Communication Apprehension in L2 among MA Students Majoring in English in Bangkok, Thailand

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Abstract: As students in a master's degree program move from year one to year two, there is a tendency for them to be more proficient in English as an international language. In addition, since they have been exposed to an environment that allows them to use English in all classes, their anxiety in using L2 (English language) should be reduced. As a result, this study investigated communication apprehension (CA) in L2 of first-year and second-year students in an MA program whose curriculum emphasizes English in international communication. Their CA scores were compared by t-test analysis.

Key words: Communication Apprehension (CA), master's degree program, L2, English language, international communication

Introduction

It can be said that the ability to use English as a second language (L2) is very important among non-native speakers around the world, as English is considered a lingua franca, or an international language. In Thailand, English is used in almost every career-- both in scientific and non-scientific fields. Moreover, the ability to communicate in English is very important for those who want to attain a better position or even better pay. However, proficiency in oral communication might be hindered by what is called communication apprehension (CA) (McCroskey, 1970, 1977, 1984; McCroskey, Daly, & Sorensen, 1976).

In Thailand, there has not been any research done on CA in L2 of Thai students studying for a master's degree in English. As a result, this study investigated communication apprehension (CA) in L2 of first-year and second-year students in an MA program whose curriculum emphasizes English in international communication. The students had various careers; some of them were cabin crew members, some were tutors, some were working in multinational companies, and some were employed in local companies. English language is used as the medium in all classes in this program. In addition, the course books and all textbooks used in this program are in English.

By the time they move from the first year to the second year of study, students in this program have studied many courses in English. The curriculum is designed for students to improve the four skills in English: reading, writing, listening and speaking. There are also courses in linguistics and a course in communication, which are required courses for every student in this program. As a result of taking these courses, joining classes on weekends, and listening and speaking in classes in English for almost two years, the second-year students should have improved their English ability and be more proficient than the students in the first year of the same program.

Purpose of the Current Study

This study aimed to (1) examine the trait-like CA (total CA) and CA across contexts in L2 of students in year one and year two of this program and (2) to compare their trait-like CA and CA across contexts in L2.

Research Questions

The research questions that guided this study were as follows:
1. What is the score and level of CA in L2 of first-year students in each dimension as well as the score and level total CA?
2. What is the score and level of CA in L2 of second-year students in each dimension as well as the score and level of total CA?
3. Are the CA scores in L2 of the first-year and second-year MA students different?

Significance of the Study

1. The research results may be beneficial for the Thai and native English speaking teachers that teach English to the students majoring in English at the master's degree level in a language institute at a public university in Bangkok.
2. Students at the master's degree level in a language institute at a public university in Bangkok should be able to understand themselves better in terms of their own communication apprehension when they use the English language (L2).
3. This research study can help to fill the gap in the literature regarding communication apprehension in L2 among Thai MA students majoring in English for international communication.

Review of Literature

Communication Apprehension (CA)

Communication apprehension is an internal feeling of people who experience anxiety when they have to engage in oral communication or even when they anticipate that they will have to communicate orally with others. McCroskey (1977) defined CA as "an individual's level of fear or anxiety associated with either real or anticipated communication with another person or persons" (p. 78). CA was subsequently divided into trait CA and state CA (McCroskey, 1982, 1984). Later, McCroskey & Beatty (1998) divided CA into four categories: (1) trait-like; (2) context-based; (3) audience-based; and (4) situational.

Trait-like CA is rather enduring since the personality orientation of an individual is not easy to change (McCroskey & Beatty, 1998; McCroskey, Richmond, & McCroskey, 2009). People with high trait-like CA have anxiety toward oral communication in all kinds of contexts.

Context-based CA can occur with people in the context of group discussions, meetings, interpersonal conversations, and public speaking (McCroskey, 1982). When all contexts of context-based CA are summed up, the result is trait-like CA.

Audience-based CA, as explained by McCroskey (1984), occurs when a person communicates only with a certain person or a certain group of people. It is, for example, when a young pupil is talking with the head master of his/her school.

Situational CA is "a response to the situational constraints generated by the other person or group" (McCroskey, 1984, p. 18). It is experienced only when communicating with one particular person in a particular situation, e.g., an interviewee in a job interview.

In this study, the main concern was trait-like CA. However, CA in each sub-dimension, or CA in each context, specifically group discussions, meetings, interpersonal conversations, and public speaking, was investigated and compared, with the summation of CA across dimensions or across contexts referred to as trait-like CA.

Causes of Communication Apprehension

CA is caused by both heredity and the environment. Condit (2000) argues that communication traits are learned and affected by environment and culture; however, heredity seems to be a more important CA contributor to trait-like CA (McCroskey, 1982; Beatty, McCroskey, & Heisel, 1998; Beatty & McCroskey, 2001). Demographic, cultural, and socio-economic factors might also affect the CA level in people (Alley-Young, 2005). In terms of culture, members of collectivistic cultures may be more likely to avoid communication than those of individualistic cultures (Hsu, 2007).

Effects of Communication Apprehension

In terms of communication, McCroskey et al. (1976) state that, generally, those with high CA tend to be quiet, reserved, and low task oriented, preferring to work alone and avoiding interpersonal conversations. According to Allen & Bourhis (1996), the communication behaviors of individuals with high CA levels are at a low level in terms of both quantity and quality. Furthermore, a high CA level adversely affects an individual's life in many areas, including education, work, income, interpersonal relationships, and self-respect. Concerning personality, Opt & Loffredo (2000) determined that people with high CA tend to be introverts while those displaying low CA are likely to be extroverts. With respect to learning, Russ (2012) found that females with low trait-like CA and low CA across dimensions prefer the explorer learning style (McCarthy, 1994), while females with high trait-like CA and high CA in the contexts of groups, interpersonal conversations, and meetings prefer the learning styles of the evaluator and experimenter (McCarthy, 1994).

Relevant Previous Studies

In Thailand, very few studies have been carried out to investigate communication traits such as communication apprehension among students studying a foreign language or a second language. Nonetheless, there have been some research studies on CA that compared CA scores of engineering students (Rimkeeratikul, 2015) and those of graduate students in a master's degree program for executives (Rimkeeratikul et al., 2016).

Regarding the constructs employed in similar studies, some researchers have used the construct called foreign language anxiety or FLA (Horwitz et al., 1986), including Effiong (2015) and Suwannaset & Rimkeeratikul (2014).

Research Methodology

This study was quantitative research undertaken with students in a master's degree program in English language for use in various careers at a public university in Bangkok, Thailand.

Subjects

This research was undertaken with first-year and second-year students in a master's degree in English for Careers program. This target group was chosen for two reasons. First, it is a course teaching L2 (English) to students, so L2 means a lot to them. It can be assumed that they do their best with respect to using the English language for their study. Students have to give a lot of presentations in English; also, they have to talk with their instructors who are Thais and English native speakers in English. Second, students of year one and students of year two of this program are assumed to be the same in many aspects, i.e., they have to pass the same screening tests to be accepted to be students in this program. However, the second-year students have received more training on how to use English and they should be more proficient in English when compared to the first-year students. As a result, the sample of this study was comprised of 47 first-year students and 63 second-year students of this MA program in the academic year 2015.

Research Instrument

The instrument used in the current study was the PRCA-24 (McCroskey, 1977). The instructions asked the respondents to imagine or reflect on times when he/she uses the English language (L2). The PRCA-24 includes 24 items using a 5-point, Likert-type scale, which ranges from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The first six items assess context-based CA in the area of group discussions, the next six items evaluate context-based CA in the area of interpersonal conversations, the following six items measure CA in the area of meetings, and the last six items explore CA in the area of public speaking.

According to McCroskey (1982; 1997), the validity and the reliability of the PRCA-24 have been found to be very high. In addition, the construct validity of the PRCA-24 when used with Thai people has already been proved (Rimkeeratikul, 2008).

Procedures

The questionnaires were distributed in the second semester of the academic year 2015 to the first-year and second-year students on the same day, two weeks before the students' final examination period. For the first-year students, 30 questionnaires were returned from 47 students. In other words, the rate of return of the questionnaires from the first-year students was 63.8%. For the second-year students, 46 questionnaires were returned from 63 students, equating to a 73.02% return rate.

Data Analysis

Descriptive statistics were calculated for the general background of the respondents. Then, the mean scores of CA when using L2 of the first-year and second-year students were computed, based on the formula provided by McCroskey (1977). This was done for CA in every dimension: group discussions, interpersonal conversations, meetings, and public speaking. In addition, the mean scores of total CA or trait-like CA were also computed by adding the mean scores of the four dimensions of the first-year and those of the second-year students.

Subsequently, t-test analysis was done to compare the mean scores of CA in each dimension of the first-year and second-year students. Finally, also through t-test analysis, the mean scores of total CA of the first-year and second-year students of this MA program were also compared. The significance level was set at $p \leq .05$.

Research Results

Table 1 shows that for the group of the first-year students, there were 30 respondents, equaling 39.5% of the total number of respondents. For the second-year students, there were 46 respondents, equaling 60.5% of the total number of respondents in this study.

Table 1
Number of Respondents

	N	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
First-year Students	30	39.5	39.5	39.5
Second-year Students	46	60.5	60.5	100
Total	76	100	100	

Table 2 reveals that CA across the four dimensions and total CA of the first-year and second-year students of this MA program were all moderate. On top of that, there was no signicant difference between the CA of first-year and second-year students in all dimensions, including the total CA even though the mean scores of CA across dimensions as well as the total CA of the first-year students were higher than those of the second-year students.

Table 2
Independent T-Test and Mean Scores of CA in All Dimensions

	Year of Study	Mean Score	Level of CA	SD	t	df	Sig (2-tail)
Group	1st Year	19.09	Moderate	1.411		60	0.274
Discussions	2nd Year	18.61	Moderate	2.071	1.103		
Meetings	1st Year	17.87	Moderate	3.375		63	0.620
	Year				0.498		

	2nd Year	17.43	Moderate	3.429			
Interpersonal Conversations	1st Year	17.55	Moderate	1.405	0.097	63	0.923
	2nd Year	17.49	Moderate	2.576			
Public Speaking	1st Year	18.85	Moderate	2.277	-0.244	61	0.808
	2nd Year	18.98	Moderate	1.739			
Total CA	1st Year	73.47	Moderate	5.689	0.476	59	0.636
	2nd Year	72.57	Moderate	7.302			

($p \leq .05$)

Discussion

The research results indicated that trait-like CA and CA across the four dimensions of the first-year and the second-year students in this MA program were at a moderate level.

The raw scores indicated that the mean scores of CA in L2 across four dimensions of the first-year students were higher than those of the second-year students. However, no statistically significant difference was detected.

The results of this research study could lead to the conclusion that the students of this program did not suffer from communication anxiety when they communicated in English. In addition, they were not stressed when they imagined using English in various contexts. The research results also indicated that students in year one and year two of this master's degree program were not different when they use English across the dimensions. Most importantly, the research results indicated that the screening test for accepting candidates to be students in this master's degree program had worked properly; thus, the first-year students of the program only had a moderate degree of communication apprehension, which should enable them to graduate without too much communication anxiety as an obstacle.

On the other hand, the results of the current study may be viewed as confirmation of what many researchers have found, namely, that people with high CA tend to do poorly in education and are not persuasive; however, graduate students in the first and second academic year of an MA program in the current study had moderate CA. Consequently, they were able to pass the screening examination, which includes both written and oral tests.

Summary and Conclusion

This research study aimed to investigate communication apprehension (CA) in L2 of first-year and second-year students in an MA program whose curriculum emphasizes English for international communication. Their CA scores were investigated and compared by *t-test* analysis. Moderate levels of CA were found

among students of both years and there was no statistical significance with regard to the differences of their CA in L2.

Recommendations for Further Research
The recommendations for further research are as follows.

1. The researcher recommends that additional qualitative research be conducted in order to increase the understanding of the underlying reasons concerning students' communication apprehension when they use English in various situations.

2. Future research investigating CA in L2 of the first-year and second-year students is recommended to be conducted when the first-year students have just started the preparatory course, which is usually in the summer semester before the first semester of the first year starts. This could measure the CA of the students before they are exposed to any lessons in the MA program. For the CA in L2 of the second-year students, their CA scores should be investigated when it is the last week of the second semester of the second year, which is the time that they graduate. This might enable the researcher to get a clearer picture of the difference between their CA before and after the students have obtained knowledge and practiced their English skills, which is a major goal of this MA program in English for communicating in various careers.

About the Author

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