

Strategies for reducing uncertainty in new communication science students at Universitas Muhammadiyah Yogyakarta to reduce communication anxiety

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Abstract

First-year Communication Science students often experience communication apprehension during the transition from high school to university, particularly as they adapt to new academic demands, lecturer communication styles, peer interactions, and diverse campus cultures. This condition is more prominent among the 2024 cohort of Communication Science students at Universitas Muhammadiyah Yogyakarta, who grew up in the post-pandemic digital era and are more accustomed to online communication than face-to-face interaction. This study aims to identify the strategies used by new students to reduce communication apprehension. Using a qualitative case study approach, data were collected through observation, interviews, and documentation involving ten informants, consisting of five male and five female students. Data were analyzed using the Miles and Huberman interactive model. The findings show that students experience two forms of uncertainty: cognitive uncertainty, related to limited understanding of lecturers' and peers' thoughts and communication styles, and behavioral uncertainty, reflected in confusion about how to act or respond in campus social situations. To reduce uncertainty, students apply three strategies from Berger and Calabrese's Uncertainty Reduction Theory: passive strategies through observation, active strategies through information seeking from third parties, and interactive strategies through direct communication. Passive strategies were found to be the most used during the early stage of university adaptation.

Keywords

Reducing uncertainty, Communication anxiety, Communication students, Universitas Muhammadiyah Yogyakarta

Introduction

Communication is one of the fundamental processes in human life, especially in the context of higher education, which requires students to actively engage in various forms of social and academic interaction. New students are often faced with more complex

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communication demands, ranging from interacting with new friends and navigating classroom situations different from the school environment to adapting to an academic culture with specific norms and expectations. Uncertainty in communication is a common phenomenon among first-year students, especially as they enter a new environment that is still unfamiliar to them. This situation makes some students feel hesitant, awkward, or even afraid when they have to engage in direct communication [1].

The phenomenon of communication uncertainty is explained in Uncertainty Reduction Theory (URT), which was first introduced by Berger and Calabrese. This theory asserts that when someone initiates an initial interaction, they will strive to reduce uncertainty regarding the other person's behavior, attitudes, and thoughts. The process of uncertainty reduction is carried out thru passive, active, and interactive strategies aimed at helping individuals predict responses and adjust their behavior during the interaction [2]. In recent developments, the use of URT continues to expand as a framework for understanding the dynamics of communication adaptation in various contexts, including higher education environments [3].

Communication anxiety, or the fear of communicating, is a form of psychological reaction that arises from uncertainty in interactions. McCroskey and Beatty explain that communication apprehension is the anxiety or fear that arises when someone has to communicate in certain situations, whether interpersonal or public [4]. Previous research indicates that freshmen tend to have higher levels of communication anxiety because they are in a transitional phase toward a more demanding academic environment [5]. This fear of communication can hinder student participation in class, reduce self-confidence, and impede the process of social adaptation [6].

New Universitas Muhammadiyah Yogyakarta Communication Science students from the 2024 cohort face an additional challenge because they come from very diverse regional and cultural backgrounds. Differences in communication styles, prior communication experiences, and social norms make the adaptation process more complex. On the other hand, the current generation is a digital generation that grew up with technology-based communication. This condition affects face-to-face communication habits, which sometimes causes students difficulty when they have to interact directly in academic situations [7].

Various psychological and social factors also influence the adaptation process of new students. Previous research found that adaptability, living environment, and mental readiness affect new students' comfort in facing new communication situations [8]. Schlossberg emphasizes that the transition adaptation process involves individuals' assessment of the new situation, the social support they receive, and their ability to manage stress [9]. In the context of communication, support from peers and a friendly environment can help new students feel safer and more confident [10].

Additionally, research on communication apprehension in first-year students indicates that students often require specific strategies to manage their anxiety. These strategies include efforts to understand the academic environment, seek support resources, and gradually adjust their communication patterns [11]. Knowledge of these strategies is particularly important for Communication Science students, who are expected to have good communication skills as part of their academic competence [12].

Method

This research uses a qualitative method with a case study approach. A case study is an empirical inquiry that delves into a phenomenon in its real-life setting [13]. Ten informants, consisting of five male and five female students, were selected using purposive sampling techniques based on the criteria that they are active students from the 2024 cohort, have experienced discomfort in communication, and are able to openly reflect on those experiences [14]. Research data was collected thru structured interviews, passive participant observation, and documentation in the form of field notes and interview recordings. Interviews were conducted to specifically explore the forms of uncertainty, anxiety triggers, and the strategies used by students to adapt to the campus communication environment, while observation was used to observe communication behaviors that informants could not always explain verbally [15][16]. All data was analyzed using the Miles and Huberman model thru the processes of data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing, which were repeated from the initial stages of data collection. Data validity is maintained thru technique triangulation by comparing interview results, observations, and documentation, ensuring that the findings obtained are scientifically accountable and reflect the real conditions experienced by new students in their communication adaptation process [16].

Results

The research findings indicate that first-year Communication Science students at Muhammadiyah University of Yogyakarta, class of 2024, experience uncertainty that primarily arises during the initial stages of interaction in the campus environment. Cognitive uncertainty appears when students struggle to understand the thinking styles, communication styles, and social expectations of both lecturers and peers. Some students admit to holding back in conversations for fear of misinterpreting the other person's intentions or using language considered out of context. This form of uncertainty is further amplified when students encounter differences in cultural backgrounds, regional language styles, and variations in intonation and expression that affect their understanding of the messages they receive. In some cases, cognitive uncertainty leads to simple misunderstandings, such as misinterpreting a friend's invitation or instructions, which then reinforces cautious communication attitudes.

Beside cognitive uncertainty, students also experience behavioral uncertainty, especially regarding how they should behave in specific communication situations.

Many students expressed confusion when it came to starting conversations with new people, determining the appropriate level of politeness when interacting with lecturers, or adjusting to group discussions dominated by a few members. This behavioral uncertainty leads some students to choose silence, delay their response, or wait for the right moment to engage in the conversation. In the context of class discussions, some students appear passive because they are afraid of interrupting others or worry that their explanations will not be well-received by the group. Meanwhile, in informal interactions, behavioral uncertainty is evident in the confusion of determining the intensity of communication with new friends, especially when dealing with characters who are either too quiet or very expressive.

The uncertainty experienced by the student directly triggered communication anxiety in various forms. Physically, some students experience a racing heart, trembling hands, and a blank mind when they have to speak in front of the class or when suddenly called on by the lecturer. Psychologically, anxiety manifests as feelings of shame, fear of judgment, and even concerns that minor speaking errors will affect their social acceptance. In a social context, some students admit they prefer to avoid crowded conversation situations or groups that already seem close because they feel inferior or lack the confidence to fit in. This anxiety is also evident in non-formal situations, such as when in a new hangout, where students tend to be passive because they are unsure how to start a conversation on a topic they consider safe.

To cope with this uncertainty and anxiety, students employ a variety of uncertainty reduction strategies. Passive strategies emerged as the most frequently used initial step, namely by observing the expressions, speaking styles, group dynamics, or interaction patterns of friends before deciding to engage in conversation. Thru this observation, students are trying to find the right communication rhythm and understand the unwritten norms within the group. Active strategies are also evident when students seek information thru friends they are already close to, ask about someone's character, or find out how to communicate with professors thru seniors. Meanwhile, interactive strategies are evident in students' efforts to build direct conversations, such as initiating simple introductions, asking small questions, or attempting to be open despite still being overcome by anxiety. These three strategies are used interchangeably depending on the situation, but most students acknowledge that passive and interactive strategies are the two approaches that most often help them reduce their fear of communicating.

Overall, the research findings indicate that the communication adaptation process for new students occurs in stages. Cognitive and behavioral uncertainty is a major trigger for communication anxiety, and the uncertainty reduction strategies they use play a crucial role in shaping their self-confidence and comfort in daily interactions. The combination of observation, information gathering, and direct communication proved to be a helpful mechanism for students to understand their social environment while also adjusting to the academic and interpersonal dynamics of their first year of college.

Discussion

The research findings indicate that cognitive and behavioral uncertainty is a primary source of communication anxiety for freshmen, and this condition aligns with the research objective of understanding the communication adaptation process in the early stages of college [2][4]. This uncertainty arises when students have to navigate social and academic environments they don't fully understand, leading to self-doubt, fear of making mistakes, and caution in their interactions. This condition shows that the initial period of college is a vulnerable phase for the emergence of communication anxiety due to the lack of certainty regarding the prevailing communication situations, rules, and expectations [1][12].

The results of this study support the main proposition in Uncertainty Reduction Theory, which states that individuals tend to experience high levels of uncertainty when entering a new social environment and will attempt to manage it thru various strategies [2][3]. The uncertainty experienced by students in this study is not only related to a lack of knowledge about the characters of others, but also to a lack of preparedness to face academic communication norms that differ from their previous experiences. Thus, communication uncertainty can be understood as a situational condition that develops as students adapt to the campus environment.

This research also shows that students communication anxiety is not merely an individual phenomenon, but is formed from the interaction between internal factors and the surrounding social conditions [4][10]. Differences in cultural background, peer communication styles, and the way lecturers deliver instructions shape communication dynamics that students must gradually understand. This condition indicates that communication anxiety emerges as a response to the complex and dynamic social adaptation demands within the college environment [9][12].

The reduction of uncertainty used by students in this study reflects flexible and contextual adaptation efforts [2]. Students are not fixated on a single specific strategy, but rather adjust their use of passive, active, and interactive strategies based on their comfort level and the communication situation they are facing. Observing the social environment serves as the initial step in building understanding, while direct interaction gradually helps students gain certainty and increase their confidence in communicating [2][3].

The findings of this study also show that communication anxiety has a direct impact on students' participation in academic and social interactions [4][10]. Students who are still in a state of uncertainty tend to limit their participation in class discussions or social interactions, while a decrease in uncertainty encourages increased courage to communicate. This indicates that communication anxiety not only affects psychological conditions but also shapes students' communication behavior patterns within the campus environment.

Overall, this study illustrates that the communication adaptation process for new students occurs gradually and non-linearly [2][9]. Uncertainty reduction strategies serve as an important mechanism in helping students build understanding of the social environment, adapt to academic communication norms, and reduce communication anxiety. Although this study has limitations in terms of scope and the number of informants

[13][14], These findings provide relevant insights into the dynamics of communication adaptation for new students and can serve as a basis for developing communication adaptation support efforts in higher education settings.

Conclusion

This research aims to understand how first-year Communication Science students at Universitas Muhammadiyah Yogyakarta, class of 2024, manage communication uncertainty and anxiety during their initial adaptation period in the campus environment. The research findings indicate that cognitive and behavioral uncertainty are key factors contributing to communication anxiety, and this process unfolds gradually as students adjust to the social norms and dynamics they encounter. Through discussion, this research confirms that uncertainty reduction strategies, whether passive, active, or interactive, play a crucial role in helping students build self-confidence, understand their social environment, and reduce communication barriers they experience. The pattern of flexible and complementary strategy use shows that communication adaptation is not just an individual response, but is also heavily influenced by social structures and the diversity of the campus environment.

Although this study provides a strong overview of the dynamics of communication adaptation, future research could expand its scope to other academic programs, compare different cohorts, or observe how uncertainty reduction strategies evolve as students gain more academic experience. A longitudinal approach or the use of mixed methods can also provide a more comprehensive picture of changes in communication anxiety over the long term. Overall, this study confirms the importance of understanding new student communication adaptation as a complex and dynamic process and also demonstrates how new knowledge about uncertainty reduction mechanisms can enrich the study of interpersonal communication in the context of higher education.

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