

## The Influence of Personality Traits on Communication Competence

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### Abstract

This pilot study was conducted to identify the relationship between personality traits and communication competence among final year undergraduate students at two public universities in the Klang Valley which were *Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM)* and *Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM)*. The purpose was to investigate the effects of personality traits on communication competence and to acquire a deeper understanding on one of the main factors of unemployment issue in Malaysia which is communication deficiency among graduates. It was found that four dimensions of personality traits which were extraversion, neuroticism, agreeableness and openness to experience had significant relationships with communication competence. However, conscientiousness trait was not found to be related to students' communication competence. Extraversion, agreeableness and openness to experience had significant and positive relationships with communication competence while neuroticism was negatively related with communication competence. It was also found that UKM students' communication competence were significantly influenced by agreeableness trait while for UiTM students, extraversion had the strongest influence towards the communication competence. It is recommended that undergraduate students should be coached to freely express their views freely which may include their discontentment in Malaysia's classroom settings. This exercise will prosper a healthy two-way communication between a teacher and a student and can further spark verbal exchanges especially among introverted students. Students with low level of openness to experience trait need to have the courage to imagine and explore new things where instructors can assist them in shaping this trait to build up their confidence level as well as to be spontaneous in sharing their experiences in classroom.

**Keywords:** Personality Traits, Communication Competence, Extraversion, Agreeableness, Openness to Experience Conscientiousness, Neuroticism

## Introduction

Currently, unemployment among fresh graduates has become an integral issue not only in Malaysia but also around the globe. In fact, it has been reported that unemployment rate in Malaysia has increased from 3.1% in 2015 to 3.4% in 2016 (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2017) and has remained status quo for 2017 (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2018). It was reported too that when recruiting new graduates for job candidates, the first criterion employers were looking for was their communication skills (Archer & Davison, 2008; Khalid, Islam & Ahmed, 2019) but unfortunately, they found that most of these new graduates failed to effectively communicate and to express themselves intelligently. In fact, 81% of companies rated communication skills among Malaysian graduates as their major skills deficit that will prevent them from being employed (TalentCorp Malaysia, 2014). As a matter of fact, higher education has been focusing on communication competency over the past few decades as a 'back to basic' element and being stressed out by the educational policy makers and advocates (McCroskey, 1984).

Other than having employees with great communication competency, those equipped with great personality traits are equally considered as potential employees. The relationship between personality traits and individual's job performance has been recognized in various studies and meta-analysis, stating that human personality traits are highly related to job performance (Barrick & Mount, 1991; Barrick, Mount & Judge, 2001; Rothmann & Coetzer, 2003; Alzgoool, 2019; Muhammad, Saoula, Issa & Ahmed, 2019). Moreover, a few scholars have stressed the relevancy of using personality measures in selecting personnel for organizations (Kodydek & Hochreiter, 2013). With the help of the personality characteristics; organizations will be able to predict the individual's level or quality of competencies as well as to obtain the valuable information regarding the individual's cognitive social ability (Robertson, Gibbons, Baron, MacIver & Nyfield, 1999). Additionally, some scholars have reported in previous studies that an employee's personality is an effective tool to predict their job performance later on (Ozer & Benet-Martinez, 2006; Schulman, 2011). As such, this has been the reason why personality-related technique has been frequently adopted during the employees' selection procedure (Barrick & Mount, 1991). In fact, experts in personality field completed countless observations to ascertain that some personalities may affect peoples' behaviors later at the workplace (Denissen, van Aken & Roberts, 2011; Gerber et al., 2011).

As a matter of fact, personality is a psychological construct and is regarded as one of the components in interpersonal communication, as it is believed to help shaping how individuals interact with their environment and relate to other people (Dunning, 2003; Hargie & Dickson, 2004; Heathcote, 2010; Zeisset, 2006). Other than that, Hannawa and Spitzberg (2015) emphasized how the differences in personality may moderate the communication competence of an individual. Despite these research findings which concluded that personality traits are indeed related to communication behaviour, and other findings showed that organizational outcomes such as job satisfaction are related to personality traits and communication competence (Brown & Reilly, 2009; Daly, 2002; Hofmann & Jones, 2005; Spitzberg, 2000; Wilson & Sabee, 2003).

## Literature Review

### Personality Traits

Adequate consensus and empirical evidence have identified the big five personality traits as universal dimension despite a lack of theoretical rationale for the etiology of traits described by the five factor model (Costa, 1997; Costa & McCrae, 1992; McCrae & Costa, 1997).

According to Chamorro-Premuzic and Furnham (2014), the big five personality model conceptualizes the differences in individuals which are independent from each other and refers to the stable patterns of individual's behaviour.

In addressing the dimensions of the Big Five Theory, the researchers chose to use Furnham (2002) enlightenment as the descriptions of the theory are more related and inclined towards work-related activities.

- a) Extraversion is the personality that characterises people who are active, expressive, impulsive, and sociable (Furnham, 2002).
- b) Neuroticism characterises people who lack positive psychological adjustment and emotional stability (Judge, Higgins, Thoresen & Barrick, 1999).
- c) Agreeableness may be referred to an individual's tendency to defer to others (Furnham, 2002).
- d) The openness to experience dimension may concern the individuals' wide range of interests and intellectuality (Furnham, 2002).
- e) Conscientiousness is about the reliability measurement in which those with high conscientiousness are believed to be more efficient, reliable, responsible, organised, dependent, thorough, and prudent (Furnham, 2002).

### **Communication Competence**

Communication is not an unfamiliar concept to be meandered as it has been highlighted for decades. The term has been coined and dated back in 3000 BC with the emergence of an essay on effective speaking addressed to the son of a Pharaoh, Huni Kagemni. The book 'Precept', which dealt with teaching effective communication and written in 2675 BC was dedicated to another Pharaoh's son, composed by the Egyptian Ptah-Hotep (McCroskey, 1984; Khalid, Islam & Ahmed, 2019; Alzgoool, 2019; Muhammad, Saoula, Issa & Ahmed, 2019).

Communication competence can be referred to as an individual's ability to interact accurately, clearly, comprehensively, coherently, expertly, effectively and appropriately with others (Spitzberg, 1988). Spitzberg & Cupach's Interpersonal Communication Competence Model was chosen as the communication competence indicators as its constructs are likely to enhance an individual's ability to communicate appropriately and effectively (Spitzberg & Cupach, 1984). This model comprised of three major components of motivation, knowledge and skills which most scholars have agreed that these three are the essential components that established the communication competence (Arasaratnam, 2004; Flaherty & Stojakovic, 2008; Spitzberg, 2000; Wiseman, 2003). Knowledge may imply on how much a person knows about a specific communication context, motivation may state to the degree of an individual wanting to converse with another person, and skills may demonstrate the successful performance of a communicative behavior (Flaherty & Stojakovic, 2008). These three dimensions will either directly or indirectly assessed by the employer when recruiting new personnel as communication has stirred quite an issue in employment. It is imperative that the communication is studied extensively to assist policy makers to assist both unemployment and Malaysian graduates quality (Rahmah, Ishak & Wei Sieng, 2011). This statement was supported by (Malhi, 2009) who mentioned that Malaysian graduates are mainly weak in ten aspects which are management, communication, creativity, problem-solving, leadership, proactive, critical thinking, self-confidence and interaction skills.

## Research Objectives and Hypotheses

**Figure 1** shows the conceptual framework of the relationship between personality traits and communication competence. Two research objectives were formulated for this study which are: (1) To identify the relationships between dimensions of personality traits on communication competence and (2) To identify the dimension(s) of personality traits that influenced communication competence. Besides, researchers have also formulated several hypotheses for this study which are:

- H<sub>1a</sub>: There is a relationship between extraversion and communication competence.
- H<sub>1b</sub>: There is a relationship between agreeableness and communication competence.
- H<sub>1c</sub>: There is a relationship between conscientiousness and communication competence.
- H<sub>1d</sub>: There is a relationship between neuroticism and communication competence.
- H<sub>1e</sub>: There is a relationship between openness to experience and communication competence.

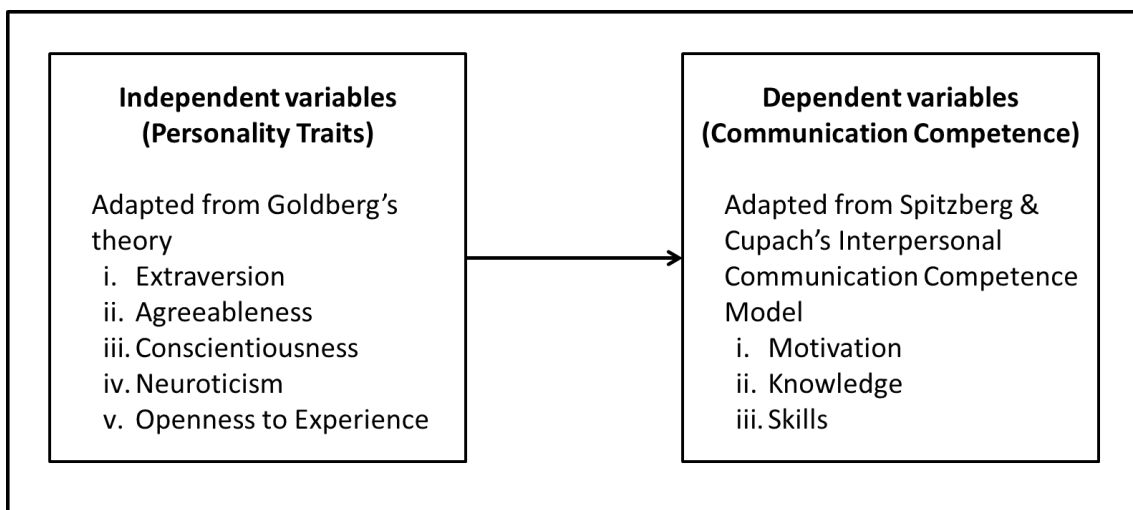


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework on the Relationship between Personality traits and Communication Competence

## Methodology

This study was a pilot study where data was collected from two public universities in the Klang Valley, Malaysia. The two public universities were UiTM Puncak Alam campus and Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM) Bangi. UiTM was represented by students from the Faculty of Pharmacy and Faculty Business and Management while students from the Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities represented UKM. 140 final year students answered the questionnaires through convenience sampling. As UiTM had greater number of final year students, data from 85 students were collected as opposed to 55 respondents from UKM. The instrument for personality traits consisting of 21 items was used while communication competence was measured using a 21 items Interpersonal Communication Competence questionnaire by Spitzberg & Cupach (1984). A six-point Likert scale was used with the values from 1=strongly disagree to 6=strongly agree. Out of the total 42 items, 12 items were reverse-coded.

Table 1  
*Study's return rate*

University	Questionnaires Distributed	Questionnaires Returned	Return Rate (%)
UiTM	85	85	100
UKM	55	55	100
<b>Total</b>	140	140	100

## Results and Discussion

### Reliability Analysis

For personality traits, two domains were reported to have Cronbach's alpha of >0.6, which can be considered as acceptable (Hair, Black & Babin, 2010; Sekaran, 2005). The two domains were agreeableness and neuroticism, while all other domains had Cronbach's alpha of 0.7 and above. The researchers decided to use the instrument because it was a well-established set of questionnaires commonly used in various studies of personality traits. In fact, this instrument was found to be a reliable instrument in Malaysian settings which almost always generate a Cronbach's alpha greater than 0.7 (Ong, 2014). Next, the instrument on communication competence variable was found to have excellent reliability with a Cronbach's alpha value of 0.905. Despite having a high value of Cronbach's alpha, two items from the motivation domain were deleted to increase the alpha value from 0.608 to 0.709. These slight changes increased the overall value of Cronbach's alpha for the overall communication competence variable from 0.905 to 0.910 and decreased the number of items from 29 to 27 items.

### Pearson-Correlation and Multiple Regression Analysis

Table 2  
*Correlation between respondents' Emotional Intelligence and Communication Competence*

	1	2	3	4	5	6
<b>Extraversion</b>	1					
<b>Agreeableness</b>	.341**	1				
<b>Conscientiousness</b>	.014	.168**	1			
<b>Neuroticism</b>	-.174*	-.369**	-.514**	1		
<b>Openness to Experience</b>	-.546**	.184*	-.089	-.021	1	
<b>Communication Competence</b>	.545**	.482**	.044	-.175*	.466**	1

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

\*Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed)

**Table 2** shows the findings on the correlation between personality traits and communication competence among the final year students in two public universities in Klang Valley. The results pointed out that there were three significant positive relationships between extraversion, agreeableness and openness to experience and communication competence ( $r=.545$ ,  $r=.482$ ,  $r=.466$   $p<.01$ ) (see Table 2). In addition, it was also found that there was a small, negative but significant relationship between neuroticism and communication competence ( $r=-.175$ ,  $p<.05$ ). Furthermore, the results also confirmed that there was a large

positive relationship between extraversion and communication competence, which indicated that greater the level of extraversion among the students would result in higher communication competence. Therefore, research question one was answered and hypotheses H<sub>1a</sub>, H<sub>1b</sub>, H<sub>1d</sub> and H<sub>1e</sub> were supported.

Table 3  
*Multiple Regression Analysis*

Independent variables	Standardized Coefficients Beta	t	Sig.
Extraversion	.300	3.691	.000
Agreeableness	.338	4.623	.000
Conscientiousness	.012	.155	.877
Neuroticism	.013	.167	.868
Openness to Experience	.241	3.087	.002
R Square		.437	
F		20.797	
Sig. F Value		.000	
Durbin Watson		1.795	

Findings from the regression analysis between personality traits and communication competence were tabulated in **Table 3**. It was found that R<sup>2</sup> was .437, in which all of the independent variables such as extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, neuroticism and openness to experience explained 43.7% of the variance (R square) for communication competence, with significant of F value of .000. In addition, the Durbin Watson value was 1.795, which was good as it was in the range of 1.5 to 2, in line with one of the assumptions for bivariate and multivariate correlation analyses. The analysis revealed that agreeableness was the most influential component of personality traits on the students' communication competence ( $\beta=.338$ ,  $p<.001$ ). Consecutively, extraversion was found to be the second variable that had an influence on communication competence ( $\beta=.300$ ,  $p<.001$ ). Finally, the sub variable openness to experience was also found to influence communication competence ( $\beta=.241$ ,  $p<0.05$ ). Conscientiousness and neuroticism dimensions were not found to influence communication competence among undergraduate students. All influential elements of personality traits had positive influence on communication competence. Therefore, it can be concluded that based on this analysis, it was found that agreeableness significantly contributed in predicting the students' communication competence.

**Table 4** summarizes the comparison between UiTM and UKM undergraduate students' personality traits and communication competence. For UKM, it was found that all of the components in independent variable such as extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, neuroticism and openness to experience explained 43.4% of the variance (R square) for communication competence, while for UiTM students, the dimensions of personality traits explained 46.1% of the variance for communication competence which was 2.7% greater than UKM undergraduate students. Durbin Watson values for both universities were within the good range of 1.5 to 2, in line with one of the assumptions for bivariate and multivariate correlation analyses. Further, the analysis also revealed that communication competence for UKM students was significantly influenced by two personality traits, which were agreeableness as the most influential dimension of personality traits ( $\beta=.478$ ,  $p<.05$ )



followed by openness to experience ( $\beta=.325$ ,  $p<.05$ ). In the meantime, it was also found that UiTM students' communication competence was significantly influenced by three personality traits which were extraversion trait being the most influential ( $\beta=.368$ ,  $p<.05$ ) followed by agreeableness and openness to experience ( $\beta=.265$ ,  $p<.05$ ;  $\beta=.204$ ,  $p<.05$ ) respectively. Conscientiousness and neuroticism dimensions were found to have no influence towards communication competence among undergraduate students for both UKM and UiTM. All influential elements of personality traits had positive influence on communication competence.

Table 4

*Multiple Regression Analysis (Comparisons between Universities)*

Uni.	Independent variables	Standardized Coefficients Beta	t	Sig.
UKM	Extraversion	.122	.928	.358
	<b>Agreeableness</b>	<b>.478</b>	<b>4.190</b>	<b>.000</b>
	Conscientiousness	.078	.603	.550
	Neuroticism	.110	.830	.411
	<b>Openness to Experience</b>	<b>.325</b>	<b>2.454</b>	<b>.018</b>
	R Square		.434	
	F		7.513	
	Sig. F Value		.000	
UiTM	<b>Extraversion</b>	<b>.368</b>	<b>3.473</b>	<b>.001</b>
	<b>Agreeableness</b>	<b>.265</b>	<b>2.744</b>	<b>.008</b>
	Conscientiousness	-.027	-.280	.780
	Neuroticism	-.052	-.495	.622
	<b>Openness to Experience</b>	<b>.204</b>	<b>2.064</b>	<b>.042</b>
	R Square		.461	
	F		13.488	
	Sig. F Value		.000	
	Durbin Watson		1.837	

These findings have been supported by various communication studies. According to Teven, McCroskey and Richmond (2006), Berne (2011) and Grant, Gino and Hofmann (2011), previous researches have indicated that the way individuals communicate and their ability to successfully lead others can be influenced by their personality. This was also supported by Layton (2013), who stated that personality played a major role in developing an individual's communication competence. Regardless of personality type, leaders may possess the ability to be competent in communication. A local researcher has also noted in her study that psychological constructs, for instance personality, are one of the main criteria that is necessary in validating the theory of communication competence (Lailawati, 2008). Nonetheless, according to Daly (2002), the integrative models of personality have been given little attention by the communication scholarship, though a body of existing research has suggested that personality is somehow connected to communication behaviors (Daly, 2002; Grant et al., 2011; Hargie & Dickson, 2004; Spitzberg & Cupach, 1984).

### Conclusions

This research was conducted as a pilot study; hence it may limit the generalizability of the findings of this study. It was intended to ascertain the instrumentation of the study as well as to determine the relationship between personality traits and communication competence among final year students in two public universities in Klang Valley. Based on the statistical analyses, it was found that three dimensions of personality traits (extraversion, agreeableness and openness to experience) had significant and positive relationships with communication competence, while one dimension (neuroticism) was negatively related to the dependent variable. Moreover, it was also found that agreeableness had the greatest influence on communication competence, followed by extraversion and openness to experience. Two dimensions of personality traits (conscientiousness and neuroticism) were not found to influence communication competence among undergraduate students for both universities, UiTM and UKM. In a nutshell, personality is one of the many determinants that may influence the communication competence among students. Therefore, it would be a wise step for educational administrators to assist students in enhancing their communication skills by engaging more activities that promote certain personality traits. In essence, students in general were born with different personalities, and yet, they can still be assisted to maximize their communication potentials by matching certain elements in their own personality.

### Recommendations

Students in Malaysia especially need to know their own personality traits in order to enhance their communication skills. Culture, the authors suspect, may influence the students to communicate openly. It is an open secret that Malaysian students, especially from the Malay society have high respect for those who are older than them, especially the teachers. This is especially true when Malaysian students in general will not ask questions in classrooms, would prefer peer or group-work type of study instead of two-way classroom interactions with the teacher. In addition, most Malay students tend not to show that they disagree with a respected person, such as a teacher, a supervisor or persons with authority. It is recommended that instructors reward class participations by encouraging the students to ask questions and to encourage them to disagree with the teacher. In fact, it is the opinion of the researchers that the students should be rewarded for disagreeing with the teachers after presenting an opposing idea which can be a better solution than what is laid out by the teachers.

This is especially true when the decision of saying something different from the authority like a boss or a supervisor (in this case, the teacher) may affect others. According to Flynn and Smith (2007), those with the responsibilities of making crucial decisions and participating in discussion process are more likely those with lower level of agreeableness and neuroticism traits. Nevertheless, those with agreeableness traits were more likeable by their superiors due to the nature of the willingness to compromise with their own interests and being supportive with everything.

It is absolutely pitiful for one to more agreeable or disagreeable just to please the person of authority. This ability is essential in balancing and coping with the pressure and demands of the working world later in life. Workforce of the future should have employees who are risk-takers, the ones who are willing to say no when it is rightfully so to say no and those who work without fear or favor for the organizations they work for. Universities are the training grounds in preparing young, inquisitive minds to help shape this nation to be right along other advanced countries. Therefore, students must be coached and to freely express



their disagreements or to appropriately point out their views and opinions. Extraverted people are those with motivation to communicate to others. Hence, introverted students should continuously learn how to initiate conversation with others or at least, learn how not to avoid conversations. Furthermore, students with low level of openness to experience trait need to feel courageous to imagine and explore new things, which will indirectly require them to communicate their minds. These students may have no problem with communication but their lack of interest in getting out of their comfort zone may prevent them from communicating with other people.

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