

## Assertiveness Among Undergraduates in a Malaysian Public University: Implications Towards Improved Employability

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### Abstract

Assertiveness began to gain scholarly interest in the 1940s but more recent research on assertiveness has pointed to the importance of assertiveness in English language teaching and learning as well as in developing student's communicative competence. In the context of workplace communication also, assertiveness is regarded as an important skill which will improve an individual's interpersonal communication. However, previous cross-cultural studies have shown that Asians are less assertive than Westerners because the principles of assertiveness may be in conflict with the values of Asian society. As a result of this, Asians may be placed in a less favourable light in situations in which assertiveness is highly regarded. Hence, this study aims to discover the level of assertiveness among undergraduates in a Malaysian public university. This paper will also report on two factors i.e. communicative competence and situations that may have a significant relationship on an individual's level of assertiveness. Respondents were chosen through proportionate stratified sampling to complete the Rathus Assertiveness Survey (RAS) used in this study. Findings indicate a high level of assertiveness but a significant difference in the level of assertiveness in different settings, while the relationship between assertiveness and communicative competence appears to contradict past research. Finally, the implication of the findings of this study with regard to employability is discussed.

*Keywords:* Assertiveness; communicative competence; situational and personal setting; unemployment; employability

### Abstrak

Ketegasan mula mendapat perhatian pada tahun 1940 tetapi penyelidikan yang lebih terkini menunjuk kepada kepentingan ketegasan dalam pengajaran dan pembelajaran bahasa Inggeris serta dalam membangunkan kemahiran berkomunikasi pelajar. Dalam konteks komunikasi di tempat kerja, ketegasan dianggap sebagai kemahiran yang penting dalam meningkatkan komunikasi interpersonal seseorang. Walaubagaimanapun, kajian silang budaya telah menunjukkan bahawa orang Asia adalah kurang tegas berbanding orang di Barat. Ini menyebabkan orang Asia dianggap kurang berkemampuan di dalam situasi di mana ketegasan di anggap penting. Oleh itu, kajian ini bertujuan untuk mengetahui tahap ketegasan di kalangan mahasiswa di university awam Malaysia. Kertas kerja ini juga akan melaporkan dua factor iaitu kemahiran berkomunikasi dan persekitaran yang mungkin mempunyai perbezaan yang ketara pada tahap ketegasan individu. Responden telah dipilih melalui persampelan berstrata seimbang untuk melengkapkan Rathus Assertiveness Survey (RAS) yang digunakan di dalam kajian ini. Hasil kajian menunjukkan tahap ketegasan yang tinggi tetapi terdapat perbezaan yang signifikan dalam tahap ketegasan dalam persekitaran yang berbeza. Walaubagaimanapun, hubungan Antara ketegasan dan kecekapan komunikasi nampaknya menyangkal hasil kajian yang lalu. Akhir sekali, implikasi dapatan kajian dan kebolehpekerjaan dibincangkan.

*Kata kunci:* Ketegasan; kemahiran berkomunikasi; persekitaran peribadi; pengangguran; kebolehpekerjaan

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## ■1.0 INTRODUCTION

Currently, one of the major goals of education is to train individuals to make them adaptable to different conditions and to possess the ability to think critically. Apart from this, it is also crucial for university students to possess high self-esteem and assertiveness in order to be able to communicate more effectively in communicating and demonstrating their professional knowledge and skills. So much so that it is now vital for university education to create graduates who possess high level of assertiveness (Karagzoglu *et al.*, 2008). Assertiveness which is widely used in various fields namely health, psychology and communication, have somewhat similar definition and can be defined as “the capacity to make requests, actively disagree, express positive or negative personal rights and feelings, initiate, maintain, or disengage from conversations, and stand up for one’s self without attacking another” (Richmond and McCroskey, 1985, p.69).

This ability—to assert and defend one’s own opinion and ideas as well as to disagree in a positive manner—appears to be a skill which is lacking among Malaysian undergraduates. Such a concern was expressed by the International Advisory Panel (IAP) in 2007. In particular, Malaysian students appear to lack the courage to ask question, lack assertiveness in defending their own ideas and do not possess good analytical skills when compared to students abroad (Khairul Anuar *et al.*, 2011). It is now apparent that assertiveness and the importance of assertiveness must be inculcated in Malaysian tertiary education. Through assertive behaviour, students will be equipped with positive personality and high self-esteem which are very valuable quality to possess especially when facing both personal and professional challenges in their future life.

Apart from assertiveness, the issue regarding the lack of communication skills among Malaysian undergraduates is not new and continues to be the concern for many stakeholders, be it the institute of higher education, employers or the graduates themselves. However, it has become one of the greatest challenge for English teachers, especially at tertiary level, to encourage students to communicate in English and to prepare them for the demands of the job market. As such, it has always been the primary concern of second language teachers to increase oral competency among second language learners. However, the low performance of the second language learners, especially in oral communication, still remains a problem even after years of learning English in school as a compulsory subject (Amizura Hanadi *et al.*, 2007). Therefore, this paper examines aspects of communication skills which are lacking and it is believed that assertive communication could hold the key to this issue.

A previous study carried out on the “Assertiveness and Academic Procrastination of English and Communication Students at a Private University” pointed out that as a way to excel in English and Communication Skills, students need to show high level of assertiveness (Yong, 2010). This, in addition, can be supported by the fact that assertiveness is seen as a characteristic of a competent communicator (Singhal and Nagao, 1993) while other researchers have claimed that assertiveness is observed as being more competent and attractive in America (Cook and St. Lawrence, 1990).

In the context of workplace communication, it has been recommended that organizations need to impart assertiveness training to their employees across all levels as this will improve the quality of interpersonal relationships within the organization (Anant, 2009). As a result, managerial effectiveness will be improved and pathological stress reduced. Previous studies have shown that poor interpersonal communication is said to be the number one cause of managerial failure and through assertive

training the organizational efficiencies will be dramatically increased (Hymowitz, 1988). The findings of these past research have shown that assertiveness is an important aspect of communication especially in the context of workplace communication. This clearly indicates that that such of skill should be developed among undergraduates to prepare them for their future personal and professional communicative challenges.

### 1.1 Research Objectives

The discussion thus far has pointed to the need for a study to examine assertiveness among undergraduates in Malaysia. Based on previous research, it is understood that assertiveness could develop or has an impact on the communicative competence of a person. Therefore, the aims of this paper are: i) to discover the level of assertiveness among undergraduates in Universiti Teknologi Malaysia (UTM), a public university in the South of Malaysia, and ii) to determine if there is a significant difference in the level of assertiveness between individuals of different levels of communicative competence and settings i.e. personal and situational. Specifically, this paper attempts to answer the following research questions:

1. What is the level of assertiveness among undergraduates in UTM?
2. Is there a significant difference in the level of assertiveness between a) different levels of communicative competence and b) settings—personal and situational?

### 1.2 Significance of the Study

A previous survey has shown that about 60,000 Malaysian graduates were unemployed due to lack of experience, poor English, and low communication skills (Gurvinder and Sharan, 2008). In line with the issue of low communicative competence discussed above, it is important to examine what aspects of communication skill which are still lacking in these graduates which may contribute to their inability to communicate competently. Specifically, this study is interested in examining assertiveness and factors that impact on a person’s level of assertiveness. In fact, the present study is important as it provides insights to English language teachers about the relationship between assertiveness and communicative competence. Although this is a small-scale study, it is an important preliminary step towards a significant research in the future. The findings will help to direct future research into similar issues, as it helps to identify the area of assertiveness which necessitates further investigation, as well as to identify the categories for classification to be explored in future research.

## ■2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

In English Language Teaching (ELT), it is essential for students to understand the target language and to respond appropriately so that they can become competent users of a particular language. Learning a language is not just about learning to comprehend the grammatical rules and its meaning, but also the ability to use and to apply it in real-life situations. Hence, communicative competence is important in ELT and it should be the aim of learners. Communicative competence, although may be defined differently by different perspectives, has a bearing on the way a person reacts and responds to the communication of others which is reflected in the style of communication.

## 2.1 Socio-communicative Style

An earlier study has shown that there are four socio-communicative styles: competent, non-competent, aggressive, and submissive (Richmond and McCroskey, 1985). Competent communicators are individuals who are high in both assertiveness and responsiveness while individuals who are low in both assertiveness and responsiveness are non-competent. While individuals who are high in assertiveness and low in responsiveness are considered aggressive, in contrary, individuals are low in assertiveness and high in responsiveness are submissive. Figure 1 illustrates the four socio-communicative styles.

Socio-communicative style (SCS) was originally developed from Norton's (1978) concept of communicator style which looks at an individual's use of assertive and responsive behaviours (Singhal and Nagao, 1993). Moreover, previous studies have stated that the way in which a person displays himself to others and stands on the evaluation of a person's use of assertive and responsive behaviours are defined as SCS (Richmond and McCroskey, 1985). A person's skill to begin communication, to adjust and to reply to the communication of others is also defined as SCS (Thomas, Richmond and McCroskey, 1994).

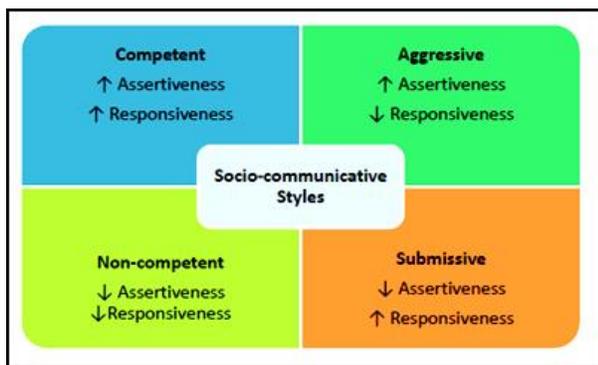


Figure 1 Socio-communicative styles<sup>10</sup>

It is believed that as a way to increase understanding and improve communication, the simplest and most effective way is to adjust communication behaviour of self with others through these styles (Manery, 2000). SCS enables more effective interpersonal communication results through an individual's communication orientation other than their own. In other words, the ability to adapt and to adjust one's communication style with others is an indication of a competent communicator (Triandis, 2004). Furthermore, the way an individual starts, responds, adjusts, and ends the communication with others is done through Assertiveness and Responsiveness. These characteristics have indirectly shown the relationship between SCS, specifically assertiveness, and being communicatively competent.

## 2.2 Assertiveness

Assertiveness began attracting research interest in the 1940s and earlier studies have shown that students should demonstrate high level of assertiveness as a way to excel in English and Communication Skills (Yong, 2010). In fact, previous study has shown that assertiveness is one of three components of communicative competence (Singhal and Nagao, 1993), thus, people who possess a high assertiveness levels are perceived as competent communicators (Zakahi, 1985). It is believed that assertiveness is important for students to succeed in oral

presentations and group discussions (Yong, 2010), and this can be related to the fact that assertiveness allows a person to be more self-assured and confident (Bankole and Dauda, 2009).

"Assertiveness involves standing up for personal rights and expressing thoughts, feelings and beliefs in direct, honest and appropriate ways which do not violate another person's rights" (Lange and Jakubowski, 1976, p.7). This clearly indicates the impact assertiveness has on an individual's style of communication or how a person communicates. In addition, assertive people are able to express themselves directly and openly, while taking into consideration the rights of others involved (Korem, Horenczyk, and Tatar, 2012). Hence, assertiveness can be viewed as being frank, straightforward, standing for one's own rights while respecting other people's thoughts and feelings.

Defending one's opinion while respecting others' is not an easy task, it is, however, believed that the ability to do so is made easier by those who have a high level of assertiveness. Moreover, self-assurance and confidence which comes along with assertiveness will leave a good impression on a person, making him/her be perceived as a competent communicator (Bankole and Dauda, 2009). Maintaining human relations while communicating requires skill and it is related to the communicators' behavior as well. Being assertive or the ability to communicate while maintaining human relation can be challenging at times but can be easily achieved by communicators who are expressive but show respect of others' opinions at the same time (Lange and Jakubowski, 1976).

In an earlier study, assertive communication has been shown to be a skill that allows a person to be more self-assured and by having such skill, the right interpersonal skills in handling situations and people will be developed (Bankole and Dauda, 2009). It is also believed that assertiveness helps a person in personal empowerment and it is a healthy form of behavior (Delsidou, 2008). Both these studies have shown that assertive communication can have a very positive influence on a person's communicative and overall development.

In its early popularity, studies on assertiveness mainly focused on the differences in assertiveness based on the race of the communicator as assertiveness is related to culture (Sigler, Burnett and Child, 2008). For example, assertiveness is more characteristic of individualistic societies in the West as compared to collectivistic or Asian societies.

## 2.3 Assertiveness and Malaysian Culture

Malaysian ethics is quite different from Western ethics. Respecting the elders, preferring group orientation of 'we more than I' or highlighting the belonging to an in-group is part of Malaysian ethics (Jamal, 2006). In addition, typical of other Asian societies, Malaysians uphold principles that underlie a harmonious relationship, a concern for face saving, and religious orientation (Abdullah, 2001). This, in many ways, contradicts the Western viewpoint. In fact the importance of extended family, disgrace and face-saving reactions, pressure for academic achievement, authoritarian and patriarchal family structures are some characteristics that distinguish Malaysian from Western culture (Triandis, 2001). However, the most important dimension which separates the west and Asian society is individualism versus collectivism.

Previous studies have shown that assertiveness is less commended in Malaysia, which has a collectivist culture. The collectivist culture can be seen reflected in Malaysian students' preference for group success, teamwork, and interdependence as opposed to individual successive, competition, and independence (Yong, 2010). What is more, Malaysian society highly values and

respects authority and being assertive, which require a person to speak up, might conflict with the values held by Asian societies. This is why being assertive, although much encouraged in the west, may not be so in Asian societies such as Japan including Malaysia (Mansor, 2010). In workplace or professional context, previous research has pointed to the fact that low assertiveness with authority is observed as respectful in some Asian countries (Hofstede, 2004). Hence, high assertiveness may have negative implications in Malaysia, giving the assumption that one is impolite or superior. It is opposed to the face saving culture that values cooperation and indirect conflict management style which is known to be more acceptable (Rose, Suppiah, Uli, and Othman, 2007).

In the educational setting, group orientation is important among Malaysian students, such as those in the university, who work extremely well in a team environment. These students have a strong sense of belonging and show more preference for group assignments rather than individual ones (Mansor, 2010). This clearly reveals their spirit of collectivism as being more vital than their individualistic tendencies and this is often translated in the willingness to give priority to group benefits ahead of personal concerns.

Even though, most previous research has pointed to the fact that assertiveness is not so commended in Asian societies such as Malaysia, it is important to stress that this does not mean that Malaysians are lacking in initiative or are unassertive. Most Malaysians wait for clear directions and favour decision making by an authority figure, but this should not be misinterpreted for a lack of motivation or self-confidence. Other researchers have also shown that Malaysians are assertive in selected situations (Yong, 2010). This is not surprising as assertiveness can be divided into different types based on the situation.

#### 2.4 Assertiveness and Different Settings

Few individuals are assertive through all situations, but most find it easier to assert themselves in some situations than others (Hargie and Dickson, 2004). Previous study asserts that it has long been known that the situation in which assertiveness is required is important (Hargie and Dickson, 2004). Previous studies have looked at assertiveness in two main settings—situational and personal, which is also the focus of this study.

##### 2.4.1 Situational Settings

In an earlier study on the level of assertiveness among private university students in Malaysia, it was found that Malaysian students' assertiveness tends to be situation-specific (Yong, 2010). They are assertive in terms of academic tasks. When asked to carry out a task, Malaysian students will insist on knowing the purpose of the task. In other words, Malaysian students are determined when it comes to task fulfillment, but may be less assertive in social situations.

In this study, situations were given which represent the common situations related to the situational setting. For instance, this included situations during the lecture and working on assignments.

##### 2.4.2 Personal Settings

Previous studies have found that Malaysian university students tend to be less assertive in terms of interpersonal relationships with peers and lecturers (Yong, 2010). In this study, student's assertiveness in different situations, including personal settings, will also be investigated.

#### 2.5 Assertiveness and Communicative Competence

The term communicative competence was initiated in the early 1970s and it is defined as the ability to understand and produce speech in real situations in ways that are effective and suitable in relation to the context (Hymes, 1972). In other words, communicative competence describes a speaker who has the skill to interact efficiently with others and the knowledge about ways and the time to use utterances properly. Moreover, previous studies have indicated that communicative competence denotes the concept of appropriate and effective communication in an interpersonal communication.

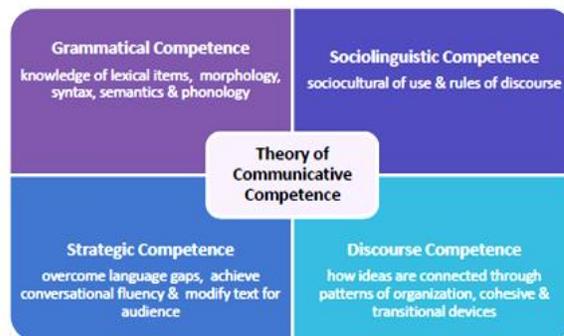


Figure 2 Theory of communicative competence (Canale and Swain, 1980)

Previous researchers have proposed a theoretical framework of communicative competence (Figure 2) which is believed to be applied in second language teaching and testing (Canale and Swain, 1980). Through experience in communicative use of first or dominant language, the communicative approach is an integrative one which prominence is on preparing second language learners to exploit those grammatical features through acquired sociolinguistic and strategic competency. The proposed theoretical framework of communicative competence includes:

- (i) Grammatical competence—an important concern for any communicative approach, whose aims include providing learners with knowledge on how to determine and express precisely the literal meaning of words,
- (ii) Sociolinguistic competence—knowledge of this rule is vital in interpreting statements for social meaning,
- (iii) Strategic competence—made up of verbal and non-verbal communication strategies that could overcome communication breakdowns, and
- (iv) Discourse competence—knowledge on how ideas are connected through patterns of organization, cohesive and transitional devices.

It is important to note that people who are perceived as competent communicator possess high assertiveness level (Singhal and Nagao, 1993). This can be supported by an earlier study that indicated that one of the signs of communicative competence is assertiveness (Thomas, Richmond, and McCroskey, 1994). Additionally, it is stated that assertiveness is seen as a characteristic of a competent communicator and that assertiveness is observed as being more competent and attractive in the U.S (Cook and St. Lawrence, 1990).

## 2.6 Communicative Competence and Employment

English is taught as an important subject in both primary and secondary Malaysian schools alongside other subjects as it takes the status of a second language in Malaysia and being an important medium of communication, both at the local and international levels. However, many local graduates are faced with the issue of unemployment as they fail to secure employment due to their lack of competence in the English language, particularly during job interviews (Gurvinder and Sharan, 2008, Chan and Tan, 2006). Furthermore, in an earlier study on undergraduate's readiness for employment, the findings indicated that despite excellent academic results, many graduates are left jobless because of their low proficiency in English (Zarina Othman *et al.* 2011).

In line with the issue of low communicative competence previously discussed, it is important to examine what aspects of communication skill which are lacking in these graduates which may be one of the reasons for their inability to communicate competently. Hence, the present study is important as it provides insights to English language teachers about the relationship between assertiveness and communicative competence.

Earlier researcher stated that "research on assertiveness would enable lecturers to find ways to help students reach their fullest potential in English and Communication Skills" (Yong, 2010, p.64) and believed that it could improve the students presentation skills. Since assertiveness is important for university students and their future, it is relevant to identify their level of assertiveness and how they perceive assertiveness as it will contribute to an informed conclusion regarding the impact of assertiveness in enhancing communication competency among Malaysian students.

## 3.0 METHODOLOGY

As the aim of the study is to measure the level of assertiveness among students, this study utilized the quantitative approach which is a method for collecting, analyzing quantitative data for the purpose of gaining a better understanding of the research problem. This study was set out to identify if there is a significant difference in the level of assertiveness between students of different levels of communicative competence and in different settings. The sampling of the respondents involved in this study is described in the following sections.

### 3.1 Respondents

As of January 2012, it is estimated that there are 12,955 Malaysian undergraduate students in UTM this semester in all faculties such as Faculty of Civil Engineering, Faculty of Electrical Engineering, Faculty of Mechanical Engineering, Faculty of Computing, Faculty of Geoinformation and Real Estate, Faculty of Built Environment and else. They consist of students from various ethnicities such as Malay, Chinese, Indian, Kadazan, Iban and more. Table 1 provides information pertaining to the number of samples involved in this study.

**Table 1** No. of samples

	Faculties	Students
Engineering	Faculty of Electrical Engineering (FKE)	798
	Faculty of Mechanical Engineering (FKM)	754
	Faculty of Computing (FC)	613
Non-Engineering	Faculty of Geoinformation and Real Estate (FKSG)	518
	<b>Total</b>	<b>2,683</b>

From the total number of undergraduates from the selected engineering and non-engineering faculties, only 10 percent of the population will be randomly selected for this study. Therefore, there should be a total of 268 samples involved in this study; however, a total number of 300 sets of questionnaires were distributed. Data were gathered from UTM Malaysian undergraduates from three main ethnic groups (i.e. Malay, Chinese and Indian), from different faculties and consist both male and female students.

### 3.2 Questionnaire

Like many previous research that examines the level of assertiveness in educational settings (Yong, 2010; Sigler, Burnett and Child, 2008), this study uses the Rathus Assertiveness Schedule (RAS) which measures assertiveness based on two different settings—personal and situational. There are 20 items and respondents will be required to circle the appropriate scale based on their perception of themselves and their agreement or disagreement of the situations given. Table 2 shows the scale that is used in this study.

There are five scales which range from 1 to 5, with '1' being strongly disagree and 5 as strongly agree. If the respondents chose '5', it shows that they are assertive as they strongly agree with the assertive situations. However, if they prefer '1', it shows that their assertiveness level is low as they strongly disagree with the assertiveness situations. Meanwhile, those who prefer '3' shows that they are in the moderate level. However, for item 1, 3, 5, 7, 9, 12, 14, 16, 18, and 20, the scale was reversed as the situations are negative (to avoid response bias). Therefore, for these items, if they chose '1' shows that they are strongly agree with the assertive situations and vice versa.

**Table 2** Scale

Score	1	2	3	4	5
Items	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Uncertain	Agree	Strongly Agree

It is important to note that the entire questionnaire is divided into 3 parts; i) Part A: Demographic Background, ii) Part B: Personal and Situational Settings and iii) Part C: Rathus Assertiveness Schedule.

**Part A:** The purpose of this part is to obtain the information about students' demographic background and for the purpose of analysing the data based on variables that will be covered in this study.

**Part B:** In this part, the students were required to write down their reaction in both Personal and Situational Settings. Six settings were given whereby 3 settings represent the situational settings and another 3 settings represent the personal settings. The rationale of this part is to discover whether the students' level of assertiveness remains the same in different situations.

**Part C:** This is the Rathus Assertiveness Schedule (RAS) which contains 20 items that require subjects to describe themselves and every item in RAS will be measuring assertiveness based on two different settings—personal and situational.

A pilot study was conducted to establish the validity and reliability of the questionnaire used. The questionnaire obtained a Cronbach alpha reliability coefficient of 0.82.

### 3.3 Data Analysis

The data collected were analysed using SPSS version 20. Frequency scores, percentage and standard deviation were determined to identify the level of assertiveness among UTM undergraduates. The mean assertiveness scores between undergraduates in different ethnic groups were compared by ANOVA and in addition to this, a paired sample t-test was carried out to identify if there is a significant difference in the level of assertiveness between respondents in different settings.

As for the qualitative data or responses to the open ended questions, the first step in analysing the open-ended questions is open coding. In this step, data are clustered in themes (Brown, Stevenson, Troiano, & Schneider, 2002). At this stage, the coding is loosely structured or open to allow many potential themes to emerge. The process begins with an identification of the language used. The linguistic analysis focuses on the lexical choice and structure. Once the language used had been identified, the data were organised based on the emerging themes.

The themes included i) Submissive which is Being silent and Expressing indifference/lack of concern, ii) Assertive–Expressing own rights via appropriate language, Expressing opinions and Expressing thoughts in direct way, and iii) Aggressive–Expressing own right using strong language and Expressing thoughts using harsh words.

## 4.0 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A total number of 300 questionnaires were distributed to UTM undergraduates and a total of 229 of them were returned and analysed. The demographic information of the samples is shown in Table 3.

**Table 3** Demographic of samples (n=229)

Item	Frequency	Percentage (%)
<b>Gender</b>		
Male	121	52.8
Female	108	47.2
<b>Race</b>		
Malay	100	43.7
Chinese	100	43.7
Indian	29	12.6
<b>Faculty</b>		
Engineering	137	59.8
Non-engineering	92	40.2

### 4.1 Level of Assertiveness Among Undergraduates in UTM

In order to identify the level of assertiveness among UTM undergraduates, frequency scores, percentage and standard deviation were calculated. The findings are shown in Table 4.

**Table 4** Level of assertiveness among UTM undergraduates

	Frequency	Percent	Mean	Std. Deviation
Low	11	4.8	1.95	.214
High	218	95.2		
Total	229	100.0		

The overall mean score obtained is 1.95 (SD=0.214). From the findings, 95.2 percent of the undergraduates are categorized as possessing high assertiveness level while only 4.8 percent are described as having low assertiveness level (refer Table 3). As for

the qualitative data, although the responses to the open ended questions were analysed and categorized according to the three themes that is Submissive, Assertive and Aggressive, only the assertive themes are reported in Table 5.

**Table 5** Frequency of assertive themes (n=229)

Question	Frequency	
<b>Personal</b>	1	181
	2	183
	3	171
<b>Situational</b>	1	159
	2	195
	3	212

From the findings shown in Table 5 it is shown that the majority of the respondents are assertive based on the frequency of assertive themes that have emerged from the data. Therefore, this supports the quantitative data and can be concluded that the majority of UTM undergraduates are highly assertive.

The discussion in the previous sections have shown that assertiveness is less commended in Asian countries including Malaysia, which also has a collectivist culture which is reflected in Malaysian students value for cooperation, group success, and interdependence rather than competition, individual success, and independence (Yong, 2010). These findings contradict previous research on assertiveness and Malaysian culture. For example, in one of the open-ended questions, the respondents were given a situation in which one of their classmates ask them to work with him/her despite the lecturer specifically telling them to work individually without any help from friends. Interestingly, a majority of them responded assertively.

One of the most important findings in this study is that the undergraduates are seen to be able to overcome the situation assertively. These findings, however, contradict the findings in previous study that group orientation is important among Malaysian students and they work extremely well in a team environment with most preferring group assignments rather than individual ones (Mansor, 2010). Nevertheless, it should be considered that in an earlier study, it was found that Malaysian students tend to be assertive and determined when it comes to task fulfillment (Yong, 2010).

### 4.2 Assertiveness and Different Levels of Communicative Competence

Currently in Malaysia, the Malaysian University English Testing or MUET is widely used as a benchmark in determining students English language proficiency for the purpose of admission into Malaysian public universities. The test is developed and administered by the Malaysian Examination Council and recognized only in Malaysia and Singapore. The grading for MUET is as follows: i) Band 1: Extremely limited user, ii) Band 2: Limited user, iii) Band 3: Modest user, iv) Band 4: Competent user, v) Band 5: Good user, and vi) Band 6: Very good user. In this study, the researcher adapted the MUET classification band to categorize respondents' level of communicative competence into three groups: High, Moderate, and Low. Respondents were asked to indicate their MUET results according to band (1-6). The researcher then grouped their results into three groups; i) Low (Bands 1 & 2), ii) Moderate (Bands 3 & 4), and iii) High (Bands 5 & 6). Since there are three levels, ANOVA was used to determine the significant difference in the level of assertiveness between

respondents with low, medium and high levels of communicative competence.

**Table 6** Level of assertiveness between respondents of different levels of communicative competence ( $n=229$ )

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	P
Between Groups	31.763	2	15.882	.302	.740
Within Groups	11889.425	226	52.608		
Total	11921.188	228			

Table 6 shows that there is no significant difference in the mean scores of the level of assertiveness between respondents of different levels of language proficiency ( $p$ -value=0.740).

These findings indicate that the level of language proficiency of a person does not influence his/her assertiveness level. In addition, this appears to contradict the findings of previous studies which has shown that people who are perceived as competent communicator possess high assertiveness level (Singhal and Nagao, 1993) and that assertiveness is one of the signs of communicative competence (Zakahi, 1985). This contradiction may be due to the fact that the respondent's communicative competence was measured using their MUET results which were taken before the students entered university. It can be assumed that their assertiveness and language proficiency have developed throughout their years in UTM. Perhaps another test is required to measure the respondents' current English language proficiency more accurately which may yield a different result.

### 4.3 Assertiveness in Different Settings-Personal and Situational Settings

In an attempt to identify if there is a significant difference in the level of assertiveness between respondents in different settings, paired sample t-test was used and the findings of the test are shown in Table 7.

**Table 7** Level of assertiveness in different settings—situational and personal ( $n=229$ )

	Paired Differences				df	Sig. (2-tailed)
	Mean	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean		
Total Score	29.68					
Personal						
Total Score	31.95	-2.271	4.324	.286	228	.000
Situational						

Table 7 presents the results of the t-test which reveals a significant difference in the mean scores of the level of assertiveness between respondents in different settings ( $p$ -value=0.000). It can also be seen in Table 4 that the mean score for assertiveness in situational setting ( $M=31.95$ ) is higher than the personal setting ( $M=29.68$ ).

The findings show that the respondents are more assertive in situational settings and this is not unexpected as previous studies have indicated that few individuals are assertive through all situations, but most find it easier to assert themselves in some situations than others (Hargie and Dickson, 2004). This also supports the findings in an earlier study that Malaysian students' assertiveness tends to be situation-specific (Yong, 2010). It is

believed that in terms of academic tasks, they are assertive in that they want to know the objectives, but they may be less assertive in social situations.

Previous research has also implied that low assertiveness with authority figures is perceived as respectful in some Asian countries. Hence, high assertiveness may have negative implications in Malaysia, giving the impression that one is rude or arrogant. It runs counter to a face saving culture that values compromise and indirect conflict management styles (Rose, Supiah, Uli and Jamal, 2007). It is, therefore, not surprising that the respondents are more assertive in situational settings rather than in personal settings.

#### 4.3.1 The Level of Assertiveness Between Respondents in Personal Settings

Table 8 indicates the themes and the frequency of the themes that emerged in the personal setting (Question 1).

**Table 8** Personal setting: Question 1

Theme	Frequency
Expressing own rights via appropriate language (Assertive)	144
Expressing thoughts in direct way (Assertive)	37
Expressing indifference/ lack of concern (Submissive)	18

The first situation seeks the reaction of the respondents in a situation whereby their friends return a book with missing pages. Based on the above table, it can be seen that the majority of the undergraduates ( $n=144$ ) express their own rights via appropriate language (refer Table 8). Whereas, 37 of them would be expressing their thoughts in direct way and 18 respondents would be expressing indifference or lack of concern. However, none of the respondents remain silent. It is from the responses given by the respondents that the researcher is able to see how the respondents protect and stand up for their own rights in an appropriate manner. For instance, most of them will ask for an explanation from their friends regarding the missing pages as following:

“Can you tell me what happen to my book?” (Q/R068/C/F/Eng)

Table 9 indicates the themes and the frequency of the themes emerged in personal setting (Question 2).

**Table 9** Personal setting: Question 2

Theme	Frequency
Expressing own rights via appropriate language (Assertive)	112
Expressing thoughts in direct way (Assertive)	71
Expressing own right using strong language (Aggressive)	24

The second situation asked the respondents to react to a situation in which a friend, who has on previous occasion borrowed money but has failed to pay back, asks to borrow money. As seen

in Table 8, the majority of the respondents ( $n=112$ ) would express their own rights via appropriate language. Whereas 71 of them would express their thoughts in direct way and 24 respondents would be expressing their own right using strong language. It is clear that most of the respondents are able to assert themselves and communicate this appropriately. For instance, most of them will ask for their money to be returned, for example:

“Can you please return me my money that I borrow you thus far.”  
(Q/R056/C/M/Eng)

Table 10 shows the themes and the frequency of the themes that have emerged in personal setting (Question 3).

**Table 10** Personal setting: Question 3

Theme	Frequency
Expressing thoughts in direct way (Assertive)	157
Expressing own right using strong language (Aggressive)	25
Expressing indifference/ lack of concern (Submissive)	21

The final situation seeks the respondents' reaction to a friend who regularly cancels her/him plans. Table 10 shows that in the given situation, the majority of the undergraduates ( $n=157$ ) prefer to express their thoughts in a direct way. While, 25 of them would express this using strong language and 21 respondents would express indifference or a lack of concern. Again, the majority have shown that they will behave assertively in such situations as shown in the following:

“Next time, make sure you can make it before you make any plan with me because I have other things to do too.”  
(Q/R188/I/M/Eng)

#### 4.3.2 The Level of Assertiveness Between Respondents in Situational Settings

The respondents were given three situations related to situational settings. Table 11 indicates the themes and the frequency of the themes that have emerged in situational setting (Question 1).

**Table 11** Situational setting: Question 1

Theme	Frequency
Expressing thoughts in direct way (Assertive)	159
Expressing indifference/ lack of concern (Submissive)	57
Being silent (Submissive)	10

In the first situation, the respondents were asked to react to their friends who have requested to work together on an individual assignment. Based on Table 11, it can be seen that 159 undergraduates would express their thoughts in a direct way. While, 57 of them would express indifference/ lack of concern and 10 respondents would be silent. From their responses, the majority

of them chose to be direct by telling their friends that they have been instructed to complete the assignment individually:

“I would like to help, but lecturer said we should do it on our own.”  
(Q/R034/C/F/N/Eng)

In the second situation, the respondents were asked to give their reaction if they were in a situation whereby they believe that the statements made by a lecturer is incorrect and they wanted their views to be heard by their classmates. Table 12 indicates the themes and the frequency of the themes that have emerged in this particular situation (Question 2).

**Table 12** Situational setting: Question 2

Theme	Frequency
Expressing opinions (Assertive)	155
Expressing thoughts in direct way (Assertive)	40
Being silent (Submissive)	34

From the Table 12, it is shown that more than half of the undergraduates ( $n=155$ ) prefer to express their opinions. Whereas, 40 of them would express their thoughts in direct way and 34 respondents would be silent. From their responses, most of them would express their opinions appropriately. For example:

“I'm sorry, Dr. I have an opinion, but it is up to you, if you want to accept it or not.” (Q/R048/My/M/N/Eng)

The final situation required them to indicate their response to a situation whereby their lecturer asked them to give their opinion on a topic that they do not know. Table 13 indicates the themes and the frequency of the themes that have emerged for this particular situation (Question 3).

**Table 13** Situational setting: Question 3

Theme	Frequency
Expressing thoughts in direct way (Assertive)	181
Expressing opinions (Assertive)	31
Being silent (Submissive)	17

Based on Table 13, it is evident that most of the undergraduates ( $n=181$ ) decided to express their thoughts in a direct way. While, 31 of them would express their opinions and 17 respondents stated that they would remain silent. It is clear that a large majority of the students will be assertive and admit that they have no knowledge of the topic. For instance:

“I'm sorry, Sir. I don't know anything about this topic.”  
(Q/R075/My/M/N/Eng)

From the above statement, the respondent chose to be straightforward in such situation which is a characteristic of assertiveness. These indicate that the respondents will react more

assertively in situational setting and it supports the findings from previous study that Malaysian students' assertiveness tends to be situation-specific (Yong, 2010).

## 5.0 CONCLUSION

From this study, it can be concluded that UTM undergraduates possess a high level of assertiveness. Interestingly, it is found that only 11 out of 229 undergraduates possess low level assertiveness. This clearly indicates that the undergraduates in this study have the potential to communicate assertively and become competent communicators. However, these findings appear to be in contradiction with the claim made by the International Advisory Panel (IAP) regarding local students' lack of assertiveness as compared to international students (KhairulAnuar, 2011).

The ANOVA validated that there is no significant difference in the level of assertiveness between respondents of different level of communicative competence. It is interesting to note that these findings appear to contradict previous study which has shown that assertiveness is one of the three components of communicative competence, thus, people who possess high assertiveness level are perceived as competent communicators (Singhal and Nagao, 1993). However, the MUET grading system used in this study may not reflect respondents' current level of communicative competence or proficiency in English language. Perhaps future research will look into other tests which will be more reflective of the respondents' current level of communicative competence.

The t-test validated that there is a significant difference between assertiveness in both settings and it was found that the mean score for assertiveness in situational setting is higher than in the personal setting which indicates that UTM undergraduates are more assertive in situational settings. This concurs with a previous study on assertiveness among Malaysian students which has shown the tendency of these students to be assertive in situational setting (Yong, 2010) such as in academic task or assignments. This suggests that these students, like the respondents in this study, are less assertive in personal settings because they maintain values which are important in their society such as face saving and cooperation. For example, the indirect conflict management style which is known to be more acceptable in the Malaysian culture may be in contradiction with being assertive (Mansor, 2010).

## 6.0 IMPLICATION

This study has clearly shown that the respondents of this study who are undergraduates at UTM do possess a high level of assertiveness. This indicates that the undergraduates are assertive and have the potential to be competent communicators. Thus, it is recommended that these undergraduates receive assertive training perhaps in their English language courses or as part of the university co-curricular activity as it will help towards sustaining or increasing their level of assertiveness. By possessing a high level of assertiveness which will impact on their communicative style, graduates will have a better chance of being employed as the majority of organizations or institutions look for assertive individuals in recruiting new employers to join their organizations or institutions.

In addition, it is shown that there is no significant difference in the level of assertiveness between respondents of different level of communicative competence. However, the researcher believed that MUET may not be the best instrument to measure the undergraduates' current level of proficiency. Thus, it is recommended that a new or alternative test is used to measure the

undergraduates' current level of proficiency or communicative competence more accurately.

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