

Graduate Students of Two Similar Programs: A Comparison Study of Communication Apprehension when Speaking the English Language

Sucharat Rimkeeratikul

Language Institute, Thammasat University, Bangkok 10200, Thailand
sucharat.tu@gmail.com

Abstract

Communication apprehension (CA) is one important communication barrier, which can have significant negative impacts on many aspects of a person's life including perceived ability in communication, study, work performance, and promotions. On the other hand, CA has been found to be caused by many possible factors, including a lack of self-confidence and low self-esteem. This study investigated and compared CA in L1 (Thai) and CA in L2 (English) of students in a diploma program in English. The results revealed that their CA in L2 was higher than their CA in L1 in every dimension: group discussions, interpersonal conversations, meetings, and public speaking. Also, their total CA or trait-like CA in L2 was found to be higher than that in L1. In addition, when CA in L2 of the diploma students was compared to that of master's degree students with a similar major study, their CA in L2 in every dimension, as well as their trait-like CA, was found to be higher. The results may lead to a better understanding of the students in these two academic programs. Hence, the English language teaching approaches applied with these two categories of graduate students can be adjusted by instructors in order to accommodate and facilitate students who possess different types of communication traits.

Keywords: Communication Apprehension, Diploma Program, Master's Degree Program, L1, L2

Introduction

English is an international language increasingly used in the age of globalization, meaning that there is a greater need for Thai people to adapt themselves to communicate in English. However, due to the country's historical and geographical background, Thai people may feel that they need to be trained in English in a formal institute such as a university. As a result, English is provided as a major subject in most universities around Thailand. In addition, in the same institute or university, English is taught at different levels. For instance, in the prestigious Thai public university in this study, English is taught at the levels of bachelor's degree, master's degree, and doctoral degree.

The public university in this study also offers an English major in a diploma program for people who graduated with a bachelor's degree from various major subjects. This one-year diploma program contains various subjects geared mainly towards the four skills in English: listening, speaking, writing, and reading. Students are not required to have a solid background in English, as it is the philosophy of the university to provide equal opportunities for people who might otherwise miss out on the chance to improve their English.

On the contrary, in the master's degree program offered by the same institute, the candidates must obtain a minimum score on a standardized test of English as well as pass stringent written and oral screening tests. All in all, the two programs are similar in some respects. Students are expected to have improved their English skills and proficiency by the time they graduate from the program. Learning how to communicate effectively in English for the master's degree students and the diploma program students can be more enjoyable and

with less worry if the instructors understand their students' communication traits better. As a result, this study was conducted to find out more about the graduate students of these two programs.

Purpose of the Current Study

This study aimed to (1) examine the trait-like CA and CA across contexts when using Thai (L1) of students in a diploma program in English for career development at a public university in Bangkok; (2) examine the trait-like CA and CA across contexts when using English (L2) of students in a diploma program in English for career development at a public university in Bangkok; (3) compare CA when using Thai (L1) and CA when using English (L2) among students in a diploma program in English for career development at a public university in Bangkok; (4) examine the trait-like CA and CA across contexts when using English (L2) of students in a master's degree program in English for career development at a public university in Bangkok, (5) compare the trait-like CA and CA across contexts when using L2 of students in a diploma program in English for career development at a public university in Bangkok with those of students in a master's degree program in English for career development at the same university.

Research Questions

The research questions that guided this study were as follows:

1. What is the score and level of the trait-like CA in L1 of students in a diploma program in English for career development at a public university in Bangkok?
2. What is the score and level of trait-like CA in L2 of students in a diploma program in English for career development at a public university in Bangkok?
3. Is there any difference between the trait-like CA when using Thai (L1) and CA when using English (L2) among students in a diploma program in English for career development at a public university in Bangkok?
4. What is the score and level of the trait-like CA when using English (L2) of students in the master's degree program in English for career development at a public university in Bangkok?
5. Is there any difference between the trait-like CA when using English (L2) between students in a diploma program in English for career development and the trait-like CA when using English (L2) of students in a master's degree program in English for career development at the same university?

Significance of the Study

1. The research results can help teachers teaching English (L2) at the university better understand their students in the diploma program in English for career development at the public university in terms of how they feel when they communicate in English (L2) in various contexts.
2. The research results may enable teachers teaching English (L2) at the university to understand the differences in the communication traits between the students in the diploma program in English for career development and the students in the master's degree program in English for career development at the same university.
3. Teachers teaching English (L2) at the university can adapt and adjust their teaching methods to suit the characteristics of students in the two programs.

Review of Literature

Concepts and Definitions of Communication Apprehension

Communication apprehension is a construct that has been applied in many fields of study, particularly in communication and psychology. In the area of using English in communication, understanding CA helps coaches, mentors, or English language teachers to deal with their classes and students better. CA refers to the feelings of people who experience anxiety when they communicate or even when they imagine that they are going to communicate. As defined by McCroskey (1977), "CA is an individual's level of fear or anxiety associated with either real or anticipated communication with another person or persons" (p.78). One type of communication apprehension that has been studied extensively is trait-like CA, which is divided into four dimensions: group discussions, interpersonal conversations, meetings, and public speaking. In this study, the type of CA that was investigated was trait-like CA.

Trait-like CA is rather permanent, similar to personality traits of people that are enduring and resistant to change. However, Condit (2000) argues that it can be changed during adulthood.

Measuring Communication Apprehension

As CA occurs at the cognitive level, it is rather difficult to diagnose. The instrument that is commonly used to measure CA is called the Personal Report on Communication Apprehension, or PRCA-24 (McCroskey, 1982), which contains 24 items divided into four dimensions according to the concept of trait-like CA. The CA levels of each dimension are shown below (McCroskey, 1982).

Dimension of CA	High	Moderate	Low
Group Discussions	>20	11-20	<11
Meetings	>20	13-20	<13
Interpersonal Conversations	>18	11-18	<11
Public Speaking	>24	14-24	<14
Total Score	>80	51-80	<51

Causes of Communication Apprehension

Trait-like CA typically manifests in four contexts: group discussions, interpersonal conversations, meetings, and public speaking (McCroskey, 1984). Many scholars, e.g. Beatty, McCroskey, and Heisel (1998) and Opt and Loffredo (2000), assert that heredity is a major factor leading to trait-like CA. In addition, some variables such as communication ability, communication skills, and cognitive ability have been revealed to have negative correlations with CA (McCroskey & Anderson, 1976; Richmond & McCroskey, 1998).

Effects of Communication Apprehension

Most studies on CA focus on the effects of CA rather than the causes. To a great extent, the effects reported are negative for those who have high CA. Richmond and Roach (1992) found that people with high CA are not well accepted at work. Harville (1992) and Winiacki and Ayres (1999) determined that individuals with high CA have lower job satisfaction, job status, and organizational commitment. Regarding students in higher

education, Anderson and McCroskey (1976) and Booth-Butterfield, McCroskey, and Payne (1989) found that students with high CA have lower overall grade point averages.

With respect to preferred style of learning, Russ (2012) discovered that individuals with high CA in group discussions and interpersonal conversations prefer independent analysis and observation. In addition, individuals with high trait-like CA prefer learning by watching and listening. That is, they prefer taking a passive role in learning.

Relevant Previous Studies

Young (1990); Howie (2003); and Richmond, McCroskey, McCroskey, and Fayer (2008), found that CA in a non-native language or L2 tends to be higher than CA in the native language (L1). In particular, people who perceive themselves as incompetent in non-native language (L2) tend to avoid speaking that language (L2) (Horwitz, Horwitz, & Cope, 1986; Evans, 2010). In addition, avoiding speaking the second or non-native language (L2) limits opportunities of people to reduce their CA in L2 (Baker & MacIntyre, 2000). Rimkeeratikul (2017) found that among Thai monks in Bangkok, CA in L2 (English) was affected by the number of years of those monks being in the monkhood.

Research Design

This study is a quantitative research study investigating CA of students studying at two different levels of graduate programs in English aimed at training them to be proficient in the English language for use in a variety of careers. One group of students was in a one-year diploma program consisting of courses taught in English emphasizing the four skills: reading, writing, listening, and speaking. The other group was in a two-year master's degree program, which also emphasizes the four skills of the English language. However, the courses offered in the latter are more rigorous and the screening test is more stringent. All in all, the latter program is meant to be for people who are more fluent and more proficient in English than those in the other one.

Subjects

The subjects of this study were graduate students studying English major in two similar but at the different levels of degree and proficiency. As this research mainly sought to investigate and compare: (1) CA in L1 and L2 of the students in a diploma program and (2) CA in L2 of the students in a diploma program with CA in L2 of the students in a master's degree program in English for career development at the same university, which is in Bangkok, the subjects of this study were students of the graduate diploma program and those in the MA program of the English development for being better in their careers. The study was conducted with 46 second-year students in the master's degree program (academic 2016) and 27 students in the diploma program (academic year 2014).

Research Instrument

The instrument used in this research study was a questionnaire containing four parts. The first part of the questionnaire asked for demographic information of the respondents; the second part was the PRCA-24 relating to when the respondents use the Thai language (L1); the third part was the PRCA-24 relating to when the respondents use the English language (L2); and the final part asked for the contact information of the respondents. In this part of the questionnaire, the respondents had the option of leaving it blank or providing the researcher with the information in case the need arose to contact them for in-depth interviews at a later date.

The second part as well as the third part of the questionnaire is PRCA-24 (Mc Croskey, 1982). The application is that for the second part, the respondents were asked to recall and report what they generally feel when using Thai (L1) in their oral communication in various contexts. For the third part, the respondents were asked to recall and report how they generally feel when they use English (L2) in their oral communication in various contexts.

Procedures

The questionnaires were distributed to 46 second-year students in the master's degree program and 27 students in the diploma program. The questionnaire distribution was done in the second semester. The return rate for the master's degree program was 65.22% (n=30) while that of the diploma program was 81.48% (n=22). The return rate for the master's degree program might have been lower because the researcher was teaching only one section out of two, and some of the students in the other section likely did not return the completed questionnaires due to the inconvenience.

Data Analysis

The data analysis of this study was divided into two phases. The first phase sought to find answers to the first three research questions. The steps of the data analysis were as follows: (1) the scores from the PRCA-24 when using Thai of the diploma students were computed to get the mean scores; (2) the scores from the PRCA-24 when using English of the diploma students were computed in order to get the mean scores; and (3) a Dependent *t*-Test analysis was applied to determine the difference between CA in Thai(L1) and CA in English(L2) among the students of the diploma program.

The second phase of the study sought to answer the last two research questions. The steps of the data analysis were as follows: (1) the CA scores when using L2 (English) of the master's degree students were computed and the mean scores were obtained; and (2) an Independent *t*-Test analysis was conducted to compare the mean scores of CA when using English between the students of the diploma program and the master's degree program.

Research Results

The information below shows that there were 28 students in the diploma program in the second semester of the academic year 2014. The return rate for the questionnaire was 78.57%. The number of students in the master's degree program in the same semester in academic year of the following year, 2016, was 46, and the rate of return was 65.22%.

	Number of Students	Number of Respondents	Rate of Return for the Questionnaire
Diploma Program	28	22	78.57
MA Program	46	30	65.22
Total	74	52	70.27

The research results for the two phases are as follows.

Phase One: A Dependent *t*-Test analysis employed to compare CA in Thai (L1) and CA in English (L2) among students of the diploma program

First, the CA scores of the students in the diploma program when communicating in Thai (L1) and when communicating in English (L2) were calculated and the levels of CA were determined. As seen in Table 1, for the students of the diploma program, the CA scores revealed that they did not have much fear or anxiety when communicating in Thai across the four contexts. In other words, they did not have anxiety as a trait in oral communication when using their first language (L1), which is Thai. They had a moderate degree of CA in every dimension, as well as for trait-like CA.

The same table also shows that the students of the diploma program felt anxious in almost every context when using L2 (English) or even when they anticipated speaking English. Their CA level for each dimension was rather high, except for CA in the dimension of public speaking, which was moderate ($\bar{X} = 21.95$).

For the last part of this phase, a Dependent *t*-Test was applied in order to compare the means of CA in L1 and those of L2 of the diploma students. The results, as seen in Table 1, revealed that the CA scores in L2 across the four dimensions of the students of the diploma program were higher than those of L1 ($p \leq 0.05$). In addition, their trait-like CA in L2 was found to be higher than their trait-like CA in L1.

Table 1

Dependent T-Test and Mean Scores of CA in All Dimensions among Diploma Students

		Mean	Level of CA	SD	df	<i>t</i>	Sig (2-tail)
Group Discussions	Thai	15.23	Moderate	4.98	21	-5.09	.000*
	English	20.64	Rather High				
Meetings	Thai	17.32	Moderate	4.89	21	-3.53	.002*
	English	21.00	Rather High				
Interpersonal Conversations	Thai	15.73	Moderate	4.60	21	-4.12	.000*
	English	19.77	Rather High				
Public Speaking	Thai	18.14	Moderate	5.01	21	-3.57	.002*
	English	21.95	Moderate				
Total CA	Thai	66.41	Moderate	13.59	21	-5.29	.000*
	English	81.73	Rather High				

($p \leq 0.05$)

Phase Two: Independent *t*-Test analysis employed to compare CA in L2 (English) among students in the diploma program with that of students in the master's program

As the first step in this phase, the CA scores when communicating in English (L2) of the students in the master's program were calculated, and the levels of CA were determined. The results revealed that the CA in L2 of the students in the master's degree program was moderate across the four contexts. In addition, the total CA or trait-like CA when communicating in L2 of the master's degree students was at a moderate level (see Table 2).

Next, an Independent *t*-Test analysis was conducted to compare the mean scores of CA when using English between the students of the diploma program and the master's degree program. Table 2 shows that the CA in L2 across the four dimensions and the trait-like CA of the diploma students was significantly higher than that of the master's degree students ($p \leq 0.05$).

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

Group		N	Mean	CA		df	<i>t</i>	Sig (2-tail)
				Level	SD			
Discussions	Diploma	22	19.64	Rather High	3.71	45.74	3.92	.000*
	MA	30	15.53	Moderate	3.76			
Meetings	Diploma	22	21.00	Rather High	4.56	40.39	3.77	.000*
	MA	30	16.50	Moderate	3.81			
Interpersonal Conversations	Diploma	22	19.14	Rather High	4.65	36.96	3.66	.000*
	MA	30	14.83	Moderate	3.44			
Public Speaking	Diploma	22	21.95	Moderate	5.07	41.24	2.13	.040*
	MA	30	19.10	Moderate	4.37			
Total CA	Diploma	22	81.73	Rather High	14.42	41.95	4.09	.000*
	MA	30	65.97	Moderate	12.73			

($p \leq 0.05$)

Discussion

Based on the results from the PRCA-24 scale, the students of the diploma program were found to have rather high CA in every dimension, except for CA in the dimension of public speaking. CA in the context of public speaking among the students of this program was the lowest compared to other contexts probably because they had frequent opportunities to practice the skill of public speaking throughout the one year of the study. It seems, as Condit (2000) posits, that CA can be changed. Thus, it would also be beneficial for the students as well if they can have more chances in the classroom to practice L2 (English) in the other three contexts: group discussions, interpersonal conversations, and meetings. In addition, the teaching approaches should be selected with care. It is as Russ (2012) recommends that in order to provide high CA students with growth opportunities, they may need to learn how to collaborate with others and become more tolerant of unpredictability in human behavior.

The results of this study might also enable instructors to apply teaching pedagogy in a way that equips students with more skills in communicative situations that tend to help them reduce anxiety. This may be accomplished by providing them with vocabulary and language structures that can be used to respond in specific situations. Mock-up activities might also be helpful as they will give students chances to practice what they have learned in each designed module, with the purpose of being able to expose them to face-to-face interactive oral communication in situations similar to the real ones they will encounter (Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment, p.74). It might be better for the students if they are not only trained to give information in front of the public, which is considered one-way communication.

Moreover, the English language teachers need to realize that the students of these two programs have different English communication traits. It can possibly be concluded that the teaching approaches applied with the students of these two similar-but-different programs must be tailored to suit their specific needs.

Summary and Conclusion

The current study aimed to investigate CA of students of two similar programs: the first is a one-year program offering a diploma degree for people graduating with at least a bachelor's degree from any field of study, while the second is a two-year master's degree program. The entrance examination for the former is not as rigorous as the one for the master's degree program, as the latter requires at least a 500 score on the university standardized test (equaling 5.5 IELTS); moreover, to graduate with an MA, they are required to achieve at least a 550 score on the university standardized test (equaling 6.0 IELTS).

In terms of communication in English (L2), the CA scores of the students in the diploma program were found to be rather high in every context that requires the communicators to be interactive: group discussions, interpersonal conversations, and meetings. However, their CA in public speaking was found to be moderate.

Finally, when the CA scores in using English (L2) of these two programs were compared, those scores of the students in the diploma program were found to be significantly higher than those of the master's degree program. The results may be useful for instructors in terms of making them aware of the differences in communication traits of their students. Based on the results, teachers may adjust their teaching methodology to help students get the most from the program. More importantly, the research results may ultimately be used as a reminder for the instructors to lead the class to be with a happier classroom atmosphere and filled with better relationships between the teachers and their students.

Recommendations for Further Research

The recommendations for further research are presented as follows:

1. The researcher recommends that a triangulation method be implemented, i.e., using more than one research method with the diploma students of the most current batch, in order to verify the research results of this study. For example, the PRCA-24 when communicating in Thai and the PRCA-24 when communicating in English can be distributed to them at the beginning of the first semester and also at the end of the last semester, enabling a comparison of CA before and after joining the program.
2. An interview can be done with each instructor teaching the students of the diploma program to investigate their perceptions towards the students before and after the joining the program of the students.
3. This research may be extended with an in-depth interview with one or two diploma students who graduated from the program in academic year 2014, subsequently joined the master's degree program, and then graduated at the end of academic year 2016. Thus, these subjects experienced both the diploma and master's degree programs. The interview results from them may be useful for the diploma and master's degree programs.

About the Author

Sucharat Rimkeeratikul is an associate professor and the director of the Master of Degree Program in Career English for International Communication (CEIC) of Language Institute, Thammasat University. She completed her Ph.D. in Interpersonal Communication and Master's Degree in Language and International Trade from Eastern Michigan University, USA. She graduated with a B.A. in English from Liberal Arts, Thammasat University. Her interests involve communication apprehension, anxiety in L2, intercultural communication and ESP.

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