

Full Length Research

A Cross-cultural Comparison of Four Sub-dimensions of Communication Apprehension between Koreans and Americans

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The purpose of this study is to research cultural differences in reported levels of communication apprehension among Koreans, one of the largest international student national groups, and Americans and to discuss the ramifications of the findings for Koreans studying in the U.S. The author administered the most recent version of the Personal Report of Communication Apprehension (PRCA) - 24, with twenty four items for four different communication situations, to Korean and U.S. mainstream students. In addition to the goal of discovering differences or similarities in cultural patterns of thought, this study will help resolve the conflicting findings of differences in reported communication apprehension level between Koreans and U.S. mainstream students. Results showed that four of the five hypotheses were supported: Koreans reported statistically significant differences in communication apprehension level from the Americans; their levels of communication apprehension were higher for overall communication apprehension and three of the four sub-dimensions of the communication apprehension scale.

Keywords: Communication apprehension, cross-cultural analysis, cultural differences

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INTRODUCTION

There is an extensive literature on communication apprehension in the field of communication following the seminal work of McCroskey in the seventies. The topic of communication apprehension is an important one for at least two reasons: the first is that among the adult population of the United States polled, the number one reported fear is speaking before a group (Bruskin & Associates, 1973). Also, McCroskey (1977), in a study of nearly 20,000 American students, found that 15 to 20% were "high communication apprehensive" to the extent that their daily encounters were impaired and academic functioning was affected.

Additionally, communication apprehension is important because intercultural interactions are increasing and differences in communication apprehension can create misunderstandings. Even though communication apprehension is viewed negatively and creates a major obstacle to daily encounters for people from the U.S., an individualist culture where communication is valued, other collectivistic cultures may be the opposite, valuing reticence over talkativeness. For members of these cultures, other additional factors such as respect for authority and seniority may direct the members of those cultures to abstain from talking. For international

students who are taught by their cultures to value silence, the problem may be more serious: After all, their academic success depends in large part on the perceptions of their peers and teachers, who are largely from the mainstream U.S. culture.

Compounding this problem for international students, is the fact that they have to express themselves in English, which may be their second, third, or fourth language. Given the large numbers of international students in the U.S., the topic of cross-cultural differences in communication apprehension is one that merits further investigation.

The specific purpose of this study is to research cultural differences in reported levels of communication apprehension among Koreans, one of the largest international student national groups, and Americans, and to discuss the ramifications of the findings for Koreans studying in the U.S. In addition to the goal of discovering differences or similarities in cultural patterns of thought, this study will help resolve the conflicting findings about differences in reported communication apprehension level between Koreans and U.S. mainstream students. In other contexts such as in organization communication, communication differences between cultures have been found in the literature. Knowledge of these differences will help promote accurate attributions in organizations as well, helping to avoid potential misunderstandings, and affecting effective leadership and organizational effectiveness as well.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Communication Apprehension as a Construct

Communication is important in many contexts, including within an organization. Bakar, Dilbek, and McCroskey (2010) studied the effect of communication on LMX (Leader-Member Exchange) and found that high quality supervisor communication engenders group commitment by subordinates, among other findings.¹ Therefore, within organizational settings, communication apprehension is an important construct that can affect leadership performance. In the academic context, communication apprehension has been found to be negatively correlated with student interaction competence, and Kangas-Dwyer (2006) found that communication apprehension can be lowered through training sessions at communication centers. Yook (2009, 2012) also found a link between communication centers and academic success in higher education, through the reduction of communication apprehension. Communication apprehension, defined as a fear or anxiety associated with real or anticipated talk with one or more persons (McCroskey & Richmond, 1990), has been studied for many years.

However, when reviewing the body of literature on

communication apprehension and related constructs there seem to be many related concepts. For example, shyness has been described as the conceptual twin or as very similar to the conceptualization of communication apprehension (McCroskey, 1984; McCroskey & Richmond, 1990). Watson, Monroe, and Atterstrom state that communication apprehension results in shyness, timidity, and reticence (1989).

In an attempt to clarify the relationships between the concepts, McCroskey & Richmond (1990) state that shyness and communication apprehension have a genus/species relationship, i.e. that communication apprehension is a species of a more comprehensive construct, shyness. Although seeing communication apprehension as a subset of shyness intuitively makes sense, it may be equally plausible to say that predisposition towards speaking when manifested as behavior, is often labeled as shyness, reticence, or communication apprehension. Culture and personality intertwine to affect the predisposition and behaviors manifested, as well as perceptions of the predisposition and behaviors.

Cultural Factors Affecting Communication and Attitudes about Speaking

Different cultures attribute different values to the communicative act of speaking. For example, the Paliyans of South India communicate very little throughout their lives and even become almost completely silent by the age forty. Verbal, communicative persons are regarded as abnormal and often offensive (Gardner, 1966). According to Storti (2001), employees in France tend to feel that they have a right to express their views to their managers, although they do respect managers' rights to have the final say by virtue of the vested authority of their positions. For Native Americans, speech constitutes an unnecessary intrusion in the learning process and the culture stresses the importance of observation and participation. African American culture also seems to make greater use of direct observation, rather than extended verbal explanations in their classrooms (Edwards, 1983). Especially in collectivistic cultures, where standing out from the crowd is devalued, cultural rules for speaking are expected to differ from those of the mainstream United States. To explain the relevance of cultural influence on our discussion of communication apprehension, a review of Hofstede's work on culture is warranted.

Hofstede (1980, 1997), found four underlying dimensions of cultural programming. In his study of 116,000 subjects, he identified these dimensions as power distance, uncertainty avoidance, masculinity/femininity, and individualism/collectivism.

Briefly stated, power distance is the extent to which

those of lesser status in a society accept that power is distributed unequally, and uncertainty avoidance is the extent to which members of a society avoid ambiguous situations. Masculinity refers to the competitiveness and rigidity of gender roles reflected in a society, while femininity refers to its nurturing characteristic and tendency to have overlapping gender roles. In contrast to individualism, collectivism refers to the extent to which needs and goals of the collectivity are more highly valued than individual needs and goals.

Asian/U.S. Communication Styles

The individualism/collectivism dimension has been linked to preferred communication styles (Kim, Sharkey & Singelis, 1994; Kim & Miyahara, 1994; Kim & Wilson, 1994; Kim, Hunter, Miyahara, Horvath, Bresnahan, & Yoon 1996). The United States has been described as a low context culture where the emphasis is on the clarity and explicitness of messages (Hall, 1983). Asian cultures such as the Korean culture have been categorized as high context cultures in which meanings are derived indirectly from the context of the communication. The tentative style of communication, in which the emphasis is on indirect and evasive messages, is preferred by collectivists (Kim & Miyahara, 1994). For collectivistic cultures, relationally sensitive behavior styles are preferred (Kim et al., 1994; Kim et al., 1996). Preserving in-group harmony and relationships is an important goal of communication in collectivistic cultures: Neither a teacher nor a student should ever be made to lose face; students will only speak up in class when called upon by the teacher (Hofstede, 1986).

Cross-cultural Research in Communication Apprehension

In a previous cross-cultural study, a comparison among Chinese and U.S. mainstream students was conducted. Zhang, Butler and Pryor (1996) found that, as expected, Chinese students reported a significantly higher mean of communication apprehension when compared to U.S. students. The recent findings of Zhang et al. (1996) contradict earlier findings by Klopf (1984) which found the opposite: the earlier study had found that Chinese students' reported levels of communication apprehension were *lower* than those of U.S. mainstream students. The earlier finding counters our expectations of reported levels of communication apprehension, based on cultural differences: The expectation would be that the Chinese students' communication apprehension level would be higher than those of U.S. mainstream students, because of China ranks higher on the collectivism scale (Hofstede, 1986). The contrast in the findings may be explained in

part by the fact that in the earlier study, the scale used to measure communication apprehension had not been translated, where Zhang et al. (1996) translated their instrument.

In addition, in earlier study by Klopf and Cambra (1979) attempted to compare the communication apprehension of college students in four different cultures: Japan, Korea, Australia, and the U.S. The study, counter to expectations based on the literature on the characteristics of these cultures, showed that Americans had a lower level of communication apprehension than the Japanese, but a higher level of apprehension than the Australians and Koreans.

This result is surprising when considering the literature about cultural dimensions cited widely among scholars of intercultural communication. Korea, as an East Asian culture would be expected to be higher on the communication apprehension scale, because of its orientation toward collectivism and high power distance (Hofstede, 1980, 1997), or acceptance of status differences as a social given. Yook and Albert (1998) undertook a study in which they determined that Korean students had in fact very different views toward speaking to their instructors in various situations. The Korean students found it significantly less appropriate to negotiate in almost all of the situations tested through the individual items. The surprising and counter-intuitive findings of Klopf and Cambra (1979) may be explained in part by the fact that the scale administered to Korean students was in their non-native language, English, rather than in their native language, Korean. Although the study indicated that the Korean students were trained in English, it is not possible to assess whether the students were proficient enough in English to catch the intricacies of each item. Therefore, given the cultural differences among collectivistic cultures and individualistic cultures towards the act of speaking, and given that the scale is translated,

- H1: Korean students will report higher levels of overall communication apprehension than mainstream U.S. students.
- H2: Korean students will report higher levels of group communication apprehension than mainstream U.S. students.
- H3: Korean students will report higher levels of meeting communication apprehension than mainstream U.S. students.
- H4: Korean students will report higher levels of interpersonal conversation communication apprehension than mainstream U.S. students.
- H5: Korean students will report higher levels of public speaking communication apprehension than mainstream U.S. students.

METHOD

Participants

Two student groups ($N = 1048$) participated in this study: mainstream American college students ($n = 513$) and Korean students in Korea ($n = 535$). All participants were undergraduate students, recruited through their instructors with the students' voluntary consent.

U.S. students were recruited from two mid-western universities. There was an equal mix of males and females and students ranged in age from 18 years to 24 years ($M = 21$ years). Korean students in Korea were recruited from three universities in three major cities in Korea. Students from Catholic University in Seoul, Han Nam University in Taegu, and Jonju University in Jonju participated in this study. There was an equal mix of males and females and the ages ranged from 18 to 23 ($M = 20$ years).

Materials

In this study, the author administered the most recent version of the Personal Report of Communication Apprehension (PRCA) - 24, with twenty four items applicable to four different communication situations, to Korean and U.S. mainstream students. The reliability and validity of the PRCA scales have been well-established by previous research that tested translated versions of the instrument in China, Sweden, Micronesia, Puerto Rico, and Australia, among others (Klopf, 1984; McCroskey, 1977; McCroskey & Richmond, 1990; Zhang et al., 1996).

The survey instrument was translated into Korean for the Korean sample. First, the survey was "decentered" in preparation for translation by a professional translator bilingual in English and Korean, then a back translation was carried out with two bilinguals (Brislin, 1980). Decentering, or removing any culture-specific language that is only valid in one of the cultures, is especially important for this study, as cultural concepts and expressions are at times markedly different among Eastern and Western cultures. For example, four of the items taps apprehension about speaking in the context of a "meeting". While the term exists and is understood by Koreans in its English form, its meaning is radically different from its English version. "Meeting" in Korean means a group blind date, where a group of students from one university will meet a group of students of the opposite sex, often from a different university. This term was substituted by the more generic term for meeting in Korean, or "mo-im" to render the translation more similar in meaning to the original items.

After decentering and initial translation, the scale was back-translated by a different bilingual. Any differences

between the two versions was discussed and resolved together, as the recommended back translation process suggests (Brislin, 1980).

RESULTS

To test the first hypothesis, a t-test was conducted to compare the overall communication apprehension scores of the Korean students ($M=70.8$, $SD=11.9$) with those of the American students ($M=63.1$, $SD=14.2$). Results show that there was a large significant difference between the means of Korean students and American students ($t(1048) = -9.5$, $p < .0001$).

To test the second hypothesis a t-test of differences in-group communication apprehension scores were compared across cultures. Results show that the difference between cultures was significant ($t(1048) = -14.3$, $p < .0001$) with Koreans ($M=18.1$, $SD=4.0$) reporting a higher group communication apprehension level than Americans ($M=14.4$, $SD=4.5$).

To answer the third hypothesis, a t-test of differences in responses to items tapping communication apprehension in meetings was conducted. Results show that the Koreans' ($M=17.3$, $SD=2.9$) level of communication apprehension in meetings was significantly higher ($t(1048) = -4.0$, $p < .0001$) than Americans' level ($M=16.5$, $SD=3.4$). 0001).

To test the fourth hypothesis a t-test of differences in interpersonal communication apprehension scores were compared across cultures. Results show that the difference between cultures was significant ($t(1048) = -13.7$, $p < .0001$) with Koreans ($M=16.8$, $SD=3.5$) reporting a higher group communication apprehension level than Americans ($M=13.5$, $SD=4.1$) in the interpersonal conversation sub-dimension of the scale.

To answer the fifth hypothesis, a t-test of differences in responses to items tapping communication apprehension in public speaking was conducted. Results show that the Koreans' ($M=18.6$, $SD=4.1$) level of communication apprehension in public speaking was not significantly different ($t(1048) = 0.0$, $p < n.s.$) than Americans' level ($M=18.6$, $SD=5.3$).

DISCUSSION

In this study, the authors administered the most recent version of the Personal Report of Communication Apprehension (PRCA) - 24, with twenty four items for four different communication situations, to Korean and U.S. mainstream students. It was expected that there would be significant differences between Koreans and Americans in overall levels of communication apprehension as well as all four sub-dimensions of the communication apprehension scale.

Four of the five hypotheses were supported. Koreans reported statistically significant differences in communication apprehension level from the Americans; their levels of communication apprehension were higher for overall communication apprehension and three of the four sub-dimensions of the communication apprehension scale. For the sub-dimensions of communication apprehension in public speaking situations, however, the differences between the cultures were negligible. In previous studies, the communication apprehension level for public speaking among Americans was relatively high at 19.9 (McCroskey & Richmond, 1990), but it was expected that given the differences in cultural attitudes towards speaking, Koreans would report even higher communication apprehension than Americans. This expectation was not confirmed in the present study.

This study indicates that while overall level of communication apprehension is high for the Koreans, in terms of public speaking, there is no difference between Koreans and Americans. We may conclude, then, that public speaking is an apprehension-provoking activity, regardless of cultural background. Based on the findings of this study, we can conclude that for the other three dimensions (group communication, communication in meetings, and interpersonal conversations) the level of communication apprehension is higher for Koreans than Americans. Furthermore, the overall level of communication apprehension is higher for Koreans than for Americans. This result is directly opposite to the finding by Klopff and Cambra (1979), who found that Korean students showed less communication apprehension than American students. There was a difference in method between the present study and Klopff and Cambra's (1979) study that may help explain the contradictory findings. In Klopff and Cambra's study, the instrument was administered in English, whereas in the present study, the instrument was translated. A process of decentering and back translation, suggested by Brislin (1980) was followed in the present study. These results indicate that careful translation of an instrument is a vital step in administering them to different language communities.

Additionally, the significant difference found in the present study between Korean and American levels of communication apprehension have another important implication: It is widely accepted that a high level of communication apprehension is negatively viewed in the American culture. Communication apprehension is associated with low self-esteem, low academic performance, as well as low job performance, as measured by both self-reports and also by others' reported perceptions of subjects (Pitt & Ramaseshan, 1990). However, in other cultures, reticence and silence is valued more highly than extroversion and verbosity. Thus the concept of communication apprehension is culture-bound and may not carry the same implication in

Korean and American cultures. Given the culture-bound nature of communication apprehension, the findings of the present study are important for various contexts of Korean American cultural contact. For example supervisors and subordinates, and teachers and students from these cultural backgrounds, will find it useful to know the reported differences in communication apprehension as well as the differences in cultural associations between communication apprehension and such constructs as self esteem and academic performance when communicating to avoid erroneous attributions and perceptions.

Footnotes

- ¹ LMX stands for Leader-Member Exchange. Bakar, Dilbek, and McCroskey (2010) studied the effect of communication on LMX in the context of superior-subordinate relationships within organizations.

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