

## Exploring Foreign Language Communication Apprehension among the English Language University Students in the English Language Classroom Setting

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### Abstract

Over the past few decades the interest in communication apprehension has increased among researchers and teachers in the field of second/foreign language acquisition (SLA/FLA). The present paper is set between the macro perspective of the social-psychological period – by giving a general view of communication apprehension (CA) – and the situation-specific period – by taking into consideration the immediate educational context. The paper focuses on the phenomenon of communication apprehension among the Croatian university level students in a foreign language classroom setting. In particular, it investigates if there is a difference in the total level of communication apprehension between undergraduate and graduate students of English Language and Literature. Furthermore, it explores whether there is a relationship between different aspects of communication apprehension and the total level of communication apprehension and which background factor is the best predictor of communication apprehension among the students. The first part of the paper brings a theoretical background of the main concepts in this research, whereas the second part of the paper reports on the research itself. Two sets of instruments, questionnaires completed by the students and in-depth interviews conducted among the teachers, were used for the purpose of this study. The results show that the year of study is not a significant predictor of the communication apprehension level which students experience. Among all variables included in the analysis, the only significant predictors of communication apprehension are *evaluations*.

**Keywords:** in-class communication apprehension; English as a foreign language; university level; evaluations

### Introduction

Communication apprehension (CA) has often been perceived as one of the most important psychological factors that enters versatile interactions with other affective, cognitive and contextual factors in the process of second/foreign language acquisition (SLA/FLA). As such, it has been an attractive research topic for a number of decades but has lately gained wider attention among researchers due to its impact on foreign language learning (FLL).

The world of global English we live in has affected people from all walks of life, from teaching, business and health professionals, to those who simply want to improve their listening and communication skills. As a consequence, learning English as a foreign language (EFL) has become an inevitable part of education. The question how global trends affect EFL learners' (un)willingness to speak in the EFL classroom is at the centre of the present study<sup>1</sup>. In particular, we take a situative perspective by exploring the difference between the potential aspects of communication apprehension and its manifestations among the two generations of university students: undergraduates and graduates in the Croatian socio-educational context.

After a brief review of the CA terminology, selected related issues and relevant research findings, we report on the study carried out with the aim to better understand aspects and effects of communication apprehension on university level EFL

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Crnjak (2017) – the present paper is part of the second author's unpublished Master's Thesis

students. In the final part of the paper the most important conclusions of this study are drawn, and implications and recommendations for future research are offered.

### Apprehension vs. anxiety - Defining the terms

When looking into the terminology, it can be noticed that there is no clear distinction between the term *communication apprehension* the term *speaking anxiety*. In the existing literature the two terms appear in the same contexts, frequently denoting the same phenomenon. At the very beginning of this study the aforementioned terms were looked up in five prominent English online dictionaries and their definitions are presented in Table 1 and 2 respectively.

Table 1. Dictionary definitions of the term "apprehension"

Macmillan Dictionary	<i>a feeling of worry or fear that something bad might happen</i>
Oxford Dictionary	<i>anxiety or fear that something bad or unpleasant will happen</i>
Cambridge Dictionary	<i>worry about the future, or a fear that something unpleasant is going to happen</i>
Merriam-Webster Dictionary	<i>suspicion or fear especially of future evil</i>
The Free Dictionary	<i>fearful or uneasy anticipation of the future</i>

Table 2. Dictionary definitions of the term "anxiety"

Macmillan Dictionary	<i>a worried feeling you have because you think something bad might happen</i>
Oxford Dictionary	<i>a feeling of worry, nervousness, or unease about something with an uncertain outcome</i>
Cambridge Dictionary	<i>an uncomfortable feeling of nervousness or worry about something that is happening or might happen in the future</i>
Merriam-Webster Dictionary	<i>apprehensive uneasiness or nervousness usually over an impending or anticipated ill</i>
The Free Dictionary	<i>a state of uneasiness and apprehension, as about future uncertainties</i>

Although dictionary definitions (see Table 1 and 2) rarely use the terms *apprehension* and *anxiety* interchangeably, relevant research findings point to an occasional overlap of the two terms.

The concept of *communication apprehension* appeared in the United States where it was introduced by J. C. McCroskey in 1970. Early research related to the fear in a second, or a foreign language was conducted under the label of *foreign language anxiety*. Therefore, there are cases in which both terms denote the same phenomenon and are used interchangeably. In his later research findings on communication apprehension, McCroskey (1977) gave a brief overview of the previous studies on the topic offering a variety of terms different researchers would use to cover the notion of fear and anxiety in oral communication. Some of these terms are *stage fright*, *reticence*, *shyness*, *audience sensitivity*, and *communication apprehension*. Both McCroskey (1976) and Spielberger (1983, as cited in Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope, 1986) could not avoid the term *anxiety* when defining *communication apprehension*. In his 1977 study, McCroskey uses the terms *speech communication anxiety* and *communication apprehension* interchangeably. According to his definition, *speech communication anxiety* or *communication apprehension* is an individual's ability to communicate with others. As an important variable, it has received considerable attention in communication, education and psychology. McCroskey defines *speech communication anxiety* as an individual's level of fear or anxiety associated with another person or persons. It could be concluded that the two terms partially overlap, which could consequently lead to the misconception that they are synonymous.

According to Allen and Bourhis (1995), communication apprehension refers to a family of related terms including: (a) *reticence*, (b) *shyness*, (c) *unwillingness to communicate*, and (d) *stage fright*. They claim that there are arguments for and against the appropriateness and applicability of various terms, although the terms have many elements in common.

However, McCroskey (1976) finds it extremely important to differentiate between the terms *communication apprehension* and *stage fright*. He identifies *communication apprehension* as a much broader term and a much more severe problem that was faced by a smaller percentage of the population and overlooked because its manifestations were seldom observed except in public speaking settings. Research shows that although *communication apprehension* is often experienced both in public and private settings, it does not prove to be a widespread phenomenon. On the contrary, *stage fright* is claimed to be a rather common phenomenon experienced to some degree by almost everyone who engages in some kind of public activity, i.e. performance in front of an audience, such as singing, dancing, public speaking, and even oral reading. McCroskey (1977) also provides a reason for using the term *communication apprehension* for the purpose of his studies. He states that *communication apprehension* as a term more broadly represents the total of the fears and anxieties studied previously.

The value of McCroskey's (1976) work lies in its capacity to offer a clearer distinction between the terms related to the concept of communication apprehension and therefore serves as the starting point for our theoretical review.

### **Related Research**

Impelled by the observation that communication apprehension might be one of the most important factors influencing foreign language learning (FLL), over the past few decades the interest in empirical research in CA and the related concepts has increased worldwide. The studies have been rooted in different theories and methodologies, (most notably those advanced by McCroskey and Horowitz and their respective associates) that have given precedence to a number of variables assumed to play an important role in understanding the phenomenon of FLL communication apprehension.

The bulk of early research (Scovel, 1978; Horwitz and Cope, 1986; Krashen, 1987; MacIntyre and Gardner, 1989) suggested that the relation of anxiety to second/foreign language achievement was ambivalent and specific to language learning context, providing thereby evidence in favour of either negative, positive or no relationships.

McCroskey was the first to offer a clearer terminological distinction. In his research paper, McCroskey (1976) employed the correlation analysis in order to determine the relationship between CA and personality traits and intelligence. Furthermore, McCroskey examined some of the possible causes of CA such as intelligence, teacher expectations and students' attitudes. The findings showed that there is a relationship between students' attitudes and CA, which will be additionally confirmed by the present study.

The above mentioned research studies may have more or less unconsciously inspired most researchers to address the problem of CA with reference to EFL learners at the elementary level. However, the problem of CA equally affects more proficient language learners, in particular EFL learners at the university level. Frequently mentioned CA inducing factors at the tertiary level are as follows: language classroom requirements (integrative nature of the classroom and learner's need to communicate), high academic goals, learner's self-consciousness (associated with the image of learner's self).

The observation that the existing theories failed to incorporate all the variables of the communicative process inspired researchers worldwide to further explore and reconceptualise the construct of CA.

Thus, Mihaljević Djigunović's (2004) research was conducted in order to investigate if there is a relationship between language anxiety and a number of individual differences among Croatian students. Her study reveals that there is a correlation between language use anxiety and CA. In other words, individuals with high language use anxiety will also have high CA. In her 2006 study, Mihaljević Djigunović examined the role of affective factors in the development of productive skills. The results of the study point to language anxiety as one of the affective factors and suggest that language anxiety contributes to poor foreign language performance.

Kostić-Bobanović (2007) investigated intercultural CA among freshmen students at the Department of Economics and Tourism at the University of Juraj Dobrića in Pula, Croatia. Her longitudinal study supports the notion that a high level of CA negatively affects both the academic and the social success of an individual.

Toth (2006) explored the role of foreign language anxiety experienced during oral production of English in a qualitative study carried out among Hungarian advanced-level learners. The study shows how anxiety affects Hungarian first year English majors' speech production and performance in a conversation with a native speaker of English.

Lahtinen (2013) carried out a research among the Finnish-Swedish population in Finland and measured the levels of CA of two groups of Finnish upper secondary school students in order to find out if there is a difference in the levels of CA between them. The results showed that the Finnish-Swedes suffered less from CA than the Finns.

This section offered a brief overview of the previous studies conducted in Croatia and worldwide. Their findings contributed greatly to the investigation of CA, its relationship with individual differences, development of productive skills, as well as academic achievement and success. The theoretical part of the present study rests heavily on McCroskey's work, whereas the study steps into the footprints of the aforementioned research conducted in Finland (Lahtinen, 2013). As the following sections will show, regardless of similarities in research methodology, the results would differ.

### **Types of Communication Apprehension**

Within the phenomenon of communication apprehension, two types of communication apprehension can be distinguished. The first type is usually referred to as 'trait' apprehension, and the second type as 'state' apprehension. This distinction was offered by McCroskey (1977), who based it on the previous work of Spielberger (1966) and Lamb (1973).

According to McCroskey (1977), *trait apprehension* is characterized by fear or anxiety regardless of the type of oral communication situation a person engages in, from talking to a single person or within a group of people to giving a public speech. He points out that it is not a characteristic of normal or well-adjusted individuals since people with high levels of trait communication apprehension experience very high levels of fear when engaging in any oral communication situation, both those which could be considered threatening and those which rationally could not. McCroskey (1977) reports on previous studies conducted among a college student population which suggest that about twenty percent of the students experience a high trait communication apprehension.

As opposed to trait apprehension, *state apprehension* is specific to an oral communication situation (McCroskey, 1977). The situation may vary from giving a public speech to being interviewed for a new job. A well-known manifestation of state apprehension is the so called "stage fright", the fear or anxiety a person experiences when communicating orally in situations where others are in a position to observe and evaluate their communication attempt. In situations such as acting or singing before an audience and giving a public speech many people experience stage fright, which is considered to be a normal response of people in a public setting. McCroskey (1977) even goes further and argues that it would not be completely unreasonable to suspect the emotional stability of an individual who never experiences state communication apprehension in a threatening oral communication situation.

### **Causes of Communication Apprehension**

McCroskey (1977) states that the causes of communication apprehension are not and may never be fully known. Some studies (Phillips and Butt, 1966, as cited in McCroskey, 1977) and surveys (Wheless, 1971, as cited in McCroskey, 1977) suggest that CA develops in early childhood. In line with the aforementioned findings, McCroskey and Richmond (1982) recognize heredity and environment as the primary causes of not only personality development, but also CA.

Based on previous research, Prusank (1987) proposes four approaches, i.e. four plausible explanations for the development of CA. Those are genetic predispositions, reinforcement, modelling, and learned helplessness. The genetic predisposition approach suggests that children are born with a predisposition to develop CA. McCroskey and Richmond (1982, as cited in Prusank, 1987) reviewed social biological research carried out with identical and fraternal twins and thus provided results in support of the genetic predisposition approach. While the genetic predisposition approach speaks in favour of inherited characteristics, other approaches (reinforcement, modelling, and learned helplessness) focus on the environmental aspects to which an individual is exposed.

All of the previous studies explored the possible causes of CA with children born and raised in different families. However, there are cases where children are born and raised in the same family, but only one of them develops CA. According to McCroskey (1977), some research findings did not succeed in providing an empirically supported theoretical explanation of why some children have higher/lower levels of communication apprehension than the other children in the same family, which leads to an assumption that the causes of CA are not completely known.

## **Effects of Communication Apprehension in the Classroom**

Although there are many different fields in which it appears, language classes are considered to be most affected by the phenomenon called language anxiety. As Horwitz (2004) points out, probably no other field of study implicates self-concept and self-expression to the degree that language study does. Besides, communication apprehension encompasses all aspects of communicating, that is, all language skills used in a language class.

When it comes to the classroom environment and the effects of communication apprehension on such an environment, McCroskey and Andersen (1976, as cited in Boohar and Seiler, 1982) have found that students with a high CA level prefer mass lecture classes to small classes, in order to avoid communication. Later research (McCroskey and Sheahan, 1977, as cited in Boohar and Seiler, 1982) has shown that those students interact less with peers they are not close to and are more often dissatisfied with the college environment.

McCroskey (1976) claims that highly apprehensive students avoid taking speech courses and public speaking courses. When they enrol in such courses after all, they are very likely to drop them before the first performance, regardless of whether the course is required or not. In cases in which they do not drop the course, students experience very severe problems ranging from being absent on the day of an assigned speech, refusing to speak due to not being ready, fainting and escaping from the classroom (McCroskey, 1978).

Some studies (Young, 1986, Scott, 1986, Phillips 1992, as cited in Toth, 2006) have additionally confirmed the previous research findings (Scott and Wheeless, 1976; McCroskey and Daly, 1976, as cited in Miller and Edmunds, 1992) suggesting that there is a negative relationship between the anxiety level and academic achievement. The results indicate that students with a high anxiety level do not perform on tests as well as their peers with a low anxiety level. Consequently, because of the teachers' low expectations of high communication apprehensive students, those students were less likely to succeed in a formal education setting.

### **Communication Apprehension in the English Language Classroom Setting**

Despite a small number of previous studies identifying the need for more research on communication apprehension at the university level (Mihaljević Djigunović 2004, 2006; Kostić-Bobanović, 2007), this field still requires greater research impetus in the Croatian social-educational context. The present study sets out to fill that void. Moreover, it has been suggested that CA may become a serious problem for pre-service foreign language teachers in their attempt to incorporate as much communicative competence as they can into foreign language teaching at all levels.

### **Methodology**

The aim of the quantitative part of this study is to determine and compare communication apprehension among the undergraduate and graduate university level students of English Language and Literature at the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, J. J. Strossmayer University of Osijek, Croatia.

The aim of the qualitative part of the study was to explore the concept of CA from the teachers' point of view. The interview conducted among the university teachers provides some insights on how teachers perceive communication apprehension in the foreign language classroom setting and how they successfully overcome potential classroom management difficulties in practice.

The present study seeks to answer the following questions:

RQ<sub>1</sub> Is there a difference in the level of CA between undergraduate and graduate students of English language?

RQ<sub>2</sub> Which background factor is the best predictor of CA among the students?

RQ<sub>3</sub> Is there a relationship between different aspects of CA and the total level of CA?

RQ<sub>4</sub> Is there a relationship between the level of CA and students' behaviour in a foreign language classroom setting?

RQ<sub>5</sub> How do university foreign language teachers perceive CA and how do they cope with it in their classes?

## Sample

A total of 97 subjects participated in the quantitative part of the research. All of the subjects were students of English Language and Literature at the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, J. J. Strossmayer University of Osijek, Croatia. The research was conducted among four groups of students - first and second year undergraduate students and first and second year graduate students. The number of undergraduate and graduate students was unequal. There was a total number of 54 undergraduate and 43 graduate students.

As far as the qualitative part of the research is concerned, it included five participants, all of whom were teachers at the Department of English Language and Literature at the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, J.J. Strossmayer University of Osijek, Croatia. The teachers were chosen carefully with regard to courses they teach (one teaching linguistics courses, two teaching literature and applied linguistics courses).

Because the participants were solely from Osijek, Croatia, this cannot be considered a representative sample of Croatian teachers and students.

## Instruments and Procedure

### Questionnaire

The first instrument used for the purpose of the present study was *A questionnaire on foreign language communication apprehension*. The first part of the questionnaire consisted of basic background questions (gender, age, year of learning English, year of studying English and grade in English after finishing high school).

The second part was the latest version of *the Personal Report of Communication Apprehension (PRCA-24)*, which consists of twenty-four statements. The instrument was designed by James C. McCroskey, according to whom 'it is highly reliable (alpha regularly >.90)'. Rubin et al. (1994) agreed that the questionnaire is one of the most frequently used and the most valid self-report measure for trait-like communication apprehension. Each of the contexts is represented by six items. The changes were made with regard to participants' age and English language proficiency. Considering the adaptations which were made, internal consistency was measured. Cronbach's alpha for internal reliability of the questionnaire in this study was .954, which indicates highly focused scales and homogeneity.

The third part of the questionnaire was adopted from a study on communication apprehension *Communication Apprehension in the EFL Classroom: a study of Finnish and Finnish-Swedish upper secondary school students and teachers* conducted in Finland (2013). The original questionnaire had two versions, one of which was in Finnish and the other one in Swedish, thus it was translated in English for the purposes of this study. According to Lahtinen (2013), the purpose of this part of the questionnaire was to map out the intensity of different aspects in the EFL classroom environment that can contribute to the emergence of CA. It consisted of 31 statements. Apart from Principal component analysis extraction method, Oblimin rotation with Kaiser normalization was used and provided the best-defined factor structure. All items in this factor analysis had primary loadings over .4.

After conducting factor analysis, which crystalized three relevant factors and therefore defined three subscales within the scale, internal consistency of the three subscales was measured. Two subscales showed high internal consistency, and one subscale showed slightly lower internal consistency (see Table 3). The first aspect of communication apprehension is labelled *evaluations* because the belonging questionnaire items described situations where self-evaluations and peer evaluations were present. The second aspect is labelled *teacher* due to its strong direct or indirect connection with the teacher, his or her characteristics or class management. Finally, the third aspect is named *atmosphere*. It is considered to be an umbrella term for questionnaire items covering different foreign language classroom situations which contribute to the atmosphere created in the foreign language classroom environment.

Lower reliability coefficient was interpreted as a result of fewer items in the category, as well as a result of a broader area which is covered by the statements. The third theme area was retained but the results gathered shall be interpreted as not completely reliable.

The five-point Likert scale was used for both the second and the third part of the questionnaire. The participants were asked to indicate the degree to which a statement applied to them using (1) = completely disagree, (2) = disagree, (3) = neither

agree nor disagree, (4) = agree, and (5) = completely agree. In the first part of the questionnaire 12 items had to be reversed prior to statistical analysis.

Table 3. *Aspects of communication apprehension (subscales, questionnaire items, and internal consistency coefficients)*

Aspect of communication apprehension	Questionnaire items	Cronbach's alpha
Evaluations	Q26, Q31, Q32, Q33, Q38, Q41, Q42, Q45, Q47, Q49, Q50, Q52	.93
Teacher	Q27, Q29, Q30, Q34, Q36, Q39, Q43, Q44, Q51, Q55	.82
Atmosphere	Q25, Q28, Q37, Q40, Q48, Q54	.57

The fourth and the last part of the questionnaire, adopted from the above mentioned Finnish study, reports on participants' feelings about communication in English in the English language classroom setting. Two open-ended questions from the original questionnaire were omitted as redundant as they had been previously covered in the quantitative part of the research. It consisted of two yes or no questions, a scale ranging from 4 to 10 where participants were asked to assess their English language skills, two questions about attitudes towards school and English language with a five-point Likert scale (1 = very negative and 5 = very positive), one question about the strength of participants' feeling of excitement or shyness in English classes as well with a five-point Likert scale (1 = very strong and 5 = very weak), and the last four open-ended questions.

### Interview

The second instrument was an interview which was designed for the purpose of the present study. The interview consisted of 24 questions. Each question was followed by one or more sub-questions. Questions were divided into three categories. The first category was related to the phenomenon of CA, the second category examined errors and error correction, and the third category dealt with interviewees' own experiences with CA.

Both questionnaires and interviews took place at the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, J. J. Strossmayer University of Osijek. All the participants were familiarized with the aim of the research. The data collected in the form of questionnaires were analysed in IBM SPSS Software Version 23. The interviews conducted with the teachers themselves were recorded and transcribed afterwards.

## Results and Discussion

### Quantitative results – questionnaire

As previously stated, the collected data were analysed in SPSS. First of all, basic descriptive analysis of the items connected to the participants' feelings about communicating in English language in the English language classroom setting in different situations (questionnaire items 1 – 24) showed that mean values do not vary a lot. They are slightly lower for questionnaire items which express CA and slightly higher for the ones expressing lack of CA. Descriptive analysis of questionnaire items connected to the reasons why participants feel nervous and timid to speak English during English classes (questionnaire items 25 – 55) showed that the highest mean values concern *evaluations*, *teacher*, and *expectations*.

To answer the first research question and to test the hypothesis stating that there is a significant difference in the total level of CA between undergraduate and graduate students of English language, a one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was conducted. Significance level was set at  $p < 0.05$ . The statistical analysis was performed using SPSS (Version 23). The students were divided in four groups with regard to their year of study: 1<sup>st</sup> year undergraduates, 2<sup>nd</sup> year undergraduates, 1<sup>st</sup> year graduates, 2<sup>nd</sup> year graduates. The results in Table 4a have shown that there is a statistically significant difference at the  $p < 0.05$  between groups [ $F = 2.933$ ;  $df = 3/85$ ;  $p = 0.038$ ].

Table 4a. *Difference in the total level of communication apprehension between undergraduate and graduate students (ANOVA)*

	Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	4.911	3	1.637	2.933	.038
Within Groups	45.767	82	.558		
Total	50.678	85			

After establishing a statistically significant difference in the total level of CA between groups, Scheffe's post hoc test was conducted to verify where exactly this difference lies. However, the results of the post hoc test presented in Table 4b do not show where the difference between the groups is.

Table 4b. *Scheffe's post hoc test results*

(I) Year of Studying	(J) Year of studying	Mean Difference (I-J)	Std. Error	Sig.	95% Confidence Interval	
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound
1st year undergraduate	2nd year undergraduate	-.12103	.54070	.997	-1.6644	1.4224
	1st year graduate	-.04117	.19117	.997	-.5868	.5045
	2nd year graduate	.56647	.21047	.072	-.0343	1.1672
2nd year undergraduate	1st year undergraduate	.12103	.54070	.997	-1.4224	1.6644
	1st year graduate	.07986	.54984	.999	-1.4896	1.6493
	2nd year graduate	.68750	.55685	.678	-.9020	2.2770
1st year graduate	1st year undergraduate	.04117	.19117	.997	-.5045	.5868
	2nd year undergraduate	-.07986	.54984	.999	-1.6493	1.4896
	2nd year graduate	.60764	.23294	.087	-.0573	1.2726
2nd year graduate	1st year undergraduate	-.56647	.21047	.072	-1.1672	.0343
	2nd year undergraduate	-.68750	.55685	.678	-2.2770	.9020
	1st year graduate	-.60764	.23294	.087	-1.2726	.0573

As for the third research question, a Pearson-product-moment correlation was used to explore if there is a relationship between the total level of CA and different aspects of CA (*evaluations*, *teacher*, and *atmosphere*). The test shows that the total level of CA is positively correlated with two aspects of CA (*evaluations* and *teacher*), both at the 0.01 level.

The correlation analysis in Table 5 reveals that the total level of CA exhibits a weak but statistically significant positive correlation ( $r=.325$ ,  $p<.001$ ) with regards to students' perceptions of their *teachers*. This indicates that the more negative the attitude the students will have towards their EFL teachers, the higher the total level of communication apprehension in class.

There was also a strong significant positive correlation ( $r=.779$ ,  $p<.001$ ) between the total level of CA and students' *evaluations*. This correlation indicates that the students who experience higher levels of CA fear being less competent than their peers and tend to evaluate themselves negatively.

*The atmosphere* in class exhibits no statistically significant correlation with the total level of CA. Evidently, the participants' perception of the in-class atmosphere (number of students, ability to speak) does not impact their total level of CA.

Table 5. *Pearson Correlation between the total level of communication apprehension and different aspects of communication apprehension*

	Evaluations	Teacher	Atmosphere
PRCA-24	.779**	.325**	.079

\*\* . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

In order to find out which background factors predict the total level of CA, regression analysis was conducted. The total level of communication apprehension measured by PRCA-24 was the dependent variable and various background factors such as *gender, age, year of study, and grade in English after finishing high school* were independent variables in the analysis. The results show that there is a weak significant negative correlation between *grades in English after finishing high school* and the total level of CA (see Table 6a). This indicates that students with higher grade in English after finishing high school exhibit lower total level of CA in class.

Table 6a. *Results of regression analysis (dependent variable: PRCA-24) with background factors as predictors of total level of communication apprehension*

Dependent variable	Independent variable	B	$\beta$	t
PRCA-24	Gender	.104	.064	.606
	Age	-.043	-.114	-.654
	Year of study	-.068	-.110	-.633
	Grade in English	-.463	-.319	-3.006**

\*\* $p < .01$ ;  $R = .403$ ;  $R^2 = .162$

However, after including other aspects of CA as independent variables (evaluations, teacher and atmosphere), the results showed that there is only a strong significant positive correlation between *evaluations* and the total level of CA. The results can be seen in Table 6b.

Table 6b. *Results of regression analysis (dependent variable: PRCA-24) with background factors and aspects of communication apprehension as predictors of total level of communication apprehension*

Dependent variable	Independent variable	B	$\beta$	t
PRCA-24	Gender	-.042	-.026	-.372
	Age	-0.19	-.050	-4.39
	Year of study	-.129	-.208	-1.831
	Grade in English	-.011	-.008	-.101
	Evaluations	.605	.780	10.200**
	Teacher	.028	.023	.296
	Atmosphere	.023	.020	.282

\*\* $p < .01$ ;  $R = .816$ ;  $R^2 = .666$

In the first step, the results of regression analysis ( $R=.403$ ;  $R^2=.162$ ;  $F=3.726$ ;  $p<.01$ ) show that background factors explain only about 16% of the total level of CA measured by PRCA-24. Only *grade in English after finishing high school* proved to be a significant predictor of CA ( $\beta= -.319$ ;  $p<.01$ ).

On the other hand, when three different aspects of CA were included in the second step of the regression analysis, the results ( $R=.816$ ;  $R^2=.666$ ;  $F=37.245$ ;  $p<.01$ ) show that all factors together explain about 67% of the total level of CA measured by PRCA-24. With both background factors and aspects of communication apprehension included in the analysis, only *evaluations* ( $\beta= .78$ ;  $p<.01$ ) proved to be a significant predictor of the total level of CA.

Additional Pearson Correlation test (see Table 7) was conducted to investigate if there is a relationship between the total level of CA and students' choice of seat in the classroom. The test results show a positive correlation at the 0.01 level. It indicates that the students who have a high level of CA choose a remote seat in a foreign language classroom in order to avoid oral communication in class.

Table 7. Pearson Correlation between the total level of communication apprehension and students' choice of seat

	Students' choice of seat
PRCA-24	.398**

\*\* . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

Finally, when students were asked about the causes of the excitement and shyness in English classes, the majority of them (forty-one of ninety-eight students, i.e. 42%) wrote that the main cause for this is the fear of being evaluated by their teacher, as well as being evaluated or even laughed at by their peers. They stated that they are mostly afraid of being negatively evaluated or being embarrassed in cases of making a mistake. That confirms the results emerged from the third part of the questionnaire. Apart from the aforementioned, students also listed some other causes such as teacher and class atmosphere, lack of knowledge or low language skills, lack of preparation and student's personality.

When it comes to students' suggestions, students (forty out of ninety-eight, i.e. 41%) consider good preparation to be the key for alleviating communication apprehension in classes. Minority thinks that communication apprehension can be alleviated by positive encouragement by the teacher, smaller, less formal, and more relaxed classes.

### Qualitative results – interview

This section focuses on the findings emerged from the interviews conducted with five teachers from the Department of English Language and Literature at the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, J.J. Strossmayer University of Osijek, Croatia. They set out to examine how English teachers perceive communication apprehension in the foreign language setting and to investigate how they cope with it.

The interview results show that the interviewees are not quite familiar with the term communication apprehension. The responses range from the misuse of the term to the complete lack of awareness of its actual meaning. The interviewees consider CA to be a very negative phenomenon which has a great influence in the foreign language classroom setting. They particularly notice CA causing problems during students' oral presentations, regardless of the preparation. However, all of the interviewees consider good preparation to be the key to alleviate CA. The participants thought of CA mostly as a personality trait. When it comes to the causes of CA and different aspects of the phenomenon, they notice that the main source of fear lies in peer evaluations, which speaks in favour of the quantitative results of the study. Surprisingly, interviewees' expectations of the relationship between year of study and the level of CA overlap with the principal hypothesis of the study. In other words, the participants expected that first year undergraduate students experience higher levels of CA than their graduate colleagues. The participants also revealed some techniques they employ while dealing with CA in classes, such as creating a very positive and easy-going atmosphere, encouraging students to speak, giving students time to prepare, etc. The interviewees also choose error correction strategies with extra caution in order not to cause their students' level of CA to increase. Some interviewees admitted having personal experiences with CA, as well as noticing the presence of CA even among some of their colleagues.

## Discussion

Regarding the first research question, the results of the regression analyses showed that there is no difference in the level of communication apprehension between undergraduate and graduate students of English. Furthermore, *year of study* as a background factor does not influence the level of communication apprehension at all and therefore it cannot be interpreted as a predictor of apprehensiveness students experience in the foreign language classroom setting. With regard to those findings, our first hypothesis is refuted. Before research was conducted, it was assumed that the oral communication apprehension decreases with experience and that first year undergraduate students experience a higher level of anxiety and apprehensiveness while speaking in class than their graduate colleagues. However, the research did not confirm those assumptions. The reason for these findings could lie in the ratio of undergraduate and graduate students, which was unequal. Although the discrepancy was not that large, it could be assumed that the results would be different if the ratio was equal. On the other hand, the results could be explained in another way. The only instrument for measuring the level of CA for the purpose of this study was PRCA-24, which measures only trait CA. If we observe communication apprehension only as a personality trait, then the background factor such as *year of study* cannot be considered as a predictor of CA and expected to influence the level of anxiety or fear which high communication apprehensive students experience in a foreign language classroom setting.

When other background factors were taken into consideration, the analysis showed that students' *grade in English language after finishing high school (High School Leaving Exam)* is a significant predictor of the level of CA students experience in a foreign language classroom setting. It partially confirms our second hypothesis and speaks in favour of previous findings about the relationship between the level of CA and academic achievement. If we observe students' *grade in English language after finishing high school* as a kind of indicator of pre-university achievement, it can be assumed that lower grade in English language predicts higher level of CA.

However, when aspects of communication apprehension were included in the analysis, students' *evaluations* turned out to be the only significant predictor of the level of communication apprehension that students experience, which again partially confirmed our third hypothesis. It means that the students who experience higher levels of communication apprehension fear being less competent than their peers (tend to evaluate themselves negatively) as well as being negatively evaluated by their teacher or their peers. The existing research findings support the claim. Horwitz (1986) argues that fear of negative evaluation, also called "apprehension about others", is a special type of anxiety related to foreign language learning, very similar to test anxiety. However, according to Horwitz, it is much broader in scope because it is not limited to test-taking situations. Furthermore, it can occur in any evaluative situation very common in foreign language classes. Students who experience high level of fear of negative evaluation tend to avoid evaluative situations and often expect that others would evaluate them negatively. The nature of foreign language classes, in which evaluation is inevitable, represents a problem for the students who are faced not only with the continuous assessment by the teachers but also by their fellow students. These findings are further confirmed by the results of the qualitative part of the research. Interviewees consider the presence of other students and peer evaluations to be one of the greatest causes of CA in their classes. Moreover, students list "others" and the fear of being laughed at as the main cause of CA.

The hypothesis that the level of communication apprehension affects students' behaviour in a foreign language classroom setting, such as choosing a seat, is confirmed by Pearson Correlation test. It can be concluded that students who score high on PRCA-24, i.e. who have a high level of CA choose a remote seat in a foreign language classroom in order to avoid oral communication in class. As opposed to them, students who score low on PRCA-24, i.e. who experience a low level of CA do not tend to choose seats from which they would not be seen or asked to respond in English. The results speak in favour of McCroskey's (1976) research which indicates that, compared to people lower in CA, high communication apprehensive students choose seats in a small group where they are less likely to be forced to interact. Furthermore, research indicates that high communication apprehensive students are four times as likely to sit outside the interaction area in the classroom as they are to sit in it.

## Conclusion

This research which included the total of 97 students and 5 university teachers was carried out primarily in order to investigate if there is a difference in the level of CA between undergraduate and graduate students of English Language and Literature, at the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, J. J. Strossmayer University of Osijek, Croatia.

The main purpose of the study was to investigate the relationship between the level of CA experienced by undergraduate and graduate students and their *year of study*. The results of the research show that *year of study*, as one of the background factors, is not a significant predictor of CA. Moreover, no difference in the levels of CA between undergraduate and graduate students was found, so the principal hypothesis of the study was refuted. However, other background factors such as *grade in English after finishing high school* proved to influence the level of CA thus confirming the previous research findings that suggest the correlation between CA and academic achievement. The relationship between the level of CA and three different aspects of CA emerged from factor analysis was also investigated. The results showed that the correlation at a significant level exists when it comes to *evaluations* and *teacher*. These findings also speak in favour of the previous research findings, especially when it comes to the correlations between the level of CA and *evaluations*.

There are more than a few limitations of this study. Although we are aware that the limited number and the ratio of the participants as well as the restricted research area do not capture the full complexity of learners's communication apprehension, we believe that a study like the present one offers a valuable snapshot of the EFL learners' CA in the situational context. The present findings may serve as a springboard for future research which should seek to incorporate both learners' and teachers' perspectives and mixed-method approach in providing some more reliable in-depth analyses into such a complex and omnipresent phenomenon.

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