

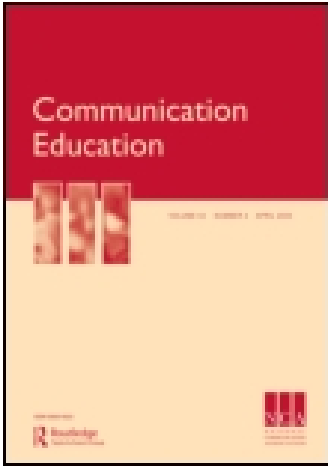
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Communication apprehension among master's of business administration students: Investigating a gap in communication education

John Burk ^a

^a Senior Associate with DLR Group , 2141 E. Camelback Rd., Suite 100, Phoenix, AZ, 85016

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Communication Apprehension among Master's of Business Administration Students: Investigating a Gap in Communication Education

John Burk

*Master's of Business Administration students at a large Midwestern university were administered the Personal Report of Communication Apprehension-24. The students also responded to a questionnaire that generated data for six independent variables and were analyzed in relation to the PRCA-24 scores via a multiple regression analysis. The findings indicate that communication apprehension (CA) exists among the MBA students with the average overall score slightly below the national average. The students had low dyadic, but high meeting and public speaking apprehension. Undergraduate major and culture significantly predicted the PRCA-24 scores. Students with math-related majors had significantly lower CA than students with a business-related or other undergraduate majors. The findings suggest that MBA programs are not addressing CA in their curricula. **Keywords:** communication apprehension, MBA students, communication education, managerial communication*

Communication apprehension (CA) has been typically assessed among undergraduate student populations and has not been assessed among specific graduate student populations. In particular, CA among Masters of Business Administration (MBA) students has not been investigated. MBA students may be a unique population to assess levels of communication apprehension. MBA students have achieved academic success (having completed a bachelor's degree and met the admission requirements of an MBA program) and face a complex organizational communication environment upon graduation (i.e., a corporate environment). What is not known is to what extent MBA students have CA. MBA students who may have CA face a difficult task. They not only need to complete a graduate curriculum, they need to effectively communicate with superiors, peers, and subordinates in a non-academic setting upon graduation. Assessment of CA, however, may not be occurring within MBA programs.

A factor that may contribute to MBA students having CA is insufficient communication education. Pincus, Rayfield, and Ohl (1994) indicate that MBA curricula do not provide communication courses. An assumption made in the MBA program literature is that graduates will become managers (Bongiorno & Byrne, 1994; Hallenborg, 1995; Hendry, 1992; Miller, 1993; Saka, 1992; Steele, 1992). Research suggests that communication skills are essential for managerial success (Bigelow, 1991; Rasmussen, 1991). Managers must give presentations, facilitate small groups, conduct meetings, and interpersonally consult with employees (Munter, 1983).

John Burk (Ph.D., Southern Illinois University, 1996) is a Senior Associate with DLR Group, 2141 E. Camelback Rd., Suite 100, Phoenix, AZ 85016. The manuscript is based on a dissertation completed under the guidance of DRS. Michael Parkinson (Chair), Mary Lou Higgerson, Bryan Crow, Elyse Pineau and William Coscanelli. The author would also like to thank Dr. Patricia Elmore for her support and assistance.

Corporations, however, have been less than satisfied with the communication skills of MBA graduates (Yates, 1983). Corporations appear to assume a communication skills deficit among managers, given the number of consultants hired to teach such skills (Feinberg & Pritzker, 1985; Yates, 1983). MBA graduates entering the workforce are often unprepared to meet the complexities of managerial communication.

Therein lies a gap between what MBA students learn about communication and what corporations experience upon employing MBA graduates. MBA students may have a communication skills and knowledge deficit that may be influenced by communication apprehension. What has not been investigated is to what extent MBA students experience communication apprehension in relation to national averages and what variables influence their levels of apprehension. This study asks four research questions aimed at discovering what MBA students experience in their program and, by extension, whether the MBA curricula address the presence of the phenomenon.

Research Questions

- RQ₁: Do MBA students have levels of CA comparable to the national average?
- RQ₂: What particular communication contexts co-occur with higher levels of CA among MBA students?
- RQ₃: What independent variables significantly predicted the PRCA total scores over and above a linear combination of the variables?
- RQ₄: What independent variables significantly predicted the PRCA subscale scores over and above a linear combination of the variables?

The six independent variables chosen for the study were selected either because research indicated they might be significant or because they had not been previously studied. They are 1) work experience, 2) previous communication classes completed, 3) membership in extracurricular organizations, 4) MBA specialization, 5) culture, and 6) undergraduate major. The variables of culture, previous communication classes, specialization, and undergraduate major were chosen because they are linked to previous CA research. The other variables were chosen for their relevancy to MBA students and because they had not been previously investigated.

Four of the independent variables are grounded in previous research. Communication courses, for example, have been found to reduce CA if activities are imbedded which address the phenomenon (Ayres & Hopf, 1993; Pelias, 1992; Phillips, 1991; Richmond & McCroskey, 1989). If MBA students have completed communication courses, then their scores on the PRCA may be affected. Likewise, culture has been shown to influence PRCA scores (Hackman & Barthel-Hackman, 1993; McCroskey & Richmond, 1990). Many of the MBA students studied were from different countries and their scores may be influenced by cultural differences. Communication apprehension has also been found to influence job choice and selection (McCroskey, Daly, & Sorensen, 1976; McCroskey & Richmond, 1979). By extension, CA may have influenced the selection of specialization and undergraduate major. The students may have chosen a specialization or major based upon its perceived communication requirements.

Work experience and membership in extracurricular organizations were chosen as variables because they constitute non-academic settings in which the students communicated. By communicating in those contexts, the students may have developed skills that might influence their levels of CA. Varied amounts of work experience may positively or negatively influence the PRCA scores. More or less

participation in extracurricular organizations may influence the scores in much the same way. Work experience and membership in extracurricular organizations have not been previously studied but are relevant to the MBA students as experiences that might influence communication apprehension.

The independent variables were operationalized as the participants' responses to a questionnaire. They were asked to indicate the years of work experience between completing their bachelor's degree and starting the MBA, the number of communication classes completed, in how many extracurricular organizations they participated, MBA specialization, country of origin, and undergraduate major. The students were also asked to indicate what type of communication classes they completed and in what type of organizations they participated. Lists of communication courses and organizations were provided to help them answer the questions. The relationship between the six independent variables and the scores on the PRCA were analyzed through multiple regression.

Method

Participants

One hundred twenty-two students enrolled in a MBA program at a large Midwestern university participated in the study. Eighty-five students' responses (about 70%) were used in the data analysis. All of the students were potential participants and attempts were made to include everyone. Collection of data occurred in four MBA classes: Managerial Accounting; Professional Development; Business Policies; and Financial Management. The MBA academic advisor facilitated data collection by producing class rosters that helped cross-reference the students so they would not be administered the instrument and questionnaire twice. Of the 122 students, 95 filled out and returned the instrument and questionnaire. Ten students returned the forms incomplete and were not used.

Instrument and Questionnaire

Dependent variable. The Personal Report on Communication Apprehension (PRCA)-24 (McCroskey, 1982) was administered to the students to measure overall traitlike levels of CA and context-based levels of CA in dyadic, group, meeting, or public speaking situations. The instrument addressed feelings about communication with other people. The students indicated their level of agreement with each statement based on a Likert-type scale of one (strongly agree) to five (strongly disagree).

Independent variables. The students recorded years of work experience and number of previous undergraduate or graduate communication classes completed and extracurricular organizations of which they were members on the questionnaire. These interval data were used in combination with the categorical data in the regression analyses. MBA specialization, culture, and undergraduate major were categorical variables because MBA students belonged in one category of each variable and not any other (i.e., students have one specialization and no other). MBA specialization was coded to reflect the specialization of each student. Culture and undergraduate major, however, were reduced to two and three categories respectively. Students were asked their country of origin. Students who indicated they were from the U.S. were grouped together. Likewise, students who indicated they were from countries other than the U.S. were also grouped together to reflect cultural differences between U.S. and international students. Individual countries were not

separately coded due to the variation among them that would have reduced their comparative value.

Students indicated their undergraduate major on the questionnaire. An analysis of the frequency distribution of majors found the students generally fell into three categories: business-related, math-related, or other majors. The majority of students had undergraduate majors in business-related fields such as accounting, finance, management, etc.—making them a natural group for comparison. The second most frequent majors were math-related (i.e., engineering, math, computer science, and technology) which were also grouped together for comparison purposes. No other major had more than three students who indicated it as their major. Thus, the students were grouped into the category of majors other than business or math.

Results/Discussion

Research questions

RQ₁: Do MBA students have levels of CA comparable to the national average?

Yes. The overall PRCA average score was 64.93, which is nearly the national average. The MBA students, therefore, are not a unique sample. They do not have, as a group, a large number of extremely high or low scores. The scores approach a normal distribution with only three more students scoring one standard deviation below the mean than scored one standard deviation above the mean. This finding suggests that MBA students have levels of CA comparable to undergraduates (Levine & McCroskey, 1990; McCroskey & Richmond, 1979) and are not a unique population.

The finding provides an epilogue to research (Ericson & Gardner, 1992; McCroskey, Booth-Butterfield, & Payne, 1989) that indicates undergraduates with high levels of CA may have low grade point averages and drop out of college and only a few students with high CA persisted and completed degrees. This study suggests that more students with moderate or high levels of CA persist, complete degrees, and attend graduate school, however, no differences were tested.

McCroskey et al. (1989), suggest that students with CA who drop out of college return to a “safer place” (p. 101). The opposite, however, may be true. Students with CA may find ways to cope and feel “safe” in an academic environment. They persist, complete their undergraduate degrees and choose to remain in the “safe” environment of graduate school in which they can predict the communication situations encountered. Students with CA may persist and succeed more than previous research indicates—a positive finding.

RQ₂: What particular communication contexts co-occur with higher levels of CA among MBA students?

Scores on meeting and public speaking subscales of the PRCA-24 showed higher averages (17.82 for meeting, 19.39 for public speaking) than group and dyadic subscales. Additionally, 21 percent of the MBA students scored one standard deviation above the average for the meeting subscale and 20 percent scored the same for the public speaking subscale. Public speaking apprehension is not unique to MBA students as most people score high on that subscale (McCroskey, 1982). It does demonstrate, however, that they have a need to reduce apprehension in that context, and any previous experiences (courses or otherwise) did not significantly reduce the

apprehension. The MBA students also had high levels of meeting apprehension. The students might have limited or negative experiences in meetings that may induce apprehension. No data were gathered to determine the reason for meeting apprehension.

RQ₃: What independent variables significantly predicted the PRCA total scores over and above a linear combination of the variables?

Undergraduate major and culture. Multiple regression was used to determine that undergraduate major (students with a business, math, or other related major) accounted for nearly 15% of the variance (out of the 24% accounted for by all of the independent variables). Undergraduate major significantly predicted the scores on the PRCA with 24 (of 45) business majors scoring at or above the average and four (of 15) math majors and 12 (of 25) students with majors other than business or math scoring the same. Students with math related undergraduate majors accounted for 6% of the variance alone, significantly contributing over and above all other variables (see Table 1).

The findings show that students with business and other undergraduate majors had consistently higher levels of CA than students with math related majors. Nearly half the students with business and other undergraduate majors had moderate or high levels whereas only 27% of math majors had moderate or high levels of CA. Research indicates that CA influences job choice and selection (McCroskey et al., 1976; McCroskey & Richmond, 1979). By extension, CA may influence choice of undergraduate major as a precursor to job choice/selection.

Culture accounted for 6% of the variance in predicting the total scores with 18 (of 45) U.S. students and 22 (of 40) international students scoring at or above the average score. International students had higher levels of CA than U.S. students with over half having moderate to high levels of CA. English was the second language for 96% of the international students assessed. These results should be interpreted with caution as the validity of measuring CA among people from countries other than the U.S. has been questioned (Bourhis, Tkachuk, & Allen, 1993; Hackman & Barthel-

TABLE 1
SUMMARY OF REGRESSION ANALYSES USING PRCA TOTAL SCORE

Model	Variables ^a Included	Variables ^b Eliminated	R ²	Reduction ^c in R ²	df	F	p
Full	1-10	None	.2363		10, 74	2.290	.0211*
RM 1	2-10	1	.2234	.0129	1, 74	1.2580	.2657
RM 2	1, 3-10	2	.2270	.0093	1, 74	.9063	.3442
RM 3	1, 2, 4-10	3	.2157	.0206	1, 74	1.9992	.1616
RM 4	1-3, 8-10	4, 5, 6, 7	.2085	.0278	4, 74	.6738	.6123
RM 5	1-7, 10	8, 9	.0913	.1450	2, 74	7.0302	.0016*
RM 6	1-9	10	.1845	.0518	1, 74	5.0278	.0279*
RM 7	1-8, 10	9	.1819	.0544	1, 74	5.2797	.0244*

^a Variables included in regression equation: 1) work experience, 2) previous communication courses, 3) extracurricular activities, 4) marketing specialization, 5) finance specialization, 6) management specialization, 7) information systems specialization, 8) business undergraduate major, 9) math undergraduate major, 10) American students.

^b Variables eliminated from regression equation that are tested for their significance over and above variables that remain in the equation.

^c Amount of variance accounted for by variables eliminated from the equation.

*Statistically significant at $p < .05$.

Hackman, 1993; McCroskey & Richmond, 1990). At the very least, culture was a statistically significant intervening variable that influenced the overall scores and should be considered when measuring other samples of MBA students.

RQ₄: What independent variables significantly predicted the PRCA subscale scores over and above a linear combination of the variables?

Again, multiple regression determined that undergraduate major and culture variables significantly predicted the group, meeting, and dyadic subscale scores—which should be expected given the results of research question three. The scores on the group subscale, however, were also significantly influenced by membership in extracurricular organizations that accounted for 6% of the 28% total variance accounted for by all other variables (see Table 2, restricted model 3). Students who were members in more extracurricular organizations generally had lower group apprehension scores. Students who chose to be members in extracurricular organizations felt comfortable doing so and were potentially less apprehensive in that general context. Extracurricular organizations may be a context in which the MBA students can comfortably communicate and practice communication skills.

Conclusions

Persons with CA may be more successful in their chosen environment than previously indicated (Ericson & Gardner, 1992; McCroskey et al., 1989). MBA students with moderate or high CA demonstrated that they succeeded as undergraduates and chose to attend graduate school. The success of the MBA students shows that the levels of CA did not affect their academic progress or performance. Even with moderate or high levels of CA, the MBA students met the graduate admission standards of the MBA program at the large midwestern university. Communication apprehension did not stop the MBA students from pursuing their career goals which is a positive finding.

Additionally, MBA students are taking their CA into a corporate environment that may only enhance their apprehension and change the conditions by which they succeed or fail. That is, MBA students have coped well and succeeded in an academic environment but must develop new mechanisms that mitigate the negative effects of CA in a corporate environment. In essence, MBA programs do not prepare graduates to negotiate the organizational communication environment of a non-academic work setting.

Recommendations

The communication education of MBA students is significant because communication courses can assess and reduce CA and contribute to the development of

TABLE 2
SUMMARY OF REGRESSION ANALYSES USING PRCA GROUP SUBSCALE

Model	Variables Included	Variables Eliminated	R ²	Reduction in R ²	df	F	p*
Full	1-10	None	.2748		10, 74	2.804	.0053*
RM 3	1, 2, 4-10	3	.2186	.0562	1, 74	5.7336	.0192*
RM 5	1-7, 10	8, 9	.1351	.1397 ^a	2, 74	7.1269	.0015*
RM 6	1-9	10	.2341	.0407	1, 74	4.1519	.0452*

^a Business undergraduate major (8) contributed over and above math undergraduate major (9).

*Statistically significant at $p < .05$.

communication competencies (Ford & Wolvin, 1993). MBA programs are obligated to meet the needs of students, but are not doing so. Corporations have not been satisfied that MBA students possess the requisite communication skills to perform as managers and business schools have not emphasized communication education in their programs (Pincus et al., 1994). Additionally, a lack CA assessment is not surprising given the absence of communication courses offered in MBA programs (American Assembly of Collegiate Schools of Business, 1991). MBA curricula are neither preparing graduates to meet the communication demands of managers nor addressing a potentially important need of MBA students: management of communication apprehension.

National MBA curriculum standards do not require communication education (AACSB, 1991), which is further evidence of the gap between what students are taught versus what they experience in the workplace. If MBA students continue to be apprehensive as managers, then job performance (McCroskey & Richmond, 1979), supervisor/subordinate relationships (McCroskey, Richmond, & Davis, 1986) and task-oriented group performance (Hawkins & Stewart, 1991) may be affected. The MBA students have a demonstrated need that the curriculum is not fulfilling. A change in the status quo is recommended.

The scope of future studies that investigate MBA students needs to be broadened. More students need to be sampled. Programs at other universities need to be examined to discover if the findings in this study are representative of MBA students throughout the United States. Other variables need to be investigated. The independent variables in this study accounted for 24% of the variance in scores on the PRCA. Seventy-six percent still requires explanation. The significance of undergraduate major should be further explored to discover what particular majors or experiences might co-occur with apprehension. Graduate students in different programs need to be assessed to find out if MBA students are unique or representative of other graduate students.

The MBA students investigated in this study have communication apprehension comparable to the national average, particularly in meetings and giving speeches, which co-occur with their undergraduate major and culture. Communication education is not an MBA curriculum requirement. Therefore, no course or program is dedicated to assess or reduce the phenomenon let alone improve communication skills. MBA students may not be prepared for the organizational communication environment they will face as managers. Options exist that can help MBA students reduce their apprehension and become effective communicators and successful managers upon graduation. Communication education within MBA programs may help them do so.

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