tailed)	1	-.177	-.468**	-.450**	-.522**	-.547**
N	80	80	80	80	80	80
Interpersonal(INTE) Sig. (2-tailed)	-.177	1	.304**	.379**	.267*	.469*
N	.177	.006	.001	.017	*	.000
	80	80	80	80	80	80

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Personal Leadership(PL)	.468**	.304**	1	.593**	.699**	.868**
Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.006		.000	.000	.000
N	80	80	80	80	80	80
Self-Management(SM)	-.450**	.379**	.593**	1	.599**	.847**
Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.001	.000		.000	.000
N	80	80	80	80	80	80
Intrapersonal (INTRA)	-.522**	.267*	.699**	.599**	1	.872**
Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.017	.000	.000		.000
N	80	80	80	80	80	80
Total EI(TEI)	-.547**	.469**	.868**	.847**	.872**	1
Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000
N	80	80	80	80	80	80

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

The data in Table 3 shows that there is a significant negative relationship between emotional intelligence and communication apprehension. The (r) between the two variables of total emotional intelligence and communication apprehension is $r = (-.547)$, which according to Hinkle, Wiersma, & Jurs (2003) is a moderate negative relationship with r significant at the 0.01 level. The analysis of the relationship between communication apprehension and the respective domains of EI also shows a significant negative relationship between all of the domains of emotional intelligence except for interpersonal skills which do not indicate a significant relationship. Intrapersonal skills recorded the highest r - value which is $r = -.522$ at the 0.01 significance level. Next to intrapersonal skills is personal leadership skills ($r = -.468$) followed by self-management skills ($r = -.450$).

Table 4 : Regression Analysis for domains of Emotional Intelligence and Communication Apprehension

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted Square	Std. Error of the Estimate	Durbin-Watson
1.	.425 ^a	.181	.170	15.75668	2.190
a. Predictor: (Constant), Mean Personal Leadership b. Dependent Variable: Communication Apprehension					
2.	.483 ^a	.233	.223	15.24226	2.274
a. Predictor: (Constant), Mean Self Management b. Dependent Variable: Communication Apprehension					
3.	.522 ^a	.273	.263	14.84694	2.237
a. Predictor: (Constant), Mean Intrapersonal b. Dependent Variable: Communication Apprehension					

The results of the regression analysis as displayed in Table 4 indicates that the respective domains of EI specifically personal leadership, self-management and intrapersonal skills are significant predictors of the independent variable of communication. The adjusted R^2 for the domain of personal leadership is 0.170 which indicates that the independent variable of personal leadership can account for 17% of variance in communication apprehension levels. Next, the domain of self-management shows an adjusted R^2 of 0.223 which implies that this domain of EI can explain 22.3% of variance in communication apprehension levels. Lastly, the adjusted R^2 for the domain of intrapersonal skills is 0.263 which means that this domain of EI can account for 26.3% of variance in communication apprehension levels.

6.0 DISCUSSION

This study has established that emotional intelligence has a negative correlation with communication apprehension which means that the higher the emotional intelligence level, the lesser the experience of communication apprehension in learners. The domain of emotional intelligence that communication educators have to focus on especially with Malay learners are intrapersonal skills whereby educators have to think of methods that can help boost their self-esteem and manage their stress levels. Learners also have to be made aware of their self-management skills specifically in managing time, being committed to their given tasks and empowering them to have the drive to achieve goals. In addition to these, working on building their leadership qualities especially in decision making skills will make them become more confident individuals. Emotional intelligence training within the language classroom will enable learners to recognize their own feelings during the learning process and in their interactions with others. The most important consideration that English language teachers have to make is to ensure that the learning environment is student-centred. Present day language classrooms include a lot of group dynamics and student interaction as these are part of the teaching methodology in the communicative classroom. However in the ESL classroom and specifically with tertiary level learners who are in their late teens and early twenties there may be a reluctance to

co-operate as they fear being embarrassed in front of their peers. The emphasis therefore is to create a warm environment in the classroom where learners establish a bond with each other in the classroom. Activities should include establishing that bond between learners at the start of the semester through ice breakers and mingle activities that get them to know each other better and at the same time generate interest in the lesson. Other useful activities would be using role play, simulations and drama activities related to the real world. Brainstorming and discussion activities will also encourage the sharing of knowledge and opinions. Topics should focus on human interest areas and common interest of that age group. Human interest issues would also be an excellent opportunity to inculcate values in learners.

7.0 CONCLUSION

This study has established that ESL learners with high communication apprehension levels have poor control of their emotional intelligence skills. The educational implication of this descriptive study is that it is necessary to infuse emotional intelligence training within the language classroom to help students deal with communication phobia. If learners are prepared adequately to enter a job market where collaboration and excellent communication skills are required, they will have the extra edge when looking for employment. In short, learning and applying emotional intelligence skills will not only improve communication skills but also contribute to academic and career success.

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