

## Silence is Not Golden: Investigating Classroom Participation Anxiety Among University Students

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**Abstract:** A phenomenon that prevails in university classrooms, particularly among the undergraduates, is their silent and reticent behaviors during classroom hours. This study was undertaken to test the hypothesis that such behaviors can be ascribed to what we have labeled as “classroom participation anxiety”, a type of situation anxiety not unlike communication apprehension. The population for this study comprised undergraduate students taking courses in “English for Occupational Purposes” in a university in Malaysia. The study investigated whether differences existed in classroom participation anxiety between male and female students; between local and international students; between students from the six bachelor degree programs. In addition, the study also investigated whether predictive relationships existed between perceived oral competence in English, students’ motivation to study, teachers’ verbal and non-verbal immediacy behaviors with classroom participation anxiety. The findings revealed that statistically significant differences existed between local and international students and between students from the six bachelor degree programs. However, no statistically significant mean differences existed in classroom participation anxiety between male and female students. The results also revealed that only two correlates were significantly predictive of classroom participation anxiety: perceived oral competence in English and teachers’ verbal immediacy behaviors.

**Key words:** Classroom Participation Anxiety • Perceived Verbal and Non-verbal Immediacy Behaviours • Perceived Oral Competence in English • Internal Motivation

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### INTRODUCTION

A frequently-heard complaint among university faculty members is that students all too often are extremely reluctant to speak up during classroom hours and often are unwilling to participate adequately and effectively during lecture hours. Silence seems to reign in the university classroom particularly in courses where marks are not awarded for class participation. It is difficult to ascertain whether students have understood or learnt anything when the overwhelming majority does not ask questions to seek clarification, let alone respond immediately to questions posed by instructors.

A question that really concerns most faculty members is: what explains such reticent and tacit behaviors in the university classroom? In the West and in the Asia-Pacific

region, studies have investigated such a phenomenon in the university/college classrooms. [1], a renowned instructional communications scholar, calls it “oral communication apprehension”. [1] has created an instrument to measure such a phenomenon which he has called “Personal Report of Communication Apprehension-24 (PRCA-24)”.

[1]’s instrument has been widely used in studies both in the West and in the Asia-Pacific region. Having examined his conceptual and operational definitions of “oral communication apprehension”, we find it to be too broad for our research purposes. Through our own observations and anecdotal reports that we have gathered, we find that students appear to be orally apprehensive only in the university classroom and not when they are outside. It is because of this reason

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that we are hesitant and reluctant to label the reticent behaviors among university students as “oral communication apprehension”.

University students behaviour during classroom hours can be ascribed to what we have labeled as “classroom participation anxiety”. If such a construct prevails among university student’s population, how serious is it? If such a construct prevails, would there be differences among male and female university students, among local and international students and among students majoring in different programmes. In addition, we would also like to find out whether a relationship exists between “classroom participation anxiety” and the following independent variables: students’ perceived oral competence in English, student’s motivation to study and teachers’ verbal as well as nonverbal immediacy communication behaviors in the classroom.

We have organized our literature review according to our dependent and independent variables. Dependent variable. Classroom Participation Anxiety. Our dependent variable for this study, which we have labeled as “classroom participation anxiety” could not be found in any of the manual or online indexing/abstracting services such as Psychological Abstracts, ERIC and Communication Abstracts. However, we believe this construct of ours to be a subset or at least a variant of [1]’s “oral communication apprehension”. Hence, we shall review some studies on “oral communication apprehension” which are relevant to our research questions. We shall divide our review into two major categories: students’ variables and teachers’/instructors variables.

**Students’ Variables: Gender:** [2] investigated the level of oral communication apprehension between male and female accounting students. He found that female accounting students were significantly more apprehensive than their male counterparts. [3] investigated the level of oral communication apprehension between male and female accounting students as well as between male and female non-accounting students. They found that male accounting majors exhibited higher levels of oral communication apprehension when compared to their male counterparts in the non-accounting majors. In addition, [3] also found that female accounting majors exhibited lower levels of oral communication apprehension when compared to their female counterparts in the non-accounting majors. [4] conducted a study on ‘oral communication apprehension’ among Universiti Utara Malaysia accounting students.

They found that female accounting students to be significantly more apprehensive than their male counterparts.

**Students’ Variables: Nationality:** [5] conducted a study on “oral communication apprehension” among American, Australian, Japanese and Korean college students. They found that American college students had a slightly lower incidence of oral communication apprehension when compared to Japanese students but a significantly higher incidence than Australian and Korean college students.

**Students’ Variables: Majors:** [2] investigated the level of oral communication apprehension between traditional and non-traditional accounting majors. He found that oral communication apprehension was significantly higher for traditional accounting majors when compared to non-traditional accounting majors. [3] compared differences in the level of oral communication apprehension between accounting and non-accounting majors. Their findings revealed that accounting majors were significantly less apprehensive than their non-accounting majors.

**Students Variables: Perceived Oral Competence in English:** Oral competence in English is a variable that we introduced in this research that was not empirically investigated. We suspect that English as a Second Language among university students might probably contribute to the variation in “classroom participation anxiety”. We hypothesize that students who perceive themselves to be orally competent in English are likely to experience less anxiety and would subsequently engage in greater classroom participation than those who perceive themselves to be less orally competent in English. Hence in the university, “classroom participation anxiety” could be related to students’ perceptions of their oral competence in English since the medium of instruction in the university is English. Since we believe we are the first to introduce this variable in this type of study, we were therefore not surprised when we failed to find any previous studies that linked this variable to “oral communication apprehension”.

**Students Variables: Motivation to Study:** Studies have shown “oral communication apprehension” to be associated with students’ motivation to study. Motivated students are likely to experience less classroom participation anxiety since they are eager, enthusiastic and passionate about their studies and are likely to ask

more questions and be more interactive than those who are less motivated to study. [6] investigated the relationship between oral communication apprehension and students' motivation to study. Their findings revealed that students who demonstrated higher levels of motivation to study are likely to demonstrate lesser levels of oral communication apprehension.

**Teachers Variables: Verbal and Nonverbal Immediacy Behaviors:** [7] and [8] found that teachers' verbal as well as nonverbal immediacy behaviors to be negatively correlated with oral communication apprehension.

[9] defined "immediacy" as the degree of perceived physical and psychological closeness between two people. Teachers or instructors who engage in greater verbal and nonverbal immediacy behaviors are likely to minimize anxiety in the classroom and consequently elicit greater degree of classroom participation among their students.

#### **Objectives of the Study**

**Research Hypotheses:** Based on our review of the empirical literature, we formulate the following non-directional hypotheses.

**Hypothesis 1:** There are statistically significant mean differences in classroom participation anxiety between male and female university students.

**Hypothesis 2:** There are statistically significant mean differences in classroom participation anxiety between Malaysian and non-Malaysian university students.

**Hypothesis 3:** There are statistically significant mean differences in classroom participation anxiety between students majoring in Accounting, Economics, Architecture, English, Engineering and ICT.

**Hypothesis 4:** There are statistically significant relationship between students' perceived oral competence in English and classroom participation anxiety.

**Hypothesis 5:** There are statistically significant relationship between students' motivation to study and classroom participation anxiety.

**Hypothesis 6:** There are statistically significant relationship between teachers' verbal immediacy behaviors and classroom participation anxiety.

**Hypothesis 7:** There are statistically significant relationship between teachers' non-verbal immediacy behaviours and classroom participation anxiety.

**Hypothesis:** Collectively, all the above four correlates would significantly predict the variance in the classroom participation anxiety.

#### **Sampling and Self-Reported Questionnaire:**

The population for this study comprised undergraduate students taking courses in "English for Occupational Purposes" from the following degree programs: Bachelor in Accounting, Bachelor in Economics, Bachelor in Business Administration, Bachelor in English, Bachelor in Engineering and Bachelor in Information Technology. There were altogether 473 students from all the 6 Bachelor degree programs mentioned earlier.

Allowing for a plus/minus 2% error rate, a sample size of 250 students was randomly and proportionately selected from the population of 473 students. The self-reported questionnaires which comprised all the relevant variables were distributed to the study's sample during classroom hours. Hence, it is hardly surprising that we received a 100% return rate. There were hardly any missing values.

#### **Construct Validation: Classroom Participation Anxiety:**

The dependent variable, "classroom participation anxiety" was operationalized using a 5-item measure that were anchored on a 5-point scale ranging from 5 (strongly disagree) to 1 (strongly agree). High scores would mean high anxiety whereas low scores would mean low anxiety. We created a scoring rubric to make it easy to interpret the scores:

- 1 to 5 not anxious at all
- 6 to 10 not anxious
- 11 to 15 somewhat anxious
- 16 to 20 anxious
- 21 to 25 highly anxious

All the 5 items were tested for construct validity using exploratory factor analysis.

As presented in table 1, the findings revealed that all the 5 items had factor loadings of more than 0.6 and that collectively all 5 items explained 51% of the variance in "classroom participation anxiety". The 5 items were also tested for internal reliability using Cronbach's alpha which met the minimum requirement as suggested by [10].

Table 1: Construct Validity and Internal Reliability for Classroom Participation Anxiety

Scale Item	Factor Loadings	Cronbach's alpha
Occa	0.78	0.76
Relcom	0.75	
Lokfor	0.73	
Asres	0.66	
Alask	0.75	

Notes:

Percent of Variance Explained: 51%

Item Descriptions are found in Appendix 1

Table 2: Construct Validity and Internal Reliability for Perceived Oral Competence in English

Scale Item	Factor Loadings	Cronbach's alpha
Enggod	0.78	0.70
Orcom	0.73	
Easrel	0.73	

Notes:

Percent of Variance Explained: 56%

Item Descriptions are found in Appendix 1

Table 3: Construct Validity and Internal reliability for Motivation to Study

Scale Item	Factor Loading	Cronbach's alpha
Intere	0.82	0.73
Inspire	0.78	
Useful	0.75	
Chall	0.66	

Notes:

Percent of Variance explained: 57%

Item Descriptions are found in Appendix 1

**Construction Validation: Perceived Oral Competence in English:** The independent variable, “perceived oral competence in English” was operationalized using a 3-item instrument that were anchored on a 5 point scale ranging from 5 (strongly agree) to 1 (strongly disagree). The 3-item instrument was examined for construct validity using exploratory factor analysis. The results of running an exploratory factor analysis showed that all the three (3) items had factor loadings of more than 0.70 and collectively the three items explained 56% of the variance in “perceived oral competence in English”. The three items were also examined for internal reliability assessment using Cronbach’s internal reliability coefficient alpha. As shown in Table 2, the findings revealed that all the three items collectively had an alpha value of 0.70 which meets the minimum requirement as specified by [10].

Table 4: Construct Validity and Internal Reliability for Teachers’ Verbal Immediacy Behaviors

Scale Item	Factor Loading	Cronbach's alpha
Solvie	0.75	0.73
Feed	0.70	
Askque	0.67	
Humour	0.67	
Stufel	0.66	
Praise	0.61	
Invite	0.60	
Stunam	0.59	
Calls	0.57	
Discus	0.54	
Class	0.52	
Exaexp	0.44	

Notes:

Percent of Variance Explained: 38%

Item Descriptions are found in Appendix 1

**Construct Validation, Motivation to Study:** The independent variable, “motivation to study” was operationalized using a 4-item instrument that was anchored on a 5-point scale ranging from 5 (strongly agree) to 1 (strongly disagree). The variable was assessed for construct validity using exploratory factor analysis. The results of running an exploratory factor analysis revealed all the four items to have factor loadings of more than 0.60 and collectively they explained 57% of the variance in “motivation to study”. The 4-item instrument was also submitted to an internal reliability assessment using Cronbach’s reliability coefficient alpha. The results, as presented in table 3, showed that the 4-item instrument has an internal reliability coefficient alpha value of 0.73 which meets the recommended value as specified by [10].

**Construct Validation: Teachers Verbal Immediacy Behaviors:** [11] instrument was employed to measure instructors’ verbal and nonverbal immediacy behaviors. Verbal immediacy behaviors were measured using a 13-item instrument that was anchored on a 5-point scale ranging from 5 (very often) to 1 (never). Higher scores on this instrument indicate greater incidence of verbal behaviors whilst lower scores will indicate lesser incidence of verbal immediacy behaviors. The 13-item instrument was assessed for construct validity using exploratory factor analysis. As shown in table 4, the findings revealed that only 12 out of the 13 items had factor loadings of more than 0.4 and that collectively all the 12 items explained only 38% of the variance in the variable, “teachers’ verbal immediacy behaviors”.

Table 5: Construct Validity and Internal Reliability for Teachers' Nonverbal Immediacy Behaviours

Scale Item	Factor Loadings	Cronbach's alpha
Looks	0.81	0.77
Relax	0.76	
Smiles	0.75	
Gest	0.68	
Moves	0.67	
Smiind	0.42	

Notes:

Percent of Variance Explained: 48%

Item Descriptions are found in Appendix 1

Table 6: Group Differences on Classroom Participation Anxiety

Independent Variable	M	SD	t
Males	12.37	3.53	-1.08
Females	12.85	2.80	
Malaysians	12.86	2.96	3.16*
Non- Malaysians	10.48	3.43	

\* p <.05

The 12 items were also submitted to an internal reliability assessment and were collectively found to have a Cronbach's alpha value of 0.73 which meets the recommended value as suggested by [10].

**Construct Validation, Teachers' Nonverbal Immediacy Behaviours:** [11] 6-item instrument was employed for measuring teachers' nonverbal immediacy behaviours. The items were anchored on a 5-point scale ranging from 5 (very often) to 1 (never). The six items were assessed for construct validity using exploratory factor analysis. As shown in table 5, the results of running an exploratory factor analysis revealed factor loadings of more than 0.4 for all the 6 items and collectively all the six items explained 48% of the variance in the variable, "teachers' nonverbal immediacy behaviors". The six items were subjected to an internal reliability assessment using Cronbach's internal reliability coefficient alpha and were found to have an internal reliability coefficient value of 0.77 which meets the recommended value as suggested by [10].

**Testing of Hypotheses:** The first hypothesis was proposed to examine whether statistically significant mean differences exist between male and female students with respect to their level of classroom participation anxiety. This hypothesis was tested using the parametric independent sample t-test. As presented in table 6, the results of running an independent sample t-test showed

that no statistically significant mean differences existed in classroom participation anxiety,  $t(127.27) = -1.08$ ,  $p > .05$  between males ( $M = 12.37$ ,  $SD = 3.52$ ) and females ( $M = 12.85$ ,  $SD = 2.80$ ).

The second hypothesis was posited to examine whether statistically significant mean differences exist between Malaysian and non-Malaysian students with respect to their level of classroom participation anxiety. The hypothesis was tested using the parametric independent sample t-test. The results of running an independent sample t-test showed that a statistically significant mean difference existed in classroom participation anxiety,  $t(250) = 3.16$ ,  $p < .05$  between Malaysian students ( $M = 12.86$ ,  $SD = 2.96$ ) and non-Malaysian students ( $M = 10.48$ ,  $SD = 3.43$ ). These results are also presented in Table 6.

The third hypothesis was posited to examine whether statistically significant mean differences existed in classroom participation anxiety between students majoring in Accounting, Economics, Business Administration, English, Engineering and ICT (Information and Communications Technology). The hypothesis was tested using the parametric 1-Way Anova test. The results of running a 1-Way Anova test revealed that statistically significant mean differences existed in classroom participation anxiety,  $F(5, 246) = 2.89$ ,  $p < .05$  between students majoring in the 6 areas of specialization. The results of running a post hoc test using the Scheffe test revealed that statistically significant differences lie between students majoring in Engineering ( $M = 13.42$ ,  $SD = 3.29$ ) and those majoring in Economics ( $M = 11.89$ ,  $SD = 2.41$ ). These results are presented in Table 7.

Hypotheses 4, 5, 6 and 7 were formulated to find out whether statistically significant relationships exist between students' perceived oral competence in English, students' motivation to study, teachers' verbal immediacy behaviors as well their non-verbal immediacy behaviors with classroom participation anxiety. In addition, hypothesis number 8 was formulated to find out how much of the variance in classroom participation anxiety would be collectively explained by all these four independent variables. To test the aforementioned hypotheses, we conducted Pearson Product-Moment Correlations as well as stepwise Multiple Linear Regression Analysis.

The results of running a Pearson Product-Moment Correlation analyses revealed that only three (3) out of the four independent variables were significantly correlated with classroom participation anxiety: perceived oral competence in English,  $r = -0.51$ ,  $p < .001$ ;

Table 7: One-Way Anova Summary for Classroom Participation Anxiety

Source	df	SS	MS	F
Between Groups	5	129.28	25.86	2.89 *
Within Groups	246	2201.48	8.95	
Total	251	2330.76		

\* p <.05

Table 8: Correlates of Classroom Participation Anxiety (Paranxi)

Correlates	Paranxi	P Value
Students' Perceived Oral Competence In English	-0.51	0.000
Students' Motivation to Study	-0.20	0.009
Teachers Verbal Immediacy Behaviors	-0.20	0.009
Teachers Non-Verbal Immediacy Behaviors	- 0.10	0.930

Table 9: Stepwise Multiple Regression on Classroom Participation Anxiety

Variable	Beta	R Squared	P Value
Perceived Oral			
Competence in English	-0.51	0.260	0.000
Teachers' Verbal Immediacy Behaviors	-0.12	0.273	0.032

Students' motivation to study,  $r = -0.20$ ,  $p < .05$ ; teachers verbal immediacy behaviors,  $r = -0.20$ ,  $p < .05$ . Teachers' non-verbal immediacy behaviors failed to significantly correlate with classroom participation anxiety,  $r = -0.10$ ,  $p > .05$ . Of the three correlates of classroom participation anxiety only two of the three are also predictors of classroom participation anxiety: students' perceived oral competence in English,  $\text{Beta} = -0.51$ ,  $p < .001$ ; and teachers' verbal immediacy behaviors,  $\text{Beta} = -0.12$ ,  $p < .05$ . The two correlates collectively explained 27% of the variance in classroom participation anxiety. The results are presented in Table 8 and 9.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Why do students persist to remain silent throughout classroom hours? What explains such reticent behaviors among undergraduate students? Can such behaviors be ascribed to a type of oral communication apprehension? Whilst many studies have been conducted in the West and elsewhere on oral communication apprehension, we feel reluctant to label such behaviors as oral communication apprehension as we find these students to be vocal and voluble outside their classrooms. As such we decided to call this behavior classroom participation anxiety since we believe what is preventing them from participating actively during classroom hours could be ascribed to a kind of apprehension.

Based on this belief of ours, we created a 5-item scale to measure classroom participation anxiety. We examined the scale for construct validity as well as internal reliability and results were quite encouraging. Next, we computed a variable called classroom participation anxiety by averaging the scores on all the 5-items. We then proceeded to compute the measure of central tendency for this variable and found that the values of the mean, median and mode to be 12, 12 and 15 respectively. The scoring rubric shows that 12 and 15 reveal the participants to be somewhat anxious i.e. they are not seriously afflicted with anxiety. Hence, we cannot ascribe students' reticent behaviors during classroom hours solely and exclusively to participation anxiety since the data shows that they are somewhat anxious according to our scoring rubric. Such being the case, more studies need to be conducted to find out what really explains students' reticent behaviors during classroom hours. The data show that classroom participation anxiety is not that serious and as such it does not and would not substantially explain why students remain silent during classroom hours.

We proceeded to find out whether differences existed in classroom participation anxiety between males and females; between Malaysian and non-Malaysian students and between students majoring in different areas of specialization. We found that no differences exist between male and female students with respect to classroom participation anxiety. We suggest more research be carried out to find out whether differences exist between male and female students. At best, we can only tentatively conclude that no differences exist insofar as our sample was concerned. We found that a statistically significant difference existed between Malaysians and non-Malaysian students with Malaysian students exhibiting a higher degree of classroom participation anxiety compared to non-Malaysian students. Anecdotal data inform us that Malaysian students are far more reticent than their non-Malaysian counterparts. Could such anxiety explain why Malaysian students are more reticent during classroom hours. We are hesitant to make such a conclusion since our data show that overall the level of classroom participation anxiety among students is 'somewhat anxious'. As such it would be quite erroneous to conclude that such reticence among Malaysian students could be solely ascribed to their classroom participation anxiety. At best, we can tentatively conclude that classroom participation anxiety partially explains their reticent behaviors during classroom hours.

We found that statistically significant mean differences existed between students majoring in Engineering and those majoring in Economics. The Engineering students exhibited a higher level of classroom participation anxiety than their counterparts in the Kulliyah of Economics. Again we feel hesitant to conclude that Engineering students are inherently far more anxious than their counterparts who major in economics. More studies need to be conducted to replicate this finding. At best, we can tentatively conclude that insofar as our sample was concerned the data showed Engineering students to be significantly more apprehensive than their counterparts in the Kulliyah of Economics.

We found students' perceived oral competence in English, students' motivation to study and teachers' verbal immediacy behaviors significantly and negatively correlated with classroom participation anxiety. Teachers' non-verbal immediacy behaviors failed to correlate significantly with classroom participation anxiety. Of the three correlates of classroom participation anxiety, only two (2) were predictors of classroom participation anxiety: students' perceived oral competence in English and teachers' verbal immediacy behaviors. Collectively these two predictors explained only 27% of the variance in classroom participation anxiety. The greater the students' perceptions of their oral competence in English, the lesser would be their classroom participation anxiety. The greater the degree of teachers' verbal immediacy behaviors, the lesser would be the students' degree of classroom participation anxiety. Hence to minimize classroom participation anxiety among students, these two correlates/predictors need to be substantially elevated. We again feel hesitant to conclude that these two predictors would explain students' reticent behaviors during classroom hours since, as we have pointed out earlier, students' classroom participation anxiety is not at a critical or serious level. There are probably other constructs that could explain why students are silent during classroom hours and classroom participation anxiety cannot be held to be the sole reason why such reticent behaviors are rampant among undergraduates during classroom hours.

We suggest more research be carried out to find out why students are reticent during classroom hours. We also suggest more research be carried out to replicate our findings to find out whether classroom participation anxiety is truly the culprit behind students' reticent behaviors during classroom hours. Additionally, we suggest new instruments be created to measure classroom participation anxiety.

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### **Appendix 1: Full item Description for Measures Used**

#### **Classroom Participation Anxiety**

1. I look forward to giving a presentation of assignment or project work to the whole class.
2. I always feel relaxed and comfortable whenever I have to present my assignment or project work to the whole class.
3. I will always choose courses in which there are many occasions for assignments and project work to be presented to the whole class.
4. I will always ask and respond to any questions posed by my lecturer/teacher during class hours.
5. I will always ask questions during class hours.

#### **Perceived Oral Competence in English**

1. My command of English is good enough to enable me to communicate effectively and fluently during classroom hours.
2. I always look forward to having the opportunity to exercise my oral communication skills in English during classroom hours.
3. I always feel at ease and relaxed whenever I have to put into use my oral communication skills during classroom hours.

#### **Students' Motivation to Study**

1. The courses that I have attended and those that I am presently attending are very interesting.
2. The courses that I have attended and those that I am presently attending are very challenging.
3. The courses that I have attended and those that I am presently attending are very inspiring.
4. The courses that I have attended and those I am presently attending are very useful to me.

#### **Teachers' Verbal Immediacy Behaviors**

1. Uses personal examples or talks about experiences he /she has had outside of class.
2. Asks questions or encourages students to talk.
3. Gets into discussion based on something that a student brings up even when this doesn't seem to be part of his/her lecture.
4. Uses humor in class
5. Addresses students by name
6. Gets into conversations with individual students before and after class hours.
7. Refers to class as "our" class or what "we" are doing.
8. Calls on students to answer questions even if they have not indicated they want to talk.
9. Provides feedback on students' assignments through comments on papers and oral discussions.
10. Asks how students feel about an assignment, due date or discussion topic.
11. Invites students to e-mail, telephone or meet him/her outside class hours if they have any questions or want to discuss something related or not related to the course.
12. Asks questions to solicit viewpoints or opinions.
13. Praises students' work, behaviors or questions asked.

#### **Teachers Non-Verbal Immediacy Behaviors**

1. Gestures while talking to the class.
2. Looks at the class while talking.
3. Smiles at the class while talking.
4. Moves around the classroom while teaching.
5. Has a very relaxed body position while talking to the class.
6. Smiles at individual students in the class.