

# Oral Communication Apprehension among International Doctoral Students

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## Abstract

Communication apprehension has been identified as a major factor which inhibits an individual's willingness to communicate and his/her ability to develop effective communication skills. While many prior studies have investigated oral communication apprehension among undergraduate students, there has been little research exploring this phenomenon among doctoral students. This study applied qualitative methodology via observation and interviews. The research subjects were international doctoral students from several Malaysian universities. The experiences of the students in communicating with examination panel during academic presentations (e.g. proposal and viva) are analysed and the factors contributing to their oral CA are explored.

**Keywords:** oral communication apprehension, international doctoral students, academic presentations, Malaysia

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1 Introduce the Problem

Communication is a daily occurrence in a person's life. People communicate in different environments in order to perform their daily affair. The primary intention of learning a language is to apply it for communication purposes. Savignon (1987) claimed that language learning is the result of participation in communicative events and the ability to speak well is an important factor in seeking for jobs (P'Rayan & Shetty, 2008). Despite its crucial importance, some individuals avoid communicating with others. Such avoidance is associated to personal characteristics known as communication apprehension (CA).

Apprehension in communicating with others may impede success in school and work in today's global context (Blume et al., 2013). CA is defined as "an individual's level of fear or anxiety with either real or anticipated communication with another person or persons" (McCroskey, 1977). Common communication situations pertinent to CA comprise participating in public speaking, meetings or classes, small groups and interpersonal conversation. In the context of teaching and learning, CA has been reported to reduce students' achievement, where students who experience high levels of CA obtain lower grade point average, demonstrate cognitive deficits, exhibit performance failures and show higher dropout rates (McCroskey, 1977). More negative personal characteristics were associated with CA when McCroskey and Richmond (1990) discovered that highly apprehensive students are inclined to endure from general anxiety, lack of self-control, low tolerance for ambiguity, lack emotional maturity, low self-esteem, introverted, less innovative, unassertive and unresponsive and low tolerance for disagreement.

CA sufferers will experience emotional distress during communication, where they feel less successful in oral communication tasks because of the anxiety suffered from high CA. It is interesting to note that McCroskey (1976) discovered that CA significantly affects highly apprehensive individuals. Some of them even favor to live in houses remote from interaction centers select seats in a small group where they are less likely to be required to interact or select careers that have lower communication requirements. McCroskey (1976) also highlighted that individuals suffering from high CA have lower expectations and less desire for progression, are perceived as less credible and less attractive by their peers, participate less in small group communication, involve in less self-disclosure, and are less likely to be perceived as leaders in small groups. This study aims to highlight the crucial factors faced by international doctoral students which have caused them to experience OCA during academic presentation by focusing on the following research questions; a) what are the factors that caused

students to experience OCA? b) How do the students perceive doctoral academic presentations?

### *1.2 Relevant Scholarship*

The past three decades of research in CA indicates that the relationship between CA and language learning is an important, complex, yet a common research topic (Pyun et al., 2014). For example, research findings conducted by Pyun et al. (2014) indicate that CA strongly underlies the affective variables such as risk-taking, a prominent determinant of classroom participation and a significant indicator of successful learners. McCroskey and Richmond (1990) proved that CA well predicts an individual's willingness to communicate. They reported a negative association between CA and willingness to communicate whereby apprehensive students are less willing to engage in communication. In addition, CA has been found to inhibit development of effective communication skills (Shanahan, 2013).

Academic presentation is an event that plays an important role in doctoral students' success. Viva which refers to the postgraduate students' oral examination (typically for an academic qualification) depends highly on the students' oral communication skill (Howard et al., 2002). Howard et al. (2002) noted that candidates without the support of advisors, notes, or books normally perform under pressure because the candidates' oral skill is implicitly or explicitly central to the examiners' assessment. Howard et al. (2002) also added that the vitality of oral skill is manifested in frequent reference to the candidate ability to defend his research project/thesis and clarify the aspects of his work. The researchers discovered that some examiners make explicit connection between the verbal and intellectual skills and some examiners believed that oral examination or viva offers evidence of the candidates' ability to think originally and independently.

Oral presentation during viva sessions is a real challenge for international students because it is conducted in the English language. Ability to communicate clearly while under pressure and being able to defend ideas are key skills for successful viva performance. Despite the crucial importance of this communication event, some individuals may encounter challenges when communicating with their examination panel especially in the second or foreign language. Such determinant may be associated to personal characteristics known as oral communication apprehension (OCA).

International non-native English speaking students face more difficulties in oral communication during academic presentations. Morita (2000), for instance, argued that these students experience psychological difficulties (i.e. lack of confidence or inferiority complex) related to academic presentations. According to Carter (2012), experience of international students from the viva voce differs from their native counterparts as they experience more language anxiety which increases when speech is both formal and critical to success. Ariff and Mugableh (2013) investigated Jordanians students in Malaysia. The researchers discovered that linguistic difficulties were the main concern of these students namely: vocabulary, pronunciation, listening comprehension, and difficulties related to the immediacy and interactive nature of spoken language. The researchers argued that lack of experience in oral academic presentations in English language context put Jordanians in a negative situation during the course of their studies.

This research attempts to explore the experiences of international doctoral students during academic presentations (e.g. proposal and viva) and investigate instances of OCA.

## **2. Method**

The objective of the present study is to qualitatively explore the phenomenon of OCA experienced by international doctoral students in Malaysia. To achieve this objective, observations and interviews were conducted to develop an understanding of "the world from the subjects' points of view, to unfold the meaning of peoples' experiences" (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). Prior to proceeding to data collection, an interview guide and observation protocol were prepared which, drawing from the literature, indicated the topics to be covered in the interview and during observations. More specifically, the emphasis in the literature on contributory factors provoking OCA shaped the construction of the interview guide and observation protocol.

The interview participants of this study were 25 international doctoral students from various public universities in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. The participants were chosen on the basis of their level of the study and their country of origin. Both male and female participants were included. A richly textured interpretation of OCA and its role in the interviewees' academic presentations was recorded from the international doctoral students, the main participants of this study. At the beginning of each interview, the researcher explained the objective of the study, emphasized the confidential nature of the research, and guaranteed the anonymity of the interviewee. The initial part of each interview was devoted to interviewee's demographic information. When sufficient rapport was built up and the interviewee seemed sufficiently comfortable, the conversation then turned to the

interviewee's experience and perception of OCA during academic presentations. Interviews were voice recorded for subsequent transcription. The data was then analysed employing NVivo software to uncover common themes.

Observations were conducted between May to December 2016. Gaining entrance into the site was accomplished through personal contact that was recommended by the interview participants. The researcher attended the open session for proposal presentations offered by one faculty. Interested students and individuals were allowed to attend the presentation in order to experience proposed defense presentation. The faculty announced upcoming presentations by sending email to all students of the faculty.

During the presentations, the researcher played the role of a complete observer (Merriam, 2009). She participated during the Question and Answer session because the panel allowed the audience to raise any questions or provide comments regarding the presentation.

In addition to taking field notes during the presentations, the researcher also recorded the presentations with permission from the presenters to refer to the video during data analysis. The proposal presentations were attended by students of the same faculty; hence, the researcher had the opportunity to build rapport with them and received their cooperation and facilitation for the data collection.

### 3. Results

This section outlines interesting findings gathered from the interview sessions. Four significant factors emerged from the rich data and were categorized into; linguistic issues, deficiency in knowledge of research during presentations, students' negative perceptions towards the presentation panels and other factors.

#### *Linguistic issues.*

Linguistic issues were identified as the major factor that contributes to international doctoral students' OCA during academic presentations. The participants have communicated several important linguistic issues which can be categorized under linguistic issues include: a) *complexity of English language as perceived by the students*; b) *students' lack of vocabulary list*; and c) *examiners' pronunciation and accent*.

*"Study is different from the communication. Because in study just you know scientific subjects and words... But communication is different" (P1).*

*"Sometimes I want to give example then I don't know which word I should use you know to deliver the same meaning" (P3).*

*"It's the academic vocabulary you know because we use general English. I sometimes forget academic vocabulary" (P19).*

*"Most of the problem was the way we pronounce things. Each of us, the way they understand certain things, they expect you to pronounce the way they understand if pronounce it the other way it meant another thing for them. So me too" (P18).*

*"I couldn't understand the examiners' accent and was shy to ask them" (P9).*

*"English as our second [language] one so sometimes we have a problem to speak grammatically or to speak fluently or convey our understanding about something" (P12).*

Deficiency in knowledge of research during presentations was also identified as one of the prominent factors that contribute to international doctoral students' OCA. In the analysis, deficiency in knowledge of research during academic presentations emerged from categories comprising: a) *fear of negative comments during presentation*; b) *lack of experience in oral presentation*; c) *poor slides* and d) *lack of knowledge in subject matter*.

*"I knew that I would be evaluated, there would be examiners, they have read my proposal; they are here for judging me. They are here to making the scene that is it right or wrong. These things give you pressure of course" (P7).*

*"They made me realize that my presentation was rubbish. Slides, content and everything has problem. They said I presenting like somebody reading news. They said this is not presentation, this is reading" (P18).*

*"One of the issues that I noticed to be challenging for many students is providing poor and inappropriate slides. The notes prepared in slides are not good and helpful ... For example, they [the students] copy all subject matter in a slide instead of bringing the key points. This would be a problem. They run out of time, [they] cannot explain" (P8).*

*"When you come the question and answer session now. Yes, of course you feel nervousness when you do not know the answer" (P7).*

*“sometimes not my case but another student when the examiners not in your field very difficult to convince them. Because once in your field very easy to understand but when not in your field. Like I am did in Electrical Engineering but examiner in Mechanical Engineering, he has just basic in about the Electrical and this makes many clashes when you need to come to understand” (P6).*

*Students' Negative Perceptions towards Presentation Panel* was another factor which has caused OCA among the participants. The analysis of the data has highlighted the following sub-themes attributed to students' OCA: a) examiners' language deficiency; b) ineffective chairperson; c) strict examiners; d) moody examiners; e) examiners unwelcoming facial expression; g) examiner is not subject matter expert; h) examiner did not read the thesis; i) instances of talking in Malay; J) examiners are superior in their content knowledge; k) high expectation towards international students.

a) *Examiners' Language Deficiency.* Incompetency of examiners in the English language was one of the major concerns of the participants. This doctoral student was nervous during his proposal presentation:

*“When I was presenting on my own I was comfortable but when it came to the question and answer I understood that they didn't understand many of the things that I already explained. They didn't understand what I explained so they asked again. This made me anxious and nervous at the same time” (P3).*

The student's anxiety level was exacerbated as he discovered that the panel members were not proficient in the second language, hence had difficulty in understanding their accent.

b) *Ineffective Chairperson.* Some participants revealed that the chairperson indirectly created an uncomfortable atmosphere for them. They recalled being confused by countless questions asked by the examiners during the presentation sessions. The situation deteriorated with the interference of the chairperson who also posed some questions instead of facilitating the session. One doctoral student commented:

*“Sometimes in the viva ... the examiners [ask] more questions from different sides at the same time [and] the chairman [did] not organize session good. Chairman also sometime ask. You feel confused. This is for my case get me confused because they not organize the session well” (P1).*

Participant P2 also faced similar experience. However, she was being optimistic by assuming that some examiners purposefully ask many questions to the students in order to evaluate the originality of their work. Her supervisor came to her rescue by complaining to the chairperson. Some examiners might have overdone it. In such cases, the chairperson has to take action and ensure that the session runs effectively:

*“Some examiners they try just like bullying you to their mind or just playing with your mind to see if you are... They are coming to make sure that one hundred percent you know, you understand and this is your work and its originality, to test your maturity. He (chairperson) tries all to talk, not to disrupt any one like nothing serious. But when he saw my supervisor get angry yeah that time he said that is enough (P2).*

The above quotes are supported with the video transcript recorded during a proposal presentation. One of the examiners insisted very detailed information from the student who was very apprehensive due to insufficient knowledge. The supervisor was dissatisfied and instantly complained to the panel and requested that the chairman took some actions. The following quote was the transcript of the video:

*“I think, for example, I think it is not be fair to the student where you ask something that not be really done yet. For example, you ask about correlation which is after the proposal. Proposal must be assessed as a proposal. ... Mr. Chairman I think you should play your role (laughing). This is harassment to the candidate. (Supervisor spoke during a proposal presentation defense).*

c) *Strict Examiners.* Several participants commented that strict examiners can affect the level of their OCA, as indicated below:

*“My internal examiner to me was like fighting. Because I don't know as I told you also the personality is affected. For example, this internal [examiner] I know him is from faculty you know he like whatever he said the others to accept especially if you are student” (P2).*

Clear comments during the presentation are crucial to the participants to proceed in their research. Strict examiners usually create barriers and seldom provide rational comments or justifications to the students. Consequently, the students develop negative perceptions toward the examiners, hence trigger their OCA.

d) *Moody Examiners.* The participants also highlighted the existence of moody examiners who greatly induced their OCA during presentation:

*“Their personal problem or they may had a bad day; I think it happens believe it happens in Malaysia based on*

*the mood, I have been seven years in Malaysia I have seen a lot that of the examiners' mood is affecting the results of the graduating students. Based on the mood of the examiners the results can be different" (P4).*

It was unfortunate that even after a few months of viva experience, the students were still hurt by such event. Even the good news of passing the viva could not "wash away" the wound:

*"you think all negative feeling will wash away by this good news but of course is not good feeling because you don't feel it was a fair defense, it was a fair judgment" (P4).*

e) *Examiners' Unwelcoming Facial Expression.* Another negative perception developed towards presentation panel was examiners' unwelcoming facial expression. Some participants described that having to face an the examiner in the presentation room with such gesture increased their apprehension and reduced their self-confidence:

*"the examiners were sitting with a serious face and gesture and didn't smile, so it reduced my self-confidence and I felt I forgot everything"(P9).*

Although there were some critical comments towards the presentation panel, some participants expressed their appreciation and complimented the panel for expressing encouraging expressions to help them reduce their OCA:

*"I was lucky that had a very good panel during viva. They had a very good and friendly communication. At first, they understood that I am anxious because of presentation, they tried to comfort my. Even the chairman first ordered coffee for every one and was smiling, it really helped me to start well" (P24).*

f) *Examiner Is not Subject Matter Expert.* The participants also indicated that the oral communication is even more challenging when the examiner is not a subject matter expert, as highlighted by this doctoral student from Sudan:

*"The examiner accepts to examine a research not related to their field. When the examiners not in your field very difficult to convince them" (P1).*

The student felt anxious especially when he had to convince the examiner who had very little knowledge on the topic of his research. This has also affected his oral presentation.

g) *Examiner Did not Read the Thesis.* Some participants confessed that they inadvertently developed negative perceptions towards the presentation panel during the answer and question session. Irrelevant and illogical questions asked by the examiners caused the students to assume that the examiner did not go through the thesis. Consequently, the student became stricken and was puzzled on how his work was going to be evaluated. This student related his experience with a non-subject matter examiner:

*"I felt one of the examiners didn't even read and go through my thesis because the questions he was asking me were like very basic questions and I was feeling it is there, how you didn't see it. Even the comments that I got, somehow were disappointing, I feel like I did this the research for three years to prepare this document but the examiners even didn't take two weeks' time to read it. Because you know ok this person even didn't read my thesis how he is going to judge my work" (P4).*

h) *Instances of Talking In Malay.* Deliberate communication in Malay language in front of international students during academic presentation was perceived to be very condescending, causing anxiety in the student, as described below:

*"In presentation room I found all the examiners, my supervisor and chairman speaking in Malay and I couldn't understand what they were talking about. I was nervous and anxious at that time. I was thinking maybe they are laughing at me or something" (P3).*

i) *Examiners Are Superior in Their Content Knowledge.* The ambiance created by the examiners during academic presentation was not desirable for the participants who mostly felt very inadequate in their research ability. This is very much related to the "subordinate status" a factor that can increase state-like CA when communicating individuals are subject-matter experts. This student explained his experience further:

*"In every presentation that you are presenting in front of some professors or associate professors sitting there and for sure know a lot because they have worked a lot and have especial experience and even you present the best material, they can challenge you if they want" (P8).*

j) *High Expectation towards International Students.* Some participants felt that examiners demonstrate favouritism towards local students by treating their research work and presentations lightly compared to the international students who have to face more hurdles with higher expectation:

*“I believe so when it comes to locals the examiners take it easier, because I can compare the works that what international students are doing with locals but all not of course. With local students and international students you see that how to say the quality of the work is not same but you feel the local students are passing the viva much easier than international students. Maybe the expectation from the international students when it comes to research, the quality of the work mmm.. how to say is not aaah.. is not same but you feel the local students passing the viva much easier than international students” (P4).*

*Other Factors.* Some issues raised by the participants that caused OCA did not fit in any emerged categories. Therefore, they were grouped under “other factors” which are classified into two sub-themes: a) *Vague Comments from Panel during Presentation*, and b) *students do not know how far they can defend their stand*.

a) *Vague Comments from Panel during Supervision or Presentation.* Apart from language deficiencies, vague comments from supervisors and examiners were also discovered to have caused OCA among the participants. The participants sometimes failed to clearly infer what supervisors and examiners meant by their comments. Participants demanded more detail and effective communication from supervisors and examiners so that they can better grasp the meaning of the comments:

*“In the presentation the examiners, the evaluators say to me that I have to expand the conceptual model, now I do understand that what she says to expand the conceptual model but how this conceptual model will be expanded, well sometimes you see these are the problems do exist. Because you are unable actually to understand what other person is trying to say. Actually what examiners are trying to say or what supervisor is trying to say. Actually you understand in the words but you do not understand how to do it. I think that the supervisor and examiners need to be very comprehensive” (P7).*

b) *Students do not Know How Far They Can Defend Their Stand.* Participants who had experienced their viva presentation shared a significant issue that still remain unclear. This has greatly elicited their OCA during communication with the examiners. These participants were advised by their supervisors to welcome comments from the panel and not to argue over comments more than three times if possible. This advice befuddled them and increased their apprehension during viva presentation.

*“One of the tough parts I didn't know how to deal with was how much I am allowed to argue with the examiners. Even now at this moment I don't know how much I am allowed to even after graduating from master and PhD here. Because you know they say you should not argue much because it might give them negative feelings so I had to just give it up. Even when I am sure that I have the answer, even when I am sure I am correct about the answer I am providing. When they are arguing more, when they are asking for reason and not satisfied with my answer I don't know how far I can go. How much I can insist in my like answer... No one tells you; just my supervisor advised doesn't argue much if they are asking you small, small things, you just accept. I see many viva in YouTube they like arguing or they like attacking your work and they are fully open in like western countries to defend their work in more like extreme way that they can. But I did feel is the case in Malaysia because there is this doubt among the students that it is not only my case I am pretty sure that in my friends case you don't know how much you are allowed to confront, how much allowed to fight. And I think locals are safer about this because it is pretty easier for them” (P4).*

In the following case, a doctoral student objected her supervisor's interference during her viva. Some supervisors perceive their students as incapable of defending their work and unable to convince their presentation panel:

*“My supervisor actually advised me during viva not to argue more than three times. Argument more than three times means you don't respect. After three time I just remembered his advice that this would be disadvantage for me. But this argument because was a big issue in my thesis. My supervisor doesn't like this one why I don't try to convince more. He expects to convince the examiner more like so he disrupt us, because what to do, three time, he (examiner) still insists” (P2).*

#### **4. Discussion**

In summary, this research has qualitatively explored international doctoral students' OCA. The findings clearly demonstrated that despite years of working experiences as lecturers or presentations, doctoral students' OCA while communicating with examination panel is unavoidable. The analysis illustrated that international doctoral students' OCA is influenced by linguistic issues, deficiency in knowledge of research during presentations negative perceptions towards presentation panel and other related factors. The students were definitely apprehensive of the academic presentation and the above factors have aggravated their level of OCA.

In terms of gauging the contribution of this study, the significance in documenting and communicating the range of international doctoral student's experiences of OCA cannot be underestimated. As Byrne et al. (2012)

highlighted, most prior studies on OCA have been quantitative in orientation and the lived experiences of CA have been absent. The researchers noted that it is only by reading students' own words that the veracity of the apprehension is well conveyed. However, even those few qualitative studies have investigated OCA among undergraduates, not the postgraduate students.

This study particularly contributes to sensitising Malaysia's higher education to the very dramatic, emotional and ultimately debilitating effect of OCA among international doctoral students. Given the range of student experiences and the depth of disappointment felt by some of the students with the examination panel, it is clear that a great deal of care and reflection is required if Malaysia's higher education aspires to compete globally in hosting international students.

The study illustrates that international doctoral students are willing to discuss their challenges and communication fears with their examination panel, but may only do so when in a one-to-one confidential as well as considerate environment. There is a need for universities to convene a programme on the doctoral students' examination process by training the examiners. This is crucial in order to safeguard the standard and quality of the Malaysian higher education sector.

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