

# A Cross-Cultural Analysis of Communication Apprehension

## A Comparison of Three European Nations

*Stephen M. Croucher, Mélodine Sommier, Diyako Rahmani, & Juliane Appenrodt*

University of Jyväskylä

### Abstract

Data from England, Finland, and Germany were used to explore national differences in communication apprehension (CA). Based on the traditions of oral communication training in each nation, and the history of cross-cultural comparisons in CA, it was proposed that national differences would emerge. English participants scored lower than Finnish and German participants on totalCA, publicCA, dyadicCA, and meetingCA; Finnish participants scored higher than all nations on totalCA, dyadicCA, and meetingCA; and German participants consistently scored in the middle on all aspects of CA, except for publicCA. The study of oral communication, conversational style, and politeness are discussed as potential variables relating to CA differences between the nations.

**Keywords:** *Communication apprehension, Culture, ANOVA, Cross-cultural communication*

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### Introduction

The importance of effective oral communication skills cannot be understated. Over the past 40 years, communication researchers have demonstrated numerous benefits of effective oral communication skills (Novin & Tucker 1993). However, various communication traits affect our communication effectiveness. Traits are dispositions or enduring tendencies to think, feel, or behave in a specific way. One particular trait affecting oral communication skills that has received a great deal of scholarly attention is communication apprehension (CA).

Extensive research has explored the potential effects of biology and cultural variables on CA. Researchers have yet to consider how CA differs in nations with different educational cultures. Self-management of CA (Dwyer 2000), treatment of CA (Robinson 1997), and promoting communication and perception of competence (McCroskey 1984; Motley 1995) are all integral parts of oral communication training in the United States. It is typical for Americans to take a public speaking class of some kind, or to give speeches during their K-12 education. Many Americans also receive tips or advice on how to give effective speeches from various subject teachers before they graduate from high school. For those who attend college/university, most are required to take public speaking of some sort, which provides training in oral communication. Such oral communication training is not as prevalent, and or entirely absent, in other nations' educational curricula. Thus, the purpose of this study is to examine how CA differs among three European nations with varied educational systems: England, Finland, and Germany. Each of these nations differs in its tradition and approach to teaching oral communication skills. Moreover, when considering the traditional CA literature, which includes primarily comparisons of collectivistic versus individualistic nations, each of the nations in this study scores on the individualistic side of Hofstede's (2001) dimensions of culture. Thus, this study affords a chance to compare the CA levels of three traditionally individualistic nations.

# Communication Apprehension

Communication apprehension (CA) is a “broad-based fear or anxiety associated with either real or anticipated [oral] communication with another person or persons” (McCroskey 1977: 78). CA occurs in four contexts: group, meetings, public speaking, and interpersonal contexts. Individuals high in CA tend to withdraw from communication and are less likely to be skilled at communication (Allen & Bourhis 1996). CA is negatively correlated with willingness to communicate (WTC) (Donovan & McIntyre 2004; Mansson & Myers 2009) and with self-perceived communication competence (SPCC) (McCroskey, Burroughs, Daun, & Richmond 1990; Teven, Richmond, McCroskey, & McCroskey 2010). Research on CA approaches studies from either a situational or communibiological approach. The communibiological approach pays more attention to neurobiological foundations of human behavior and practices, while a situational theory approach focuses more on environmental factors such as culture, social learning, and situation (Beatty & McCroskey 1998; Heisel, McCroskey, & Richmond 1999; Kelly & Keaten 2000). This study takes a situational approach to the study of CA. From a situational approach, an extensive body of research has explored CA in various populations, with the bulk focusing on US student samples.

## Cross-Cultural Research on Communication Apprehension

A dearth of literature on CA has been devoted to cross-cultural comparisons of CA among US Americans and other (national) cultures, especially East Asia. However, these studies might suffer from a lack of measurement equivalence or explanation of possible cross-cultural differences (Hsu 2007). The studies which have investigated reasons for contextual incompatibilities of CA have mentioned various effective cultural and non-cultural elements. Differences in CA levels can be attributed to various differences in individualist cultures such as the US, Western Europe, and Australia and collectivist cultures such as East Asian cultures and Arabic countries (Hackman & Barthel-Hackman 1993; Hsu 2007; Pederson, Tkachuk & Allen 2008). People of more collectivist cultures are more likely to perform their activities in groups; while individuals in individualist cultures emphasize the individual needs, space, and activities. Collectivists are more sensitive about others' evaluations and this could result in higher CA.

The difference between high-context cultures such as Korea, Japan, China, and most Arabian countries and low-context cultures such as the US could affect CA levels (Merkin 2009; Pederson et al. 2008; Pryor, Bulter, & Boehringer 2005). In a high-context culture most of the information within a communication activity has already been shared among the participants, and mutual perception of the communication is dependent on the context of the communication; while a low-context culture is more straight-forward and contains more information (Hall, 1976). Since in high-context cultures individual expression is less valued high-context cultures are more apprehensive (Pryor et al. 2005). The emphasis placed on the oral communication by low/high context cultures can affect communication traits in communication (Allen, O'Mara, & Long 2014).

There is an array of other factors that can affect CA levels in cross-cultural contexts. Differences in lifestyles between the mostly-urban-settled American society and New Zealanders, of whom 45 percent live in rural areas has resulted in higher CA levels among New Zealanders (Hackman & Barthel-Hackman 1993). Taiwanese are found to have higher CA than Americans because of higher independent self-construals, higher fear of negative evaluation, higher modesty, and consequently lower SPCC in comparison to their American counterparts (Hsu 2004).

## Comparison of Oral Communication Training in England, Finland, and Germany

In addition to cross-cultural studies of CA, researchers have asserted education and oral communication training are important to improve our understanding of CA (Dwyer 2000; Robinson 1997). Research on

how such education and training takes place outside of the US is sparse. Oral communication skills are taught and valued in different ways from one country to another. In the US, many public speaking classes focus on the treatment of communication apprehension, and promoting communication competence (Robinson 1997). This is not the case in many other national school systems around the world. In the German school system there has been no developed initiatives to train students in oral communication (Deutscher Bildungsserver n.d.). However, there are steps to change this. There are currently about 70 debating clubs in Germany (VDCH 2012). There are also some educational institutions that offer courses or seminars in rhetoric and speaking (e.g. Philipp-Melanchton-Gymnasium & Eberhard-Karls-Universität Tübingen). A similar situation is happening in Finland. According to the basic and upper secondary education curriculum, only some specialization courses in mother tongue language courses offer oral communication training (Finnish National Board of Education 2004). Apart from these specialized courses, no public speaking or presentation courses are offered (Pörhöla 1997). However, debate teams have developed in Finland and there is even a national championship tournament (Kurki & Tomperi 2011; Nuorkauppakamari 2012). These two nations demonstrate European nations that are newly developing oral communication curriculum.

England, on the other hand, has a long tradition of oral communication training, which dates back to the London Debating Societies in the Enlightenment period. Public speaking and acting courses are required courses for many English youth (Andrew 1996). Public speaking competitions for schools are also recurrent events since the 1960s (English Speaking Union n.d.). Moreover, many English universities are now requiring that graduates have some experience giving speeches before graduation. The call for increased oral competency has come as more employers demand applicants with developed oral skills (Hassall, Joyce, Ottewill, Arquero, & Donoso 2000). There is a much more developed/institutional model for the training of oral communication in England than in any other European nation.

Such differences in oral communication training may further clarify cross-cultural differences in CA between these nations. From a social learning/situational theory approach, it is likely the teaching or lack of teaching oral communication skills may affect CA levels. This approach emphasizes the effects of environmental factors such as culture, social learning, and situational factors on CA, such as educational culture. Such cultural differences can affect communicative attributes and personality traits (Hofstede & McCrae 2004; Hsu 2010). Therefore, to further understand cross-cultural differences in CA between England, Finland, and Germany, taking into consideration the different educational national and educational cultures, it seems likely CA levels will differ. Thus, the following research question is put forth:

*RQ: What if any differences exist between English, Finnish, and German individuals' self-reported communication apprehension levels?*

## Method

### Participants

Three samples were collected for this study ( $n = 787$ ). The English sample ( $n = 335$ ) consisted of 160 males (47.8%) and 175 females (52.2%). The age of the English participants ranged from 18 to 40 ( $M = 26.86$ ,  $SD = 4.85$ ). The Finnish sample ( $n = 181$ ) had 78 males (43.1%) and 103 females (56.9%). Finnish participants ranged in age from 18 to 63 ( $M = 32.10$ ,  $SD = 10.32$ ). The German sample ( $n = 271$ ) consisted of 166 males (61.3%) and 105 females (38.7%). German participants ranged in age from 18 to 57 ( $M = 27.82$ ,  $SD = 10.45$ ).

The surveys were distributed online and in-person in each nation via a snowball sampling in various urban areas. The principal researcher had contacts in each nation who served as the principal points of contact. These initial points of contact helped distribute surveys in each nation. Moreover, other members of the research team distributed links to the online survey, which was on Survey Monkey. This is a convenience sample. However, as Gudykunst (2002) pointed out, in cross-cultural research it is difficult to gather random/representative samples.

Surveys were originally prepared in English, and then translated into Finnish, and German. Native speakers then translated the instrument before bilingual speakers back-translated it. After back-translation, all translations were compared for accuracy. Each translation was highly reliable: Finnish ( $k = .89$ ) and German ( $k = .87$ ). The survey instructions for the PRCA, informed participants to consider all scenarios in their native language.

## Measures

The *Personal Report of Communication Apprehension (PRCA)* is a 24-item scale measuring trait-like communication apprehension in four communication contexts: dyadic, meetings, public, and small groups (McCroskey 1984). It uses a 5-point Likert scale from 1 *strongly agree* to 5 *strongly disagree*. The scale is designed so that 6 different items make up each of the four contexts of CA (dyadic, meetings, public, and small groups). Reliability coefficients for the PRCA have ranged from .86 to .96 (Hsu, 2007; Mansson & Myers 2009). See Table 1 for means, standard deviations, and alpha values for each nation.

**Table 1:** PRCA Means, Standard Deviations, Reliabilities, and Post-Hoc Comparisons

PRCA	England			Finland			Germany		
	M	SD	$\alpha$	M	SD	$\alpha$	M	SD	$\alpha$
1. totalCA	69.10 <sub>ab</sub>	3.33	.91	74.55 <sub>b</sub>	6.51	.78	73.14 <sub>a</sub>	4.97	.87
2. publicCA	17.08 <sub>c</sub>	2.51		17.92	4.78		18.83 <sub>c</sub>	3.48	
3. dyadicCA	16.34 <sub>de</sub>	1.77		18.04 <sub>e</sub>	2.49		17.75 <sub>d</sub>	2.76	
4. meetingCA	17.15 <sub>fg</sub>	.94		19.83 <sub>gh</sub>	2.55		17.15 <sub>fh</sub>	1.47	
5. groupCA	18.52	1.33		18.76	1.51		18.64	1.33	

*Note:* Subscripts represent mean differences between groups based on Games Howell post-hoc comparison,  $p < .01$ .

## Results

To test the research question, an analysis of variance (ANOVA) was conducted. Nationality was used as the independent variable and totalCA, and each of the four communication contexts that make up CA served as dependent variables. There was a significant difference in three of the four communication contexts, and in totalCA. Nationality had a significant effect on publicCA:  $F(2, 784) = 18.98, p < .001, h:2 = .05$ ; dyadicCA:  $F(2, 784) = 42.48, p < .001, h:2 = .10$ ; meetingCA:  $F(2, 784) = 162.41, p < .001, h:2 = .29$ ; and totalCA:  $F(2, 784) = 93.63, p < .001, h:2 = .19$ . Nationality did not have a significant effect on groupCA:  $F(2, 784) = 2.33, p = .10, h:2 = .01$ . Participants from England scored significantly lower than Finnish and German participants on totalCA, dyadicCA, and meetingCA. English participants also scored lower than German participants on publicCA. Finnish participants scored higher than all other nations on meetingCA. German participants consistently scored in the middle on all aspects of CA, except for publicCA. Results of the post hoc tests are in Table 1.

## Discussion

The purpose of this study was to further our cross-cultural understanding of communication apprehension (CA) and to explore any potential differences in CA between English, Finnish, and German respondents. ANOVA results reveal there were significant differences between the groups on CA. These results are

consistent with previous studies that demonstrate cross-cultural differences between nations on CA (Hsu 2004, 2007, 2010; Lu & Hsu 2008; Mansson & Myers 2009; McCroskey, Gudykunst, & Nishida 1985; Neuliep, Chadour, & McCroskey 2003; Richmond, McCroskey, McCroskey, & Fayer 2008; Sallinen-Kuparinen, McCroskey, & Richmond 1991). The current results can be interpreted and add to literature in the following three ways.

## Implications

First, the results can be interpreted to support the notion that a culture with educational support for oral competency training is related to lower levels of CA. As England has the longest history and its educational system focuses the most on training individuals to be effective oral communicators (Andrew 1996) it makes sense that English participants would have the lowest CA levels. There are also numerous calls from employers in England for universities and for graduates to have oral competency, which is reflected in schools teaching oral competencies (Hassall et al., 2000). The lack of specific oral skills training in Germany and Finland may lead to higher anxiety and thus higher CA in situations such as giving a speech or leading a discussion. Schleef (2009) explained how the German academic setting is very formal. In classes students are less likely to be questioned or to verbally participate. In this case, the more formal style of academic instruction may increase CA. It would be advantageous to further explore the potential relationship between how different national educational systems approach oral communication training and communication traits such as CA.

Second, conversational style may have an effect on CA. In direct comparison with the other countries, the conversational style of Finns and Germans could explain why both scored higher on CA than English participants. Finn and German interaction is typically more focused on conveying information rather than social bonding (Byrnes 1986; Kurki & Tomperi 2011). As languages, German and Finnish are more content-oriented, explicit, and direct than English (Byrne 1987; House 2005; Kurki & Tomperi 2011). Germans and Finns also tend to be less willing to engage in small talk, a phrase that in fact does not exist in either language. Hence, a situation requiring small talk with unfamiliar people or a situation where Germans or Finns may feel small talk is necessary may increase CA. Communication traits may indeed be influenced by how a culture/group perceived the value of small talk. Thus, research on communication traits; particularly research on CA should consider the cultural significance of talk on communication.

Third, politeness and/or modesty must be considered as potential variables influencing CA levels. The potential influence of politeness and/or modesty can be seen in the case of Finland. Finnish participants scored highest on CA. These results could be attributed to high levels of modesty and politeness embedded in Finnish communication. Modesty is a virtue in Finnish communication culture (Nishimura, Nevgi, & Tella 2008; Valjakka 2007) and there even is a saying in Finnish about "*Vaatimattomuus kaunistaa*" or "Modesty makes beautiful" (Keltinkangas-Järvinen, 1996 in Iivonen, Sonnenwald, Parma, & Poole-Kober 1998). This virtue may lead to Finns underestimating their abilities to communicate. Aside from modesty, politeness also tends to be valued in Finnish conversation/communication styles (Carbaugh 2005) to avoid negative attributes about their intelligence and character. It is possible politeness, in conjunction with modesty could influence an individual's perception of their communicative effectiveness, which would in turn influence CA scores. Future research should consider combining politeness theory with the study of CA and similar communication traits. Politeness theory basically asserts communication messages create various kinds of face threats, people deal with these face threats in different ways, politeness and face threats influence future messages, and the threat in a message depends on the context (Cupach & Metts 1994; Johnson 2007; Johnson, Roloff, & Riffe 2004; Lakey & Canary 2002). It would be beneficial to consider how these kinds of threats and politeness influence communication traits and the perception of competence communication in different contexts.

We identify two limitations with this study. The first is that the sample for this data is not truly random. In conducting cross-cultural research it is virtually impossible to conduct truly random research (Gudykunst 2002). However, caution should be used in interpreting these results. The second limitation of the study is the method, particularly the PRCA. Some participants had questions about the items on the PRCA. While the PRCA in each language had high kappa reliability, the translations were not perfect, as it is extremely difficult, if not impossible to perfectly translate an instrument from one language into another. Therefore,

it is possible some idiomatic phrases on the PRCA did not translate properly from English into one of the languages of the study.

In spite of these limitations, the present study provides empirical evidence to suggest national differences in CA between England, Finland, and Germany. The findings emphasize the need for researchers to expand our understanding of communication traits into how such traits are potentially influenced by: oral skills training, communication settings, conversational style, and politeness. With future research it is possible to better understand how these constructs potentially affect communication traits.

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## About the Authors

Stephen M. Croucher (Ph.D., University of Oklahoma, 2006) is a Professor in the Department of Communication at the University of Jyväskylä.

Mélodine Sommier (MA, University of Jyväskylä, 2012) is a Doctoral student in the Department of Communication.

Diyako Rahmani is a Doctoral Student in the Department of Communication at the University of Jyväskylä.

Juliane Appenrodt (MA, University of Jyväskylä, 2013) is a working professional in Germany.

## Authors' Address

Please direct all correspondence regarding this article to

Stephen M. Croucher  
PO Box 35, L-230  
Department of Communication, University of Jyväskylä  
Jyväskylä  
Finland 40014