A Comparative Investigation of Communication Apprehension among Undergraduate, Graduate, and Postgraduate Students in the EFL Context

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
	Communication Apprehension (CA) is a pervasive challenge that significantly affects students, particularly those pursuing higher education in an English as a Foreign Language (EFL) context. This study serves a threefold purpose: (1) to quantify and compare the levels of CA experienced by students across different EFL educational levels, (2) to investigate potential relationships between students' CA and their educational backgrounds, and (3) to explore the strategies students employ to overcome CA. A survey research design involving 60 EFL students from three distinct cohorts (24 undergraduates, 16 graduates, and 20 postgraduates) was conducted using a convenience sampling technique. Data were collected utilizing McCroskey's Personal Report of CA (PRCA-24, 2005) and analyzed using descriptive and correlational statistics via the SPSS software. The results reveal that all undergraduates (100%), a substantial proportion of graduates (68.75%), and a notable fraction of postgraduates (45%) experienced an average level of CA, with public speaking situations being the most common triggers. While a weak negative correlation was identified (-0.225), it did not attain conventional statistical significance (sig 0.084). Furthermore, students adopt cognitive, behavioural, and preparatory strategies to manage CA effectively. This research underscores the importance of identifying specific communication situations in which students experience heightened apprehension, facilitating the development of targeted interventions to address their unique needs in these areas.

1. Introduction

Communication apprehension (CA) is a widely recognized phenomenon characterized by individuals experiencing anxiety or fear when engaging in any communication situation. It manifests in various forms, such as public speaking difficulties, reluctance to participate in

group discussions or meetings, and fear of initiating conversations (Cardon et al., 2023). This multifaceted construct was initially conceptualized by McCroskey (1977), who defined CA as an individual's fear or anxiety associated with actual or anticipated communication with others. Furthermore, CA has been identified as a pervasive experience affecting individuals from diverse backgrounds, significantly impacting their personal and professional relationships (Oliart et al., 2020). It can profoundly affect an individual's goals, career choices, lifestyle, behaviour, and self-identity (Malik et al., 2021; Cong & Li, 2022). Therefore, understanding the intricacies of CA is crucial for developing effective interventions and strategies to alleviate its negative consequences and enhance communication competence and overall well-being.

CA is a prevalent issue that affects numerous students, particularly those pursuing higher education. This issue is particularly relevant for non-native English speakers who are enrolled in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) at the undergraduate, graduate, or postgraduate level (Ahmetović, 2020; Parveen & Santhanam, 2021). Even if an EFL student knows a lot about the English language, they often have trouble speaking well in the classroom because they are worried about their language skills and how others will see them (Bijani & Sedagat, 2016; Cong & Li, 2022; Toubot et al., 2018). This fear of communicating is often made worse by the fact that higher education requires students to have complicated conversations with their peers and lecturers and more public speaking in English (Grieve et al., 2021). Furthermore, communication skills are important for academic success in higher education (Wei, 2022) and workplace success (Yenphech et al, 2022). Students of EFL who have trouble communicating may find it hard to participate in classroom discussions or show up when speaking in public situations (Kumar et al., 2022). Therefore, this can lead to lower grades and fewer opportunities for career advancement (Malik et al, 2021). Hence, CA is one of the most important and unavoidable things that can make it hard for students to learn a second or foreign language.

CA is a complex and multifaceted issue that arises from a wide range of factors. The prior studies have tried to explore these factors and found that these factors include linguistic barriers (Aichhorn & Puck, 2017), cultural misunderstandings (Balci et al., 2020; Pragash et al., 2020), previous negative experiences with communication (Hosek et al., 2018), low self-esteem (Cong & Li, 2022; Rimkeeratikul, 2017), and lack of confidence in language skills (Arindra & Ardi, 2020; Cong & Li, 2022; Rimkeeratikul, 2017). As the factors affecting the CA of EFL students are numerous, addressing this issue requires a multifaceted approach. The factors are often interrelated and may require pedagogical, psychological, and social support to reduce CA in EFL students effectively.

Addressing the issue of CA, many researchers have explored various approaches to mitigate its impact. One such approach focuses on the role of educational background in reducing apprehension levels (Rust et al.,2020). It is widely believed that individuals with higher levels of education tend to exhibit lower levels of CA (Gardner et al., 2005; McCroskey & Richmond, 1990; Tabassum & Hossain, 2020). This correlation can be attributed to higher education offering individuals increased opportunities to practice and refine their communication skills (Aziz & Zaidoune, 2022) and fostering greater confidence in their abilities (Hoskins & Wong, 2022). Therefore, based on this understanding, it can be hypothesized that (1) EFL students at higher educational levels will exhibit lower levels of CA, and (2) there will be a significant negative correlation between the level of education and the level of CA among EFL students.

Understanding the relationship between educational background and CA can provide valuable insights for educational institutions and policymakers to develop effective interventions aimed at reducing apprehension levels and enhancing communication competence. By further investigating this correlation, a deeper understanding of how educational experiences shape individuals' CA can be gained and potentially contribute to the development of tailored interventions to support individuals at different educational levels. Therefore, this study aims to explore the following research questions:

1. What level is the communication apprehension of EFL undergraduate students?

2. What level is the communication apprehension of EFL graduate students?

3. What level is the communication apprehension of EFL postgraduate students?

4. Based on the result of the communication apprehension of each level of EFL students, is there any correlation between student's communication apprehension and their educational background?

5. What strategies are used by the students for each Communication situation to overcome the apprehension?

By answering these questions, this research aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of CA across different educational levels in the EFL context. This would contribute to the academic literature on communication apprehension and inform the development of effective pedagogical and psychological interventions to support EFL students in overcoming their communication challenges.

2. Literature Review

Communication apprehension (CA) is a significant barrier many students face, particularly in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) education. Addressing this challenge is crucial for improving students' academic performance and future career prospects (Muftah, 2023). Various strategies have been explored in the literature to help students manage and overcome CA (See Aziz & Zaidoune, 2022; Bijani & Sedagat, 2016; Cardon et al., 2023; Cong & Li, 2022; Hoskins & Wong, 2022; Oliart et al., 2020; Rimkeeratikul, 2017; Toubot et al., 2018; Utari et al., 2022). These strategies can be broadly categorized into cognitive, behavioural, and preparatory approaches. This literature review examines the effectiveness of these strategies, beginning with cognitive strategies that focus on altering thought patterns, followed by behavioural strategies that involve direct engagement with communication activities, and concluding with preparatory strategies that emphasize thorough planning and practice. Understanding these strategies provides a comprehensive framework for supporting students in overcoming communication apprehension and enhancing their overall communicative competence.

2.1 Cognitive Strategy to Overcome Communication Apprehension

Many students frequently turn to cognitive strategies as an initial step in addressing communication apprehension (CA). These essential strategies involve mental processes that can alter thinking patterns, beliefs, and attitudes towards communication (Canada & Miralles, 2023; Essa, 2022). By using cognitive strategies, students can learn to reframe negative thoughts, challenge irrational beliefs, and develop a more positive mindset about

communication (Bijani & Sedagat, 2016; Rimkeeratikul, 2017; Utari et al., 2022). One effective cognitive strategy is cognitive restructuring. This involves identifying negative thought patterns and replacing them with more rational and constructive thinking (Murphy et al., 2023). Through cognitive restructuring, students can overcome self-doubt and negative expectations related to communication, ultimately leading to improved confidence and effectiveness in their interactions (Ningsih et al., 2023; Nuraeni & Ratnaya, 2023). Another crucial cognitive strategy is visualization. Students can mentally rehearse successful communication scenarios and visualize themselves speaking confidently and persuasively (Ayres & Hopf, 1985). This technique helps alleviate anxiety and build self-assurance in communication situations (Ganz, 2007; Shatri & Buza, 2017; Sibbet, 2008). Cognitive-behavioural techniques such as self-talk and positive affirmations can also positively influence students' communication apprehension (Hakim, 2023). By consciously modifying their inner dialogue and reinforcing positive beliefs about their communication abilities, students can gradually reduce their apprehension and enhance their communication skills (Murphy et al., 2023). In conclusion, cognitive strategies offer a range of tools and techniques that can significantly aid students in addressing communication apprehension. By delving deeper into these strategies and applying them consistently, students can cultivate a more positive and empowered approach to communication, ultimately fostering growth and development in their communicative competence (Bijani & Sedagat, 2016; Cong & Li, 2022).

2.2 Behavioral Strategy to Overcome Communication Apprehension

Behavioural techniques play a crucial role in overcoming communication apprehension (Nasir et al., 2023). One effective technique is desensitization, which involves gradually exposing oneself to the feared communication situation in a controlled and supportive environment (Buamona et al., 2023). This gradual exposure can help reduce the anxiety and fear associated with communication. Second, behavioral rehearsal is also a valuable behavioral technique that involves practising and role-playing communication scenarios to build confidence and improve communication skills (Kazdin et al., 1982; Zielinski, 1979). This technique allows individuals to learn and apply effective communication strategies in a safe and supportive setting (Nagasaki et al., 2020). Similarly, social skills training focuses on enhancing specific communication skills, such as active listening, assertiveness, and nonverbal communication, through structured exercises and feedback (Mueser et al., 2007). In conclusion, the role of behavioral techniques in overcoming communication apprehension is undeniable. Techniques such as desensitization, behavioural rehearsal, and social skills training provide individuals with the tools to manage their anxiety, build confidence, and improve their communication skills. By incorporating these techniques into their daily lives, individuals can effectively overcome communication apprehension and become more adept at interacting with others in various social and professional settings. It is clear that behavioral techniques offer valuable strategies for individuals looking to conquer their communication fears and become more effective communicators.

2.3 Preparatory Strategy to Overcome Communication Apprehension

Preparation techniques represent a proactive approach to mitigating CA, emphasizing readiness before communication engagements (Honeycutt et al., 2009). These strategies involve thorough planning, practising speaking skills, and utilizing written notes to diminish apprehension (Aziz & Zaidoune, 2022; Hoskins & Wong, 2022; Rimkeeratikul, 2017). By

adequately preparing, students can enhance their confidence and reduce anxiety associated with communication tasks. First, one fundamental preparatory strategy is meticulous planning. This involves outlining key points and structuring the content to ensure a clear and organized presentation. Effective planning helps students to manage their thoughts and present their ideas coherently, which can significantly reduce anxiety. (Aziz & Zaidoune, 2022; Hoskins & Wong, 2022). Second, practicing speaking skills is another crucial preparatory strategy. This includes refining aspects such as tone, body language, and vocal projection. Regular practice sessions and mock presentations can help students build confidence in their abilities and reduce apprehension (Choi et al., 2015). By rehearsing their delivery, students can become more familiar with their material and more comfortable with the act of speaking itself (Amiri & Puteh, 2022). Third, understanding the audience and tailoring the content to their needs and interests is an essential part of effective communication preparation (Hutchins, 2020). Conducting research and gathering relevant information ensures that the message resonates with the audience. In conclusion, preparatory strategies offer a comprehensive set of tools to effectively address communication apprehension. Through meticulous planning, practising speaking skills, and understanding the audience, students can significantly reduce their apprehension and enhance their overall communication competence.

3. Research Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This current study employs a survey research design to evaluate communication apprehension (CA) levels among EFL students across different educational levels. The study also examines the correlation between students' CA and their educational backgrounds. Survey research is an effective method for collecting data from a specific population to analyze attitudes, beliefs, and behaviours at a particular point in time (Arundel, 2023; Ruel, 2016). This approach is particularly useful for understanding cohort differences and relationships (Arundel, 2023; Ruel, 2016). In this study, CA levels of three cohorts of EFL students—undergraduates, graduates, and postgraduates—were assessed simultaneously using a standardized questionnaire. The survey research design is efficient and practical, enabling the collection of data from varied cohorts or demographics within a limited timeframe. This design also facilitates exploring relationships and distinctions among different educational levels, which is essential for determining if CA varies across these groups.

3.2 Participants

The study involved the voluntary recruitment of 60 students who are learning English as a foreign language (EFL). The study involved participants from three distinct universities in Indonesia, all of which offer English education programs. The study involves individuals from three distinct cohorts, comprising of 24 undergraduate students, 16 graduate students, and 20 postgraduate students. The study employed a convenience sampling technique to select participants from specific educational institutions. The determination of the sample size is based on practical considerations of availability and feasibility within the given timeframe.

3.3 Instrument

To address research questions one, two, and three, which inquire about the levels of communication apprehension (CA) among EFL undergraduate, graduate, and postgraduate students, respectively, a comprehensive instrument was used. This instrument comprises a combination of 24 closed-ended questions and three open-ended questions aimed at capturing both quantitative and qualitative data regarding students' communication apprehension levels and coping strategies. The instrument consists of 24 closed-ended questions adapted from McCroskey's Personal Report of Communication Apprehension (PRCA-24) (2005), a validated questionnaire widely used to assess communication apprehension. These questions cover various communication contexts, including group discussions, meetings, interpersonal interactions, and public speaking situations. Participants were asked to rate their apprehension levels in each context, allowing for a quantitative assessment of CA across different situations. In addition to the PRCA-24 questions, the instrument includes four closed-ended questions in which three questions were specifically tailored to address research questions one, two, and three. These three questions prompt participants to describe their actions when feeling uncomfortable, tense, or nervous in group discussions, meetings, and conversations, respectively.

Furthermore, the instrument includes one closed-ended question aimed at answering research question five, which investigates the strategies utilized by students to manage apprehension during public speaking. This question asks participants to describe their actions when feeling uncomfortable, tense, or nervous while giving a speech, offering valuable qualitative data on the strategies employed by students in public speaking situations.

By incorporating both closed-ended and open-ended questions into the instrument, a comprehensive understanding of students' communication apprehension levels and coping strategies is achieved. The combination of quantitative data from the PRCA-24 questions and qualitative insights from the additional closed-ended and open-ended questions enables a nuanced analysis of CA among EFL undergraduate, graduate, and postgraduate students.

3.3 Data Collection and Analysis Procedures

The data was obtained by administering the PRCA-24 questionnaire to the EFL students who took part in the study. The survey was disseminated via online platforms (Google Forms) to the participants. Precise guidelines were provided to guarantee uniform fulfilment of the survey. The study's objectives, confidentiality, and the participants' prerogative to withdraw from the study at any point were communicated to the participants. The confidentiality and anonymity of participants' responses were rigorously upheld throughout the process of data collection.

The gathered data was subjected to analysis using descriptive and correlational statistical methods. First, to answer research questions one, two, and three, descriptive statistics like mean, standard deviation, and frequency distributions would summarize and present CA scores for each group of students. The scoring of the PRCA-24 questionnaire would follow the Norms for the PRCA-24 by McCroskey (2005) by analyzing the CA based on four situations, namely group discussion, meetings, interpersonal, and public speaking. The scoring to each of the situations was counted below.

Table 1: PRCA-24 Scoring System

Situations	Scoring system
Group discussion	18 - (scores for statements 2, 4, & 6) + (scores for statements 1,3, & 5)
Meetings	18 - (scores for statements 8, 9, & 12) + (scores for statements 7, 10, & 11)
Interpersonal	18 - (scores for statements 14, 16, & 17) + (scores for statements 13, 15, & 18)
Public Speaking	18 - (scores for statements 19, 21, & 23) + (scores for statements 20, 22, &24)

The total scoring of CA can range from 24-120 and is divided into three levels of CA by following this scoring system:

Table 2: Communication Apprehension Category

Category	Total Score
Low	< 51
Average	51 – 80
High	>80

To answer research question four, which investigates the correlation between students' CA levels and their educational backgrounds, data on educational background were collected from the participants' general demographic information. This information included the participants' level of education (undergraduate, graduate, or postgraduate) and was subsequently coded for analysis. The CA data from the PRCA-24 questionnaire and the coded educational background data were analyzed using correlational analysis. Specifically, Pearson's correlation coefficients were calculated to assess the significance and direction of the relationship between CA and educational background. The analysis was conducted using SPSS software, which provided reliable statistical tools for data management and analysis.

To analyze the qualitative data for research question five, four steps were followed using thematic analysis, focusing on coding participant responses into cognitive, behavioural, and preparatory strategies.

1. Familiarization with the Data. The researcher thoroughly read and re-read the responses to understand the content deeply, ensuring a comprehensive grasp of the data's depth and breadth.
2. Generating Initial Codes. The researcher systematically coded interesting features of the data, highlighted relevant segments and assigned initial codes to each segment. This manual coding process ensured a thorough engagement with the data.
3. Searching for Themes. Initial codes were collated into potential themes, organizing them into broader patterns capturing significant aspects related to the research question. The focus was on identifying cognitive, behavioural, and preparatory strategies employed by students.
4. Reviewing Themes. Potential themes were reviewed and refined, ensuring their relevance and coherence with the coded extracts and the entire dataset. Themes were adjusted, combined, or discarded as needed to accurately represent the data.

By following these steps, a thematic map was developed by defining and naming each theme to construct a coherent narrative. This approach allowed for a systematic analysis of the

qualitative data, providing a comprehensive understanding of the strategies used by EFL students to overcome communication apprehension, particularly focusing on cognitive, behavioral, and preparatory approaches.

4. Results

4.1. Undergraduate Students Communication Apprehension

The result of the CA analysis for the undergraduate students is presented below:

Table 4: Undergraduates' Communication Apprehension Level

	Freq	Percent	Mean	Max	Min	Std. Dev
Low	0	0	0	0	0	0
Average	24	100	64.04	79	42	9.7
High	0	0	0	0	0	0
Total	24	100.0	64.04	79	42	9.7

Based on the analysis of CA among undergraduate students, the results indicate that all 24 participants exhibited an average level of CA. The mean score of 64.04 with a standard deviation of 9.7 suggests a relatively consistent level of apprehension within the group. The maximum score of 79 and the minimum score of 42 reflect the range of apprehension experienced by the participants. Additionally, more detailed data based on the communication situation is presented below.

Table 5. Undergraduates Communication Apprehension based on the situation

	Mean	Max	Min	Std. Dev
Group Discussion	15.16	21	9	3.8
Meetings	15.70	20	9	3.2
Interpersonal	16	20	9	3.1
Public Speaking	17.16	23	9	3.4

Table 5 provides a comprehensive overview of the levels of CA experienced by undergraduate students across different communication situations. The data revealed that undergraduate students experience varying degrees of apprehension across different communication situations. The highest mean score is observed in public speaking situations (mean = 17.16), indicating that students exhibit relatively higher levels of apprehension when required to speak in front of an audience, such as when delivering a speech. On the other hand, the lowest mean score is found in group discussion situations (mean = 15.16), suggesting a comparatively lower level of apprehension in this context.

4.2. Graduate Students Communication Apprehension

The result of the CA analysis for the graduate students is presented below.

Table 6: Graduates' Communication Apprehension Level

	Freq	Percent	Mean	Max	Min	Std. Dev
Low	3	18.75	45.3	50	41	3.6
Average	11	68.75	65.9	80	55	7.9
High	2	12.50	88.5	92	85	3.5
Total	16	100	64.87	92	41	13.7

Based on the analysis of CA among graduate students, the results reveal a range of apprehension levels within the group. These findings indicate that CA levels among graduate students vary considerably. While a significant proportion of students (68.75%) reported average apprehension levels, there were notable differences among individuals. Some students displayed low levels of apprehension (18.75%), indicating a higher degree of comfort and confidence in communication tasks. Conversely, a few students exhibited high levels of apprehension (12.5%), suggesting increased anxiety and nervousness during communication situations. Moreover, the mean score for CA among graduate students was calculated to be 64.87, with a standard deviation of 13.7. This average score provides an overall representation of the group's apprehension levels. Additionally, more detailed data based on the communication situation is presented below.

Table 7. Graduates Communication Apprehension based on the situation

	Mean	Max	Min	Std. Dev
Group Discussion	13.62	22	8	3.6
Meetings	16.87	24	10	3.8
Interpersonal	16.12	22	9	3.7
Public Speaking	18.25	24	10	3.8

Table 7 reveals that the group discussion situation had the lowest mean score of 13.62, suggesting relatively lower levels of apprehension in this context. On the other hand, the public speaking situation had the highest mean score of 18.25, indicating greater apprehension when speaking in front of an audience. The meeting situation and interpersonal situation fell in between, with mean scores of 16.87 and 16.12, respectively.

These results highlight the differential apprehension levels among graduate school students across various communication situations. It is evident that public speaking situations elicit the highest level of apprehension, which is consistent with the results of undergraduate students. This suggests that interventions and support programs focusing on public speaking skills and anxiety management techniques are also crucial for graduate students. The relatively lower apprehension levels reported in group discussion situations indicate that graduate students may also feel more at ease in collaborative and interactive communication

4.3. Postgraduate Students Communication Apprehension

The result of the CA analysis for the postgraduate students is presented below.

Table 8: Postgraduates' Communication Apprehension Level

	Freq	Percent	Mean	Max	Min	Std. Dev
Low	9	45	44.2	50	33	5.1
Average	9	45	63.5	77	52	9
High	2	10	84	86	82	2
Total	20		56.9	86	33	14.6

Based on Table 7, the results indicate varying levels of apprehension within the group, where 45% demonstrated a low level, 45% reported an average level, and 10% exhibited a high level of communication apprehension. These findings illustrate the diversity of communication apprehension levels among postgraduate students. The proportion of students experiencing low levels of apprehension suggests a higher degree of comfort and confidence in their

communication skills and abilities. On the other hand, the presence of students with high levels of apprehension indicates increased apprehension during communication situations. Lastly, the majority of participants falling within the average level of apprehension suggests a moderate level of apprehension and highlights the importance of addressing and supporting this segment of postgraduate students. Additionally, more detailed data based on the communication situation is presented below

Table 9: Postgraduates Communication Apprehension based on the situation

	Mean	Max	Min	Std. Dev
Group Discussion	12.35	20	9	3.1
Meetings	14.75	25	6	5.4
Interpersonal	14.4	26	7	4.5
Public Speaking	15.4	24	9	4.1

The findings reveal that the group discussion situation had the lowest mean score of 12.35, suggesting relatively lower levels of apprehension in this context. This indicates that postgraduate students may feel more comfortable engaging in collaborative discussions and sharing ideas within small groups. The meeting situation and interpersonal situation had mean scores of 14.75 and 14.4, respectively, indicating a moderate level of apprehension in these communication contexts. These findings suggest that postgraduate students may experience a certain degree of anxiety when participating in formal meetings or engaging in one-on-one communication with others. The public speaking situation had the highest mean score of 15.4, indicating a higher level of apprehension when speaking in public or presenting in front of an audience. This aligns with the common challenges associated with public speaking and the heightened apprehension experienced in such situations.

4.4 Communication Apprehension and Educational Background

The Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient (r) was calculated to determine the strength and direction of the correlation between CA and EB. The result is presented below.

Table 10: Correlational Analysis

		Education	Communication Apprehension
Education	Pearson Correlation	1	-.225
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.084
	N	60	60
Communication Apprehension	Pearson Correlation	-.225	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.084	
	N	60	60

The result of the correlational analysis revealed a correlation coefficient of -0.225. This indicates a negative relationship between communication apprehension and EB. However, it is important to note that the magnitude of the correlation is relatively weak. The significance level associated with the correlation coefficient was found to be 0.084. Since the significance level is greater than the conventional threshold of 0.05, the correlation is not considered statistically significant at a conventional level. This implies that the observed correlation between communication apprehension and EB may be due to chance rather than a true relationship.

4.5 Strategies employed to overcome the Communication Apprehension

Group Discussion Situation

The first strategy found to overcome the communication apprehension used by the students is the cognitive strategy. This category includes strategies that involve mindset, self-talk, and mental preparation. Examples of cognitive strategies mentioned in the data include telling oneself to calm down, staying focused, and convincing oneself to overcome anxiety.

"I always tell myself to calm down, relax and try to stay focused when in a discussion group, or I usually divert my anxiety by chatting with friends" – P3 Undergraduate

"I always wonder why I need to join this discussion. I need to convince myself, if I do not need to feel tensed or even fear. Everything will be okay, we just sharing our ideas or listen-respond people's ideas in group discussion" - P8 Undergraduate

"Praying, and thinking that everything will be all right" - P11 Graduate

"Trying to control my thought by thinking positively" – P17 Postgraduate

The second strategy used by the students is Behavioural strategies. These strategies involve specific actions and behaviours that participants adopt to address their communication apprehension. Examples of behavioural strategies mentioned in the data include actively listening, observing, staying silent, and actively participating in the group discussion.

"I will keep silent and try to get others' perception" – P6 Undergraduate

"Express my opinion, If I feel uncomfortable with the point of view or opinions being expressed in the group, I try to express my opinion politely and clearly. But I first make sure that I do not disrupt or interrupt the ongoing discussion. But If I feel very uncomfortable or disturbed by the situation, I will seek support from a friend or someone that I trust. – P19 Undergraduate

"Try to know more about the topic and share what I really know well" – P15 Graduate

"I usually observe the dynamics of the discussion first to ease me into participating in a group discussion" - P2 Postgraduate.

"I just let the other talk first, try to "read" the person once they start talking. Then, I can decide what to do next" – P18 Postgraduate

The third is Preparation strategies. In group meeting situations, this category encompasses strategies that focus on advance preparation and gathering information to enhance confidence and competence in the group discussion. Examples of preparation strategies mentioned in the data include practising speaking skills, memorizing the discussion topics, researching relevant material, and taking notes.

"I usually make a few notes about what I will convey during the discussion group so that I can convey it smoothly so that I'm confident and don't get nervous" – P11 Undergraduate

"I will look for other information about the topic which is being talked about. It can help me to be confident to deliver my opinion and I'll be checking comfortable" – P14 Undergraduate

> "*Try to calm down, inhale exhale, search the material, try to make elaboration of the material that I have been searched and then try to express my opinion*" – P10 Graduate

> "*I will take some time to prepare my thoughts and think about what I am going to say while listening to other group's members' idea*"- P13 Graduate

Meeting Situation

The first strategy found in meeting situations is also the Cognitive strategy. Cognitive techniques for managing communication apprehension in meetings encompass strategies that focus on regulating the participants' mental state and thought processes. Participants employ deep breathing to calm their nerves and enhance their focus during discussions. Positive affirmations uttered silently serve to boost self-confidence and foster a sense of assurance that everything will progress smoothly. Concentrating on the material being discussed and thinking positively aids in reducing apprehension and encouraging active participation. Understanding the situation and familiarizing oneself with the topics under discussion promotes a greater sense of control and diminishes apprehension. These cognitive strategies centre on reshaping one's mental attitude to foster confidence and engagement in meeting situations.

> "*I will focus on the material discussed during the meeting, being calm and focused can reduce nervousness.*" - P11 Undergraduate

> "*I tend to be silent and not participate in the meeting*" – P12 Graduate

> "*Remind yourself that everyone is in the same boat*" – P5 Postgraduate

> "*I tend to observe around me, and try to calm down myself with positive self-affirmation*" – P15 Postgraduate

The second is Behavioural strategy. These behavioural techniques concentrate on outward actions and interactions that enhance participants' composure and involvement during meetings. It is found that the participants use gestures, make notes, or actively engage with partners and audiences to alleviate anxiety and foster effective communication. Smiling and employing non-verbal communication techniques are valuable tools for diffusing tension and enhancing engagement. For some, doodling or fidgeting with objects, like twisting papers or spinning pencils, can help channel nervous energy and minimize apprehension. Some individuals choose to stay passive in meetings, only participating when circumstances require it.

> "*I will prepare myself to dress well so I will be more confident. Usually, I will bring a pen and sticky note to write the important topic, so it will make me feel ready to join the meeting*" – P22 Undergraduate

> "*I will leave the room for a while*" – P3 Undergraduate

> "*I twist papers, spin my pencil, draw scratches*" – P2 Graduate

> "*I will keep silent and show that I understand although I still do not have any idea to be shared*" – P14 Graduate

> "*Doing something just like taking a note to control the situation*" – P4 Postgraduate

The third strategy found is preparation. Participants in the study reported utilizing preparation strategies to alleviate communication apprehension in meeting situations. These strategies involve proactive steps taken before the meeting to enhance self-confidence and readiness. Preparing oneself to dress well and bringing essential materials like pens and sticky notes were common practices. This preparation created a sense of readiness, helping individuals feel more self-assured. Additionally, participants focused on practising deep breaths to alleviate nervousness before entering a meeting, emphasizing the importance of a calm demeanour. Such pre-meeting preparations suggest an understanding that feeling well-prepared can significantly reduce apprehension, contributing to a more positive communication experience.

> "*I will prepare myself to dress well so I will be more confident. Usually, I will bring a pen and a sticky note to write the important topic, so it will make me feel ready to join the meeting*" – P21 Undergraduate

> "*I will prepare the materials that I am going to deliver before the meeting so my nervous feeling can be decreased*" – P13 Postgraduate

Interpersonal

The first strategy found in interpersonal situations is also cognitive strategy. This Cognitive strategy involves mental approaches to address apprehension, such as focusing on positive thoughts and building self-confidence. Participants reported that cognitive techniques, like maintaining a friendly demeanour, are instrumental in fostering relaxed and engaging conversations. But it is also worth noting that this strategy is not found a lot in the participants' answers. It is only found in undergraduate students only.

> "*Occasionally, I always turn my mind to positive things and remember funny things so that I can relax a little and divert the conversation to things that make me comfortable*" – P3 Undergraduate

> "*I will tell myself in my mind to try to be more confident and just relax*" – P18 Undergraduate

The second strategy and the most used one for interpersonal situations is behavioural strategy. This strategy encompasses actions taken during conversations, including physical behaviours like smiling, deep breathing to maintain composure, actively participating by asking questions and sharing familiar knowledge, and utilizing body language to convey engagement. This behavioural tactic aims to enhance interaction and contribute to more natural and less apprehensive communication.

> "*I will smile to the people I talk to*" – P1 Undergraduate

> "*I try to find the other topic in a conversation. that makes me comfortable*" – P6 Undergraduate

> "*I respond to questions concisely short, prefer to smile and nod*" – P2 Graduate

> "*Most of the time, I will take a deep breath*" -P3 Graduate

> "*I am changing to another topic that makes me close to my partner. Sometimes, I will pay attention only and respond with facial expressions*" – P7 Graduate

> "*Arrange the answer or ideas to say, then show my body gesture while speaking*" – P6 Postgraduate

> "*I take the deep breath before conversing and slow down when conversing with others. It will help me focus on the conversation*" – P14 Postgraduate

Public Speaking situation

The participants are also found to use cognitive strategies in public speaking situations. This cognitive strategy, employed by participants in public speaking situations, primarily focuses on mental approaches to alleviate communication apprehension. These approaches encompass techniques like practising positive self-talk, self-affirmation, and reassurance. Participants mentally prepare themselves to enhance their self-confidence by reminding themselves of the importance of their message and the opportunity to engage with the audience.

> "*I will say in my heart that everything will be fine and will go according to plan and everyone will like me so don't worry, talk relax, don't be afraid*" – P3 Undergraduate

> "*I will ask myself to always remember why we need to stand on this stage and deliver the speech. I need to build my self-confidence first, like "Hey, this is your chance! Now you are on this stage". Maybe, we may call it as self-affirmation to switch our mind from bad to good even if we are under un-supporting conditions-nervous, tense, uncomfortable, etc*" – P8 Undergraduate

> "*Take a breath for a second and say to me "it is gonna be okay*" – P16 Undergraduate

> "*I make my brain or my thought being calm, and give myself positive words that I can do it*" – P8 Graduate

> "*Assume that there is no audience in the room*" – P10 Postgraduate

The next strategy is Behavioural. This strategy involves specific actions taken during the speech, including speaking slowly, making eye contact, and employing gestures. These actions are intended to convey confidence and control. Participants also utilize behavioural techniques like deep breathing, deliberate body movements, and practising speaking skills to ensure effective communication.

> "*I will start my speech by praying. I ask God to reduce my anxiety*" – P13 Undergraduate

> "*Pretend to have a little cough*" – P23 Undergraduate

> "*Take a deep breath and look other places*" – P4 Graduate

> "*I try to relax, and pause. And start to speak until feeling okay*" – P12 Graduate

> "*Try to give greeting to the audiences*" – P4 Graduate

> "*Take some deep breaths, pray, and let it go, whatever will be will be*" – P13 Postgraduate

> "*I'll take 3 seconds to keep silent and take a deep breath to calm down myself.*" – P15 Postgraduate

In public speaking situations, the participants are also found to do the preparation strategy. This strategy emphasizes readiness before public speaking engagements. These involve thorough preparation, including reviewing notes and materials, and extensive practice of speeches in advance. Participants often use written notes to support their memory and ensure they cover essential points during their presentations.

"I will never show up in a public speaking situation before mastering the material first" – P17 Undergraduate

"I will keep practising my speech before the time to perform in order to avoid those worst things" – P14 Graduate

"I try to understand what I am going to say by making a note and giving a brief speech "– P15 Graduate

"I prepare my speech ahead of time until I feel ready for the speech" – P2 Postgraduate

"I prepare myself first before giving a speech. I will make a list of what should I deliver to the audience. To decrease the tense, I will bring a piece of paper to help me remember what to say" – P18 Graduate

5. Discussion

5.1 The Prevalence of Communication Apprehension Among Students

The results of this research offer a comprehensive analysis of the levels of communication apprehension (CA) experienced by students at the undergraduate, graduate, and postgraduate levels across a range of communication contexts. A considerable proportion of students exhibit some degree of CA, with the majority developing 'average' apprehension, according to the findings. It is critical to emphasize that CA is a prevalent occurrence among students of varying academic backgrounds, and the variability in its severity across situations indicates the necessity for customized interventions and support initiatives to effectively tackle this concern (Ireland, 2020). Prior research conducted by Cardon et al. (2023) and Oliart et al. (2020) has provided evidence that CA is a prevalent occurrence that affects people from diverse backgrounds and has substantial consequences for both personal and professional relationships. The wide-ranging demographic representation in this study underscores the universal applicability of CA and highlights its critical role in fostering personal growth and professional progression.

However, contrasting these findings with other studies reveals a nuanced picture. For instance, Malik et al. (2021) and Cong & Li (2022) observed that while CA is prevalent, its impact can vary significantly based on individual differences and contextual factors. Some studies suggest that interventions focused on specific groups or tailored to particular contexts can significantly reduce CA (Ahmetović, 2020; Parveen & Santhanam, 2021), indicating that the variability in CA levels observed in this study might be addressed through more targeted approaches. In summary, while this research confirms the widespread presence of CA among students at various educational levels, it also highlights the need for more nuanced and customized strategies to effectively mitigate its impact, aligning with and extending the findings of previous research.

5.2 Educational Background and Communication Apprehension

It was first believed that educational background might play a role in reducing CA levels. According to Gardner et al. (2005) and Tabassum & Hossain (2020), individuals with higher levels of education tend to exhibit lower levels of CA. However, the correlational analysis in this study did not yield a statistically significant relationship between educational background and CA. This finding is noteworthy and suggests that educational background

alone may not be a sufficient predictor of CA. It underscores the complexity of this issue, which is influenced by various factors beyond educational experiences.

Comparing these results with previous studies reveals some interesting contrasts. While Gardner et al. (2005) and Tabassum & Hossain (2020) emphasized the mitigating effect of higher education on CA, other studies such as those by Aichhorn & Puck (2017) and Pragash et al. (2020) have highlighted that linguistic barriers and cultural misunderstandings can significantly influence CA regardless of educational attainment. Additionally, Hosek et al. (2018) and Cong & Li (2022) noted that personal experiences, self-esteem, and confidence in language skills play crucial roles in determining CA levels. This divergence in findings suggests that while educational background might contribute to CA levels, it is likely one of many factors. The complexity of CA is influenced by a multifaceted interplay of educational, psychological, and social factors. Therefore, interventions aimed at reducing CA should adopt a holistic approach, considering not only educational experiences but also individual psychological support and social integration strategies. In conclusion, this study's findings align with some aspects of existing literature while also highlighting the need for a broader perspective in understanding and addressing CA.

5.3 Variability Across Communication Situations

The data analysis in this study revealed notable variations in CA levels across different communication situations. Undergraduate students, for instance, reported the highest apprehension in public speaking situations. This aligns with existing literature, which emphasizes the challenges posed by public speaking and the heightened apprehension it often induces (Cong & Li, 2022; Toubot et al., 2018). It is clear that interventions and support programs should prioritize addressing public speaking skills and apprehension management techniques, particularly for undergraduate students. Moreover, on the other hand, graduate and postgraduate students reported lower apprehension levels in group discussion situations, emphasizing the importance of fostering interactive and collaborative communication experiences to reduce apprehension (Cardon et al., 2023; Rust et al., 2020). However, while these findings are consistent with some studies, they also highlight the complexity of CA. For instance, Hoskins & Wong (2022) argue that the context and individual experiences play crucial roles in determining CA levels, suggesting that not all graduate and postgraduate students may experience reduced apprehension uniformly.

Comparing these findings with other research reveals additional layers of complexity. Some studies, such as those by Grieve et al (2021), have shown that even at higher educational levels, specific contexts like public speaking can still trigger high levels of apprehension due to performance pressure and audience size. This indicates that while educational progression can mitigate CA in some situations, certain contexts inherently remain challenging. In conclusion, this study underscores the need for tailored interventions that consider the specific communication contexts and educational levels of students. By focusing on context-specific strategies and acknowledging the diverse experiences of students, more effective support programs can be developed to help students manage and overcome CA.

5.3 Utilized Strategies to Overcome Communication Apprehension

The findings from this research illuminate the strategies students employ to effectively manage and mitigate communication apprehension (CA). These strategies fall into distinct categories: cognitive, behavioural, and preparation techniques, each playing a vital role in

helping students navigate and overcome CA (Cardon et al., 2023; Cong & Li, 2022; Hoskins & Wong, 2022). First, many students frequently turn to cognitive strategies as an initial step in addressing CA. These techniques include self-affirmation, mental reassurance, and maintaining positive thoughts. Students employ these strategies to boost their self-confidence and allay apprehension before engaging in various communication situations (Bijani & Sedagat, 2016; Rimkeeratikul, 2017; Utari et al., 2022). For example, self-affirmation, as highlighted by several participants, involves the practice of reinforcing one's self-belief. This cognitive strategy revolves around convincing oneself that they can handle the communication situation, thus bolstering self-confidence (Bijani & Sedagat, 2016; Cong & Li, 2022).

Behavioural techniques, notably prominent in interpersonal and public speaking situations, play a pivotal role in reducing CA (Hoskins & Wong, 2022; Oliart et al., 2020; Toubot et al., 2018). These strategies encompass actions such as non-verbal communication, deep breathing, and deliberate body movements. They enable students to convey composure and a sense of control during communication (Cong & Li, 2022; Oliart et al., 2020). Non-verbal communication, including smiling and maintaining eye contact, is an essential behavioural strategy frequently employed by students. These actions help diffuse tension, foster engagement, and convey confidence in interpersonal interactions (Cong & Li, 2022; Hoskins & Wong, 2022). In public speaking situations, participants often engage in deep breathing to remain calm and focused. This behavioural strategy allows students to regain their composure and manage nervous energy effectively (Toubot et al., 2018; Hoskins & Wong, 2022).

Preparation techniques represent a proactive approach to mitigating CA, emphasizing readiness before communication engagements. These strategies involve planning, practising speaking skills, and utilizing written notes to diminish apprehension (Aziz & Zaidoune, 2022; Hoskins & Wong, 2022; Rimkeeratikul, 2017). For instance, in preparation for group discussions or public speaking, many students prepare written notes to support their memory and ensure that they cover essential points during their presentations (Aziz & Zaidoune, 2022; Hoskins & Wong, 2022).

The findings of this research are significant for educators, policymakers, and mental health professionals. By identifying the specific strategies that students find effective, educational institutions can design more personalized support programs that cater to the unique needs of undergraduate, graduate, and postgraduate students. For instance, incorporating training sessions on behavioral techniques such as non-verbal communication, deep breathing exercises, and positive visualization into the curriculum could help students manage their apprehension more effectively. Furthermore, the insights gained from this study can inform the development of workshops and seminars aimed at enhancing students' communication skills across different contexts. By tailoring these interventions to the specific challenges faced by students in various communication situations, such as public speaking or group discussions, institutions can foster a more supportive and inclusive learning environment. In addition, mental health professionals can use these findings to develop counselling and therapy programs that address the psychological aspects of CA. Techniques such as cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT) can be adapted to help students build confidence and reduce anxiety related to communication. Overall, this research highlights the importance of a comprehensive approach to addressing CA, combining practical, educational, and

psychological strategies to support students in their academic and professional journeys. By leveraging the findings of this study, stakeholders can implement effective measures to help students overcome CA, ultimately contributing to their personal growth and success.

6. Conclusion

This research can come to three conclusions. First, the study's findings on communication apprehension (CA) among undergraduate, graduate, and postgraduate students highlight the necessity for tailored interventions at each educational level. The prevalence of CA across these groups underscores the need for specific strategies to enhance communication skills and reduce apprehension. Effective interventions should be customized to meet the unique needs of students at different educational stages, ultimately facilitating academic success and fostering effective communication abilities among EFL students. Second, the results suggest that group discussions and interpersonal interactions generally elicited lower levels of apprehension across all student levels, indicating that promoting collaborative communication can help reduce CA. Conversely, high levels of apprehension were noted in public speaking situations for all EFL students, emphasizing the need for confidence-building interventions. Educational institutions should implement comprehensive public speaking programs to help students overcome their fears and communicate effectively in formal settings. This study also found that meeting situations are the context in which EFL students experience moderate levels of apprehension. This underscores the importance of providing training on effective communication in professional environments. Workshops focusing on meeting participation, communication strategies, and negotiation skills can equip students to navigate and contribute effectively in workplace settings. Third, the correlational analysis indicates that educational background alone does not significantly influence CA levels among EFL students. While higher education offers more opportunities to practice communication skills, it does not necessarily reduce apprehension. This finding highlights the importance of comprehensive approaches to CA that go beyond educational attainment. Educational institutions should focus on targeted interventions such as communication skills training and supportive environments to address the specific needs of students at all levels, helping them overcome CA and enhance their ability to interact in academic and professional contexts.

Limitation
While the non-significant result observed in the correlation analysis provides valuable insights, it is essential to consider potential limitations that may have influenced this outcome. One significant factor to acknowledge is the sample size, as the study involved a limited number of participants from specific educational institutions. A larger and more diverse sample may yield different results and provide a more comprehensive understanding of the relationship between communication apprehension and educational background. Additionally, participant characteristics, such as prior communication experiences and cultural backgrounds, could have influenced their responses and perceptions of communication apprehension. Furthermore, the specific measures used to assess communication apprehension and effective behaviours should be critically evaluated. Different measures or approaches may yield varying results, highlighting the importance of employing multiple assessment methods to capture the complexity of these constructs. Overall, these limitations underscore the need for future research to explore these

relationships in more depth and consider a broader range of factors that may influence communication apprehension and effective communication behaviours among EFL students.

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