Communication Apprehension and Intercultural Communication Apprehension among MA Students at a Public University in Bangkok

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ABSTRACT

One important skill for 21st century people is communication. However, trait-like communication apprehension (CA) can hinder effective communication. More than that, when communicating with foreigners who come from another culture, some non-native speakers of English might also be hindered by intercultural communication apprehension (ICA). Hence, the current study investigates CA in L2 (English) and ICA among students pursuing an MA in English at a public university in Bangkok, Thailand. The research results revealed that students with higher ICA have higher CA (trait-like CA). Moreover, to be more specific, MA students in the study who have higher ICA were found to have higher CA in the dimensions of group discussions and meetings. The results provide insight into how students in the study who have different levels of ICA feel in terms of their anxiety when they communicate using English in different contexts.

Keywords: communication apprehension, intercultural communication, master's degree students, English language (L2)

Introduction

In order to succeed in careers in the digital era, students need to be equipped with 21st century skills, whose framework is comprised of the four Cs: critical thinking, creativity, collaboration, and communication. Scholars have interpreted the framework of 21st century skills in different ways, with a variety of shades of meaning. However, one skill that is included in all interpretations is communication. For example, Voogt and Roblin (2012) identify the critical 21st century skills as follows: (1) collaboration, (2) communication, (3) digital literacy, (4) citizenship, (5) problem-solving, (6) critical thinking, (7) creativity, and (8) productivity. According to UNESCO's International Bureau of Education (2022), the common set of 21st century skills or competences include collaboration; communication; information and communication technology (ICT) literacy; and social and cultural competencies. Habets et al. (2020) also contend that communication is among the basic types of 21st century skills that are essential to help students enter the labor market and survive in present-day society.

However, one important communication obstacle is communication apprehension (McCroskey, 1977), also known as communicator anxiety (Hamilton & Kroll, 2018). If students' communication apprehension can be diagnosed, the teacher can provide students with appropriate support, especially when accompanied by insight into students' anxiety when they have to communicate with people from a different culture (ICA). Moreover, it is obvious that despite their similarities, a great deal of research has been done on CA, while little research has investigated ICA.

In Thailand, most bachelor's degree graduates from fields other than the English language feel that they need to have good English (L2) skills if they want to get jobs with better pay and benefits. This can be a reason that makes them pursue a second degree in the field of the English language. They also expect that having better skills in English can increase their opportunities in their current job. As the administrators of the MA program at the public university in this study have realized this fact, bachelor's degree graduates in various majors including English language and those working in any field are eligible to join the program and pursue an MA in English. MA students in this program are learning English for their careers, which are related to communicating across cultures. However, some of them may encounter obstacles such as CA and ICA when using English, which is the foreign language (L2) that most of them have to use when communicating with people from other cultures.

Hence, this research study aimed to investigate whether MA students who have different levels of anxiety when communicating across

cultures (ICA) have different trait-like CA or not, and whether they have different CA in the four dimensions: group discussions, meetings, interpersonal conversations, and public speaking.

All in all, the current research study was guided by two research questions as follows.

- **RQ 1**: Is there a difference in trait-like CA in L2 between MA students with low ICA compared to those with moderate to high ICA?
- **RQ 2**: Is there a difference in the various dimensions of CA in L2 between MA students with low ICA compared to those with moderate to high ICA?

It is recognized that communication is one of the soft skills that can have an enormous effect on people's success and job satisfaction; however, it is not easy for most Thai people to communicate fluently in English with those who come from other cultures. It is difficult not only because good English skills are required but also because they often have to overcome the internal obstacle of anxiety when using L2 (English), as well as the anxiety that arises when communicating with foreigners who come from different cultures.

Most MA students majoring in English are motivated to enhance their English knowledge and skills, which can help them to get a better job or a promotion from the position they currently hold. If students' anxiety is known, either CA or ICA, the instructors of the courses provided for the students in the program can design the curriculums and manage the teaching and learning with more empathy, which will be beneficial to the students, and the courses offered can also be more interesting.

Literature Review

The concepts that were used as the framework for the current study are communication apprehension (CA) and intercultural communication apprehension (ICA). As a result, the literature review was done accordingly.

Communication Apprehension (CA)

CA is an important construct in communication, which has been found to be an important contributor to failure and success in various aspects of an individual's life. Oral CA is divided into trait-like and situational. In this study, the emphasis is on trait-like CA. Trait-like CA is "a relatively enduring orientation of an individual's level of fear or anxiety associated with either real or anticipated communication with another person or persons" (McCroskey, 1977, p. 82; McCroskey, 1984, p. 16).

Trait-like CA is the summation of fear or anxiety when an individual communicates across four dimensions: group discussions, interpersonal conversations, meetings, and public speaking. Each individual's anxiety when communicating in each context varies.

Effects of CA

Those with trait-like communication apprehension have a tendency to be anxious about oral communication in all kinds of contexts. In general, CA is considered a barrier to communication, especially speaking. Russ (2013) states that people with trait-like CA feel uncomfortable when communicating with others across four different contexts, while context CA refers to diverse environments or contexts in which a person experiences discomfort when communicating. Moreover, Blume et al. (2013) concluded that anxiety in communication might be a barrier to success in educational and work settings in today's global context.

Causes of CA

Most research studies have focused on the ways to cope with communication apprehension. This might be because of the subtle nature of CA, which makes it difficult to specify the exact causes. However, based on the literature review, the sources of CA have been identified as low self-esteem and feelings of inferiority (McCroskey et al., 1977). Also, CA is considered to come from external factors, such as the newness of a situation (Buss, 1980).

Later on, researchers came to believe that heredity is a source of CA (Beatty et al., 1998, McCroskey & Beatty, 2000, Opt & Loffredo, 2000). That was the genesis of the term "communibiology." However, it has been argued that heredity is not the only factor leading to high CA, and some researchers such as Conditt (2000) posits that experience can help individuals to manage or cope with anxiety or, conversely, exacerbate it. This idea is aligned with those of biopsychologists such as Pinel (2014), who assert that each individual's heredity interacts with his/her experience in determining how a situation is perceived.

Currently, some researchers consider cultural background to be a cause of high CA (Croucher et al., 2015; Jalleh et al., 2021). Rimkeeratikul (2021) found that birth order influences CA in the contexts of public speaking, and income differences also affect trait-like CA and CA in the contexts of group discussions and interpersonal conversations.

Intercultural Communication Apprehension (ICA)

ICA is uncertainty in communication with an individual from another culture, which leads to a specific form of anxiety (Neuliep & McCroskey, 1997). The concept of intercultural communication apprehension is considered a subcategory of communication apprehension (CA). However, when individuals communicate in intercultural contexts, they are more likely to be anxious as the situations contain more uncertainty, which makes them stressful and even threatening (Samochowiec & Florack, 2010).

Effects of ICA

Individuals with higher ICA can have lower tolerance toward people of another culture (Lin & Rancer, 2003). If the ICA decreases, willingness to communicate with individuals from another culture can increase (Neuliep, 2012). Also, ICA is an obstacle to cultural understanding and adaptation (Chen, 2010). That is, if intercultural communication apprehension is reduced, intercultural communication competence can be achieved (Jacobi, 2020).

Causes of ICA

ICA stems from uncertainty in communication with an individual from another culture (Neuliep & McCroskey, 1997). ICA may occur because of a lack of understanding of cultural differences and intercultural communication. Individuals who have a better understanding of cultural differences can easily adapt themselves in intercultural communication (Chen, 2010). Differences in cultural characteristics can also increase anxiety when communicating across cultures (Croucher et al., 2015).

Gudykunst and Nishida (2001) also posited that by nature, individuals feel more comfortable when they communicate with people of the same culture. Similarly, Tajfel (1974) found that generally individuals do not have a desire to connect with people from other cultures.

Jacobi (2020) maintained that only frequent exposure to situations that require intercultural communication may not reduce the degree of ICA experienced by an individual, while EI or emotional intelligence was not found to be helpful in reducing ICA in individuals (Fall et al., 2013).

In addition, researchers found that ICA is relevant to how individuals feel when communicating in the English language (Ying, 2002). This raises the question of whether the internal feelings of individuals, such as communication apprehension (CA) when using English (L2) of the MA

students studying English at the public university in the study, have an effect on their anxiety when they communicate or think about communicating with others from outside of their own culture (ICA).

Research Methodology

Research Design

The research was conducted in a quantitative manner. The respondents were first-year MA students in one of the most respected public universities in Bangkok, Thailand. The research instrument utilized in this research study was a questionnaire containing three major sections. The first section asked for the respondents' general background data; the second section, the PRCA-24 (McCroskey, 2006), was employed to measure their communication apprehension when they use the English language (L2); and the last section was the PRICA (Neuliep & McCroskey, 1997), which measured the students' level of intercultural communication anxiety. The details of the two measures used in the questionnaire are explained as follows.

Personal Report of Communication Apprehension (PRCA-24)

The current research used the Personal Report of Communication Apprehension-24 (McCroskey, 2006) (see Appendix A), which was developed to measure communication apprehension (CA) in four contexts: group discussions, interpersonal conversations, meetings, and public speaking. All in all, the summation of the CA in the four contexts is the total CA, which is called trait-like CA.

Personal Report of Intercultural Communication Apprehension (PRICA)

In order to measure the fear or anxiety occurring when an individual interacts with others from different cultural groups, the Personal Report of Intercultural Communication Apprehension (PRICA) (Neuliep & McCroskey, 1997) (see Appendix B) was used.

Data Collection

Questionnaires were sent to 48 first-year MA students majoring in English in an international program at the public university in Bangkok in the study. A total of 43 questionnaires were returned, which is equal to an

89.58% rate of return. The statistical tool used in this study was an independent *t*-test in SPSS.

Data Analysis

After the questionnaires were returned, statistical analysis was done to answer the research questions. The analysis was divided into the following steps: (1) the PRCA-24 was calculated, using descriptive statistical analysis, to obtain the mean scores of each dimension or context and of the trait-like CA; (2) the PRICA was calculated to determine the level of ICA of the students in the study; and (3) an independent *t*-test was performed using the outcomes from step (1) and step (2) to compare the mean differences of CA between the students whose ICA scores were low and those with moderate to high ICA.

Research Results

The research results are reported to answer the research questions. In addition, the sequence is arranged following the order set in the questionnaire.

Mean Scores of Each Dimension and of Trait-like CA

In Table 1, the descriptive statistics of the CA of respondents are provided in the form of means and standard deviations. This was done in accordance with the formula for calculating the PRCA-24 for each dimension (see Appendix A).

Table 1

Details of Scores of PRCA when Using L2 among MA Students

	N	Min	Max	*Mean*	*SD*
Group Discussions	43	7	27	15.77	4.85
Meetings	43	8	30	17.26	4.82
Interpersonal Conversations	43	9	30	16.70	4.70
Public Speaking	43	11	30	19.63	4.73

Total CA (Traitlike CA)	43	48	117	69.35	17.13

The Level of ICA of the Students in the Study

In Table 2, after calculating the students' scores of ICA following the formula accompanying the PRICA measure (see Appendix B), the scores were assigned to the categories of low, moderate and high. The majority of the students were found to have a moderate level of ICA, while only 7% (n=3) were found to have high ICA. As a result, the number of high ICA students was combined with the number of moderate ICA students when the independent t-test was performed in the next step.

Table 2

Different Levels of ICA among MA students

ICA Level	N	Frequency	Percentage
Low	43	17	39.5
Moderate	43	23	53.5
High	43	3	7.0
Total	43	43	100

Independent t-test to Investigate the Various Dimensions of CA and the Trait-like CA Differences between Students with Low ICA and those with Moderate to High ICA

Table 3 illustrates the results of the independent t-test comparing the mean differences of CA across the four dimensions and the total CA or trait-like CA of the MA students with different levels of ICA. This was done to answer the two research questions that guided the current research study.

First of all, there was a significant difference in the total CA or trait-like CA between the respondents who have low ICA ($M = 62.12$, $SD = 17.63$) and those with moderate to high ICA ($M = 74.08$, $SD = 15.34$) ($p = 0.02$). The respondents with lower ICA were found to have less trait-like CA when using English.

For CA in the dimension of group discussions, there was a significant difference between the respondents with low ICA and those with

moderate to high ICA. Those respondents with low ICA were found to have lower CA (M = 13.82, SD = 5.02) in the dimension of group discussions when compared to those with moderate to high ICA (M = 17.04, SD = 4.37) (p = 0.03). For CA in the dimension of meetings, there was a significant difference between the respondents with low ICA and those with moderate to high ICA. Those respondents with low ICA were found to have lower CA (M =15.12, SD = 5.53) in the dimension of meetings when compared to those with moderate to high ICA (M = 18.65, SD = 3.77) (p = 0.02).

Table 3

Independent t-test and Mean Scores of CA in L2 (English) among MA Students by ICA Levels

CA Dimension	ICA Level	CA Mean	SD	df	t	Sig (2-tailed)
Group Discussions	Low	13.82	5.02	41	-2.22	.03*
	Moderate/High	17.04	4.37			
Meetings	Low	15.12	5.53	41	-2.50	.02*
	Moderate/High	18.65	3.77			
Interpersonal Conversations	Low	15.06	4.30	41	-1.91	.06
	Moderate/High	17.77	4.71			
Public Speaking	Low	18.12	4.39	41	-1.74	.09
	Moderate/High	20.62	4.76			
Total CA (Trait-like CA)	Low	62.12	17.63	41	-2.36	.02*
	Moderate/High	74.08	15.34			

*p<0.05

Conclusion and Discussion

Referring to the research questions that guided the current research study, the research results revealed that MA students majoring in English

who have low ICA were found to have lower total CA in L2. By the same token, those with lower ICA were also found to have lower CA in L2 in the dimensions of group discussions and meetings. However, the research results indicate that students with low ICA were not found to be different from those with moderate to high ICA in terms of CA in L2 in the dimensions of interpersonal conversations and public speaking.

ICA is considered a subcategory of CA. That is, CA is the larger classification and ICA is subsumed by it (Jacobi, 2020). Hence, it is no surprise that the students who have low ICA were found to have lower trait-like CA compared to those with moderate to high ICA. However, as CA itself is composed of four dimensions, i.e., group discussions, personal conversations, meetings and public speaking, it is beneficial to look into the details regarding the ICA and its connectedness to each dimension or context of the CA of the students in the study. The results of the current study, revealing that students who have low ICA have lower CA in the dimensions of meetings and group discussions compared to those with moderate to high ICA, are discussed as follows.

For the dimension of meetings, the reason for the above findings might be that using English in a meeting is a high-stakes situation and a formal context, and the meeting participants include superiors and peers whose impressions of the speaker will be formed based on the English language abilities exhibited in the meeting. Rahmani and Croucher (2017) found that individuals with education levels higher than BA have lower CA in the context of meetings, which led them to conclude that increased exposure to meeting situations in higher education contexts thereby reduces CA in meetings. By the same token, if people with high ICA have more chances to interact in meetings using their L2 (English) in international settings, their comprehensive ICA might be mitigated, especially anxiety occurring in communication across cultures in work settings.

For the case of group discussions, although this situation is less formal than the meetings context, in intercultural communication, speakers must demonstrate their (L2) English language abilities and knowledge as well as skills at work without having much time for preparation. As a result, some students have higher CA in group discussions than others, and the research results found that they also have a higher level of ICA. That is, students with low CA in group discussions were found to feel less anxious when communicating across cultures (low ICA), and vice versa. This might be because they are confident when discussing with others in L2 (English) and also feel comfortable communicating with others from different cultures.

On the other hand, the current research results showed that students with low ICA were not found to be different from those with

moderate to high ICA in terms of CA in the dimensions of interpersonal conversations and public speaking. This might be because one-on-one communication in dyadic or interpersonal conversations with a person from another culture using English as the medium language tends to be more private compared to communication in group discussions or meetings. Moreover, it is possible to make corrections or have chances to repeat or ask the communication partner to repeat themselves until mutual understanding is achieved. And as it is likely that most MA students in the program are still young and do not hold a high position in the company or organization that they are working for, the conversations they have may tend to be less formal, like chitchat. Hence, in the dimension of interpersonal conversations, no differences in CA were found between students with low ICA levels and those with moderate to high ICA levels. This suggests that ICA might not play an important role in CA in L2 in the dimension of interpersonal conversations.

Finally, for public speaking, students with low ICA and those with moderate to high ICA were not found to be different in terms of being anxious when they have to use English in public speaking. This might be because of the fact that public speaking can be prepared for in advance, and there are less likely to be impromptu interactions between the speaker and audience members from the same culture or different cultures. For example, a speaker can limit the interactions using strategies to avoid being asked further questions. Moreover, intercultural communication apprehension can be reduced while giving a speech by good preparation and practicing before giving a speech or speaking in front of the public. As a result, besides using English as the medium when doing public speaking, cultural differences have little relevance in terms of the fear or anxiety in this situation.

Implications and Pedagogy

As the world is shrinking and people are getting closer due to globalization, intercultural or cross-cultural communication is becoming vital, especially for those who want to be successful at work when using English as a lingua franca. Since teachers play an important role as facilitators providing support to students, they need to be aware of the importance of students' communication anxiety with regard to the use of the English language when communicating across cultures.

Not only are English abilities and skills essential for non-native speakers, their feelings when they have to use English in various situations and with people from different cultures are also important since their English language abilities and skills can be hindered by anxiety, such as

communication apprehension when using L2 (English) and intercultural communication anxiety (ICA). Teachers may be able to use the research results to increase their understanding and empathy when teaching the English language to students with various communication abilities and hindrances.

This study revealed that students who have CA in meetings and group discussions also have a high level of ICA. Accordingly, educators or teachers involved with MA students may seek to reduce their anxiety by adding some lessons educating them on how to communicate using English in the contexts of meetings and group discussions, such as language input, mock-up situations, role-plays, and other practice or exercises. This should make the students more confident in their English skills and abilities in dealing with the international people that the students have to work and communicate with. Finally, the less tense or anxious the students feel, the more relaxed and efficient they will be when they use English at work across cultures, enabling them to be more effective and successful in their careers.

Limitations

There are some limitations in the current research study that should be taken into consideration as follows.
1. The sample size of the current study was small and included only students of an MA program majoring in English at a public university in Bangkok, Thailand.
2. The purposive and convenience sampling method was applied.
3. The generalizability of the results is limited due to the limitations mentioned above.

Recommendations for Further Research

After the research was completed, the gaps were identified. As a result, the following recommendations for further research are made.
1. The sample size can be increased by using people at work instead of students in order to get a genuine picture of communication at the workplace.
2. ICA should be studied with other variables, such as movie watching, to determine whether it helps reduce anxiety when communicating across cultures.
3. In the future, in order to help predict the ICA of another sample with different variables, other statistical tools, e.g., regression, should be applied.

About the Author

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Appendix A
Personal Report of Communication Apprehension (PRCA-24)

This instrument is composed of twenty-four statements concerning feelings about communicating with others. Please indicate the degree to which each statement applies to you by marking whether you: **Strongly Disagree = 1; Disagree = 2; Neutral = 3; Agree = 4; Strongly Agree = 5**

_____1. I dislike participating in group discussions.

_____2. Generally, I am comfortable while participating in group discussions.

_____3. I am tense and nervous while participating in group discussions.

_____4. I like to get involved in group discussions.

_____5. Engaging in a group discussion with new people makes me tense and nervous.

_____6. I am calm and relaxed while participating in group discussions.

_____7. Generally, I am nervous when I have to participate in a meeting.

_____8. Usually, I am comfortable when I have to participate in a meeting.

_____9. I am very calm and relaxed when I am called upon to express an opinion at a
           meeting.

_____10. I am afraid to express myself at meetings.

_____11. Communicating at meetings usually makes me uncomfortable.

_____12. I am very relaxed when answering questions at a meeting.

_____13. While participating in a conversation with a new acquaintance, I feel very
           nervous.

_____14. I have no fear of speaking up in conversations.

_____15. Ordinarily I am very tense and nervous in conversations.

_____16. Ordinarily I am very calm and relaxed in conversations.

_____17. While conversing with a new acquaintance, I feel very relaxed.

_____18. I'm afraid to speak up in conversations.

_____19. I have no fear of giving a speech.

_____20. Certain parts of my body feel very tense and rigid while giving a speech.

_____21. I feel relaxed while giving a speech.

_____22. My thoughts become confused and jumbled when I am giving a speech.

_____23. I face the prospect of giving a speech with confidence.

_____24. While giving a speech, I get so nervous I forget facts I really know.

SCORING:

Group discussion: 18 - (scores for items 2, 4, & 6) + (scores for items 1,3, & 5)

Meetings: 18 - (scores for items 8, 9, & 12) + (scores for items 7, 10, & 11)

Interpersonal: 18 - (scores for items 14, 16, & 17) + (scores for items 13, 15, & 18)

Public Speaking: 18 - (scores for items 19, 21, & 23) + (scores for items 20, 22, &24)

Group Discussion Score: _____

Interpersonal Score: _____

Meetings Score: _____

Public Speaking Score: _____

To obtain your total score for the PRCA, simply add your sub-scores together. _____

Scores can range from 24-120. Scores below 51 represent people who have very low CA. Scores between 51-80 represent people with average CA. Scores above 80 represent people who have high levels of trait CA

.

	Mean	SD	High Low
Total Score	65.6	15.3	> 80 < 51
Group:	15.4	4.8	> 20 < 11
Meeting:	16.4	4.2	> 20 < 13
Interpersonal	14.2	3.9	> 18 < 11
Public:	19.3	5.1	> 24 < 14

Source:

McCroskey, J. (2006). *An introduction to rhetorical communication: A Western rhetorical perspectiv*e (9th ed.). Allyn & Bacon/Merrill Education.

Appendix B
Personal Report of Intercultural Communication Apprehension (PRICA)

This measure was developed to address communication apprehension in the intercultural context. The 14 statements below are comments frequently made by people with regard to communication with people from other cultures. Indicate how much you agree with these statements by marking a number representing your response to each statement using the following choices: **Strongly Disagree = 1; Disagree = 2; are Neutral = 3; Agree = 4; Strongly Agree = 5**

_____ 1. Generally, I am comfortable interacting with a group of people from different cultures.

_____ 2. I am tense and nervous while interacting with people from different cultures.

_____ 3. I like to get involved in group discussion with others who are from different cultures.

_____ 4. Engaging in a group discussion with people from different cultures makes me nervous.

_____ 5. I am calm and relaxed with interacting with a group of people who are from different cultures.

_____ 6. While participating in a conversation with a person from a different culture, I get nervous.

_____ 7. I have no fear of speaking up in a conversation with a person from a different culture.

_____ 8. Ordinarily I am very tense and nervous in a conversation with person from a different culture.

_____ 9. Ordinarily I am very calm and relaxed in conversations with a person from a different culture.

_____10. While conversing with a person from a different culture, I feel very relaxed.

_____11. I am afraid to speak up in conversations with a person from a different culture.

_____12. I face the prospect of interacting with people from different cultures with confidence.

_____13. My thoughts become confused and jumbled when interacting with people from different cultures.

_____14. Communicating with people from different cultures makes me fee uncomfortable.

Scoring: To compute the PRICA score, complete the following steps:

Step 1. Add the scores for the following items: 1, 3, 5, 7, 9, 10, and 12

Step 2. Add the scores for the following items: 2, 4, 6, 8,11,13, and 14

Step 3. Complete the following formula: PRICA score = 42 - Total from Step 1 + Total from Step 2.

Scores can range from 14 to 70.

Scores below 32 indicate low intercultural CA.

Scores above 52 indicate high intercultural CA.

Scores ranging between 32 and 52 indicate a moderate level of intercultural CA.

Source: Neuliep, J. W., & McCroskey, J. C. (1997). The development of intercultural and interethnic communication apprehension scales. *Communication Research Reports, 14,* 385-398.