

Speak Up! Facilitating public speaking skills within our classroom

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Author Note

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Abstract

This paper seeks to assist teachers with integrating appropriate public speaking assignments into their classrooms by surveying relevant research on communication apprehension. This paper is divided into three sections beginning by defining communication apprehension and delving into its potential roots, then identifying factors particularly relevant to teaching public speaking skills to adolescents, and lastly looking into methods of reducing communication apprehension as a way to enhance public speaking skills.

Keywords: public speaking, communication apprehension, adolescence

“Teachers prejudge student’s academic potential as early as elementary school on the basis of communication apprehension” (McCroskey & Daly, 1976).

Introduction

The above quote highlights the importance of communication apprehension as one of the many factors that teachers may unknowingly and inadvertently judge their students on when considering their students’ academic success. As such, it is crucial for teachers to learn and understand about communication apprehension; how it affects the students in their classrooms, and how to assist their students in mitigating their apprehension, thereby meaningfully impacting their students’ lives and public speaking skills in more positive ways. This paper is intended to be a brief survey of relevant research designed to assist teachers with the aforementioned task and is divided into three sections: (1) defining communication apprehension and considering its possible root causes, then moving onto, (2) considering variables specific to adolescents, and finally ending with (3) three communicative methods that teachers may employ in their classroom to meaningfully reduce the apprehension felt by their students when communicating.

Communication Apprehension and its Roots

The most utilized definition of communication apprehension comes from Dr. James C. McCroskey’s extensive research, spanning several decades, on this topic. He posits communication apprehension as “an individual’s level of fear or anxiety associated with either

real or anticipated communication with another person or persons” (McCroskey, 1984 & 2012). As such, this is a broad based apprehension/anxiety that is related to either all forms or some forms of communication (McCroskey, 1970). Therefore, communication apprehension can occur in multiple settings and not just at public speaking events. For example, communication apprehension can occur when individuals are speaking to an authoritative figure or are in a novel social situation such as a holiday party or even if they are just anticipating a conversation with their in-laws while awaiting for their arrivals at an airport. As such, the anxiety known as communication apprehension can occur either during or before a communication situation or both.

Communication apprehension has generally been conceptualized in two different ways: as either trait-like or state-like. However it should be noted that in research communities, communication apprehension can be conceptualized in four ways along a continuum starting with pure-trait-like communication apprehension and ending with a pure-state-like communication apprehension (McCroskey & Beatty, 1986). For the purposes of this paper the general trait-like and state-like communication apprehension will be discussed, as these two distinct types are easier for classroom teachers to identify and distinguish than the four-point categories.

The most distinguishable and detrimental type of communication apprehension is

trait-like apprehension. Trait-like communication apprehension has been shown to be more of a personality type orientation that is relatively enduring in the course of an individual's life and occurs across multiple communication contexts (McCroskey & Beatty, 1986). Therefore, individuals with trait-like communication apprehension have a relatively stable and predictable apprehensive behavior across multiple different types of communication situations; whether they are in a meeting, in a social gathering, speaking publicly, or talking with a person individually, they are more often than not anxious and apprehensive about communicating and will attempt to avoid such situations (Kearney & Plax, 2006). The previous study has also indicated that around twenty percent of the population has this trait-like apprehension (Kearney & Plax, 2006) and that only an intervention program intended to adjust a person's level of trait-like communication apprehension can assist with lowering their anxiety levels (McCroskey & Beatty, 1986).

A more common and less detrimental type of communication apprehension is state-like or situational communication apprehension. It is a rare for a person to not become apprehensive about any form of communication with any person. As such, this situation based apprehension occurs in most individuals, approximately 60 percent of the population, with individuals becoming apprehensive about communicating in only certain situations or only with certain individuals (Kearney & Plax, 2006). Therefore this type of communication apprehension is not personality based but rather it is based on situational factors (McCroskey & Beatty, 1986). For

example, one may encounter a person who has no problems communicating with all different types of people in different situations; except for publicly speaking, this person would be classified as someone with state-like apprehension. Lastly, it should be noted that though trait-like and state-like communication apprehension are differentiated by either personality or situational based roots to the anxiety, the behaviors and level of anxiety felt by the apprehension is the same. Thus, when a person is feeling apprehensive about a communication situation, regardless if that person has trait-like or state-like apprehension, he or she will engage in the same avoidance behavior towards apprehension-producing situations or when in such a situation be unable to adequately convey their message.

The roots of communication apprehension are highly debatable with little research conducted. Various schools of thoughts have posited different views on this matter, such as the possibility of a heredity component and learned component to communication apprehension. In other words, this debate takes place in a Nature vs. Nurture context with the possibility of both sides being correct to a certain extent. Social biologists have argued that there likely is a hereditary contribution, as research has established sociability (a trait similar to that of communication apprehension) has been observed in newly born infants (McCroskey, 1984). This “nature” or heredity view, which has been asserted by social biologists, is far from the norm; however, the majority of scholars alleging “that reinforcement patterns in a person’s

environment, particularly during childhood, constitute the dominant factors” (McCroskey & Beatty, 1986).

The dominant thought of communication scholarship regards these “nurture” arguments as a contributing factor to high or low communication apprehension. These arguments posit that a child who is positively reinforced for communication will have less apprehension and communicate more, as opposed to a child who is negatively reinforced for communicating and thus learns high apprehension and communicates less (McCroskey & Beatty, 1986). Therefore, according to these researchers, teachers should engage students and encourage them to speak up as much as possible, given an appropriate context in which their communication will be positively reinforced by the majority audience. Also, unlike social biologists, these communication researchers have shown evidence of low apprehension in children who have been positively reinforced for communicating by parents and teachers (Daly & Friedrich, 1981). Nevertheless, there continues to be much debate as to how much heredity or social learning plays a part in shaping and determining levels of communication apprehension of children.

Communication Apprehension and Adolescents

Despite the debate concerning heredity or social learning as the root causes of communication apprehension, teachers can only affect whether their students grow or decline in their apprehension towards communication. Specifically with concern to adolescents, their

emotional states and high risk social environments make them particularly susceptible to growing in their communication apprehension and lowering in their self-esteem. It should be noted that “lowered self-esteem is associated with high oral communication apprehension” and these two variables feed into each other (McCroskey, Daly, Richmond, & Falcone 1977), which can be particularly harmful for adolescents. This is particularly important for teachers to consider as students at the university level with higher communication apprehension and less emotional stability will achieve less in their academics. Such finding may also be applicable to academic achievements of high school and middle school students, as the previous study indicates that “higher CA [(communication apprehension)] is always implicated with poorer outcomes of academic achievement” (McCroskey, Booth-Butterfield, & Payne, 1989, pp. 104). As such, classroom teachers should take some time to reflect on the environments of their students as well as their self-esteem levels prior to engaging them in specific communication encounters that can potentially be detrimental to both their social lives and levels of communication apprehension.

Two cognitive changes in adolescents that teachers should be aware of are the concepts of “imaginary audience” and “personal fable.” These two distorted images adolescents have of the relationships between themselves and others impacts their cognitive thinking, emotional states, and ability to learn significantly (Berk, 2010). Imaginary audience is an adolescent’s

incorrect belief that everyone is watching, paying attention, or is concerned with everything they do (Berk, 2010). This thought of “everyone is watching me” leads adolescents to become overly self-conscious and attend carefully to everything they wear, say or do. Similarly, personal fable is the incorrect belief that “others are observing and thinking about them, teenagers develop an inflated opinion of their own importance – feeling that they are special and unique” (Berk, 2010, pp. 572). This inflated importance creates high-stakes situations daily for adolescents in which they feel the need to live up to their importance, otherwise those others that are constantly thinking about them will no longer find them to be important or special. Taken together, these incorrect beliefs create high stakes – high stress situations in the daily lives of adolescents and opens them up to being overly sensitive to any evaluation or criticism.

Adolescent’s imaginary audiences and personal fables can also specifically affect their levels of apprehension based upon known causes for increases in communication apprehension. Thus far, communication research has identified several factors/situations that can further aggravate individuals’ levels of communication apprehension. Of these multiple factors/situations, seven will be briefly mentioned here: feeling conspicuous or inspected, facing an unfamiliar or dissimilar audience, confronting a novel or formal speaking situation, feeling subordinate to one’s audience, undergoing evaluation, remembering repeated failures, and relying on English as a second language. Though all of these factors somehow play into

adolescents' incorrect beliefs of an imaginary audience and personal fable the factors of feeling conspicuous or inspected as well as undergoing evaluation play directly into these incorrect assumptions. Feeling conspicuous or inspected is a factor that whenever one speaks publicly, the one knows that each member he or she is talking to is attending to the speaker him/herself (Kearney & Plax, 2006). Therefore this imaginary audience is no longer imaginary, the audience is in front of the speaker and paying attention to him/her thereby potentially increasing one's apprehension, especially if the one misspeaks or makes a mistake. Undergoing evaluation plays directly into personal fable, where a teacher or peers are thinking about what one is saying judging or grading the speaker (Kearney & Plax, 2006). This creates a high-stakes situation where if one does not do well, one's grades can drop, his/her importance can lower, and he/she can no longer be thought of as special or unique. Facing an unfamiliar or dissimilar audience can also increase apprehension in adolescents overly concerned with their self image as they will be wondering who the audience is and what they can say to have this person or group of individuals think positively of them. Similarly, facing a novel or formal situations creates a high-stakes situation filled with uncertainty (Kearney & Plax, 2006) and heightens adolescents' self-consciousness through personal fable. The situation of feeling subordinate to one's audience also plays into the personal fable of adolescents who may believe he/she needs to live up to a certain standard to appease the audience, and if the speaker doesn't, their self-image in front of

one's peers or teachers will be damaged. Next, remembering repeated failures can significantly affect communication apprehension levels (Kearney & Plax, 2006), especially for adolescents who have an imaginary audience that is continuously focused on them. Lastly, individuals who learn English as a second language have a unique issue as their apprehension toward communication in a language not comfortable for them can easily rise (Kearney & Plax, 2006); these individuals may constantly think people are watching and judging them. All of these factors or situations can again easily raise apprehension levels for most individuals, especially for adolescents who have incorrect beliefs of imaginary audiences and personal fables. As such, teachers should keep these factors in mind when considering how they shape public speaking assignments as well as what methods they utilize in reducing their students communication apprehension.

Reducing Communication Apprehension

Systematic desensitization is the most widely utilized and highly effective method for assisting students in overcoming their communication apprehensions (McCroskey, 1972; McCroskey & Beatty, 1986). This method for treating communication apprehension is focused on behaviorist therapies (McCroskey & Beatty, 1986) and the physical responses those with apprehensions have when engaging in or anticipating the engagement of a communication situation. This method works on the “principle that if an alternative response – muscle relaxation

– can be substituted for tension and stress, people can learn to cope with anxiety producing situations, including communication situations” (Kearney & Plax, 2006, p. 63).

This method occurs in consecutive phases where the individual first becomes conscious of the physical responses that are taking place, and then, learns how to control them by releasing tension and relaxing muscles on command, followed by a gradual visualization and exposure phase. During the visualization and exposure phase, the individual gradually is exposed to increasingly stress inducing communication situations until they have fully developed their relaxation techniques (Kearney & Plax, 2006).

This method should be considered for use by teachers for multiple reasons. First, research has shown that systematic desensitization has been functional and effective in all academic settings including the administration of it on a large scale (McCroskey, 1972).

Therefore, teachers can easily utilize this method whether they are teaching small or large groups of students. Also, professional psychologists need not be called into a school setting to conduct such treatments, as systematic desensitization is a relatively simplistic method to learn and it has been shown to be utilized effectively by anyone who has studied and followed its methods (McCroskey, 1972; McCroskey & Beatty, 1986). It has also been shown to be highly effective at reducing apprehensions for students who have both trait-like and situational communication apprehension (McCroskey & Beatty, 1986). Therefore, teachers need not try and figure out the

exact states of each child in their classroom, rather this is an overarching method that will assist in reducing all forms of communication apprehension. As well as this method is most effectively used on those students who exhibit an unusually high physical arousal from a real or anticipated communicative event (McCroskey & Beatty, 1986). One minor caveat that teachers should consider when employing this method is that research has indicated that male students may be affected insignificantly more by systematic desensitization than their female counter parts (McCroskey, 1972). Though an insignificant difference, teachers should still be aware of this potential difference in effectiveness for males and females. Ultimately, systematic desensitization should have the effect of students being capable of associating relaxation to communicative situations and not anxiety or the physical tension associated with the apprehension they felt prior to treatments (Kearney & Plax, 2006).

Another highly effective method in reducing communication apprehension is cognitive restructuring. This method may prove to be a valuable tool for some teachers seeking to mitigate the negative self images and lowered-self-esteem that may be impacted further by public speaking assignments. Cognitive restructuring is essentially the process of examining the thought process and interpretations an individual may have towards a communication situation and combating negative and/or illogical self-statements (Kearney & Plax, 2006).

Cognitive restructuring occurs through various components such as: “(a) the role of

extinction, i.e., exposure to the anxiety-provoking stimuli, (b) the role of the identification and monitoring of negative self-statements, (c) the role of knowledge and rehearsal of coping statements, and (d) the combination of exposure, identification of negative statements, and rehearsal of coping statements” (Glogower, Fremouw, and McCrosky, 1978, pp. 211).

Research has shown all four components to garner some improvements for those suffering communication apprehension; however the combination and coping statements have been shown to be the most effective of the four components with statistically insignificant data showing the combination component to be the most effective (Glogower, et al., 1978). As such, it can be said that “the coping statement component is the primary factor in the cognitive restructuring procedure” (Glogower, et al., 1978, pp. 220). Thus teachers who are strapped for time and resources, but are looking into possibly utilizing the cognitive restructuring method should look into focusing on the coping statements component of this method to implement in their classrooms.

This method is particularly useful for individuals who have normal physical arousals to real or anticipated communication situations, but they interpret these arousals negatively as high anxiety (McCroskey & Beatty, 1986). Therefore, while systematic desensitization addresses the physical response to communication apprehension, cognitive restructuring addresses the mental responses an individual gives him or herself in a communication situation. It should be noted that

both systematic desensitization and cognitive restructuring are just about equally effective at reducing apprehension as well as they both “appear to both reduce arousal and improve cognitive response to arousal” (McCroskey & Beatty, 1986, pp. 290). As such, it makes no difference which of these two methods a teacher chooses to employ. The only difference seems to be that systematic desensitization is both easier to learn and employ than cognitive restructuring.

McCroskey & Beatty, 1986)

The last and most controversial method we will consider is skills training. It is a method that focuses on individual limitations in knowledge of how to communicate, as adversely affecting their levels of communication apprehension (Kearney & Plax, 2006). It assumes that apprehensive people just do not know how to communicate effectively in various situations and thus need to be taught strategies in how to communicate in order to lower their apprehension levels (Kearney & Plax, 2006).

While skills training can help individuals develop techniques to effectively communicate in various situations, there is debate as to how effective this method is in reducing the level of apprehension felt by speakers (Kearney & Plax, 2006). Communication apprehension at the conceptual level is a trait-like or situational issue; it is not necessarily a skill based problem (McCroskey & Beatty, 1986). As such, it is not surprising that research has thus far found that skills training is less than satisfactory at helping individuals overcome communication

apprehension (McCroskey & Beatty, 1986). Some researchers have gone so far as to state that it may negatively affect those with high-trait like communication apprehension (McCroskey & Beatty, 1986). Despite this controversy, skill training is still a viable and useful method when assisting those with communication apprehension. For example, research has shown that low communication skills may exacerbate apprehension for high-trait like individuals whose skills could at the very least be improved with skill training (McCroskey & Beatty, 1986). As well as, skill training may assist individuals with improving their overall communication behavior, even if those individuals remain apprehensive when engaging such behavior (McCroskey & Beatty, 1986). As such teachers may want to engage in the skills training method as a way to improve their students' overall performance in publicly speaking. However teachers should keep in mind that for students, "even when their skill is enhanced, many maintain their CA and do not believe their skill has improved at a satisfactory level" (McCroskey & Beatty, 1986, pp. 291). Therefore, while students' performance and communicative behaviors will improve, they will continue to engage in antisocial behavior because their apprehension levels have not decreased nor do they believe that they are communicating at a satisfactory level. As such it is advisable to perform multiple methods that have been shown to significantly reduce communication apprehension, such as systematic desensitization and/or cognitive restructuring along with skills training to assist in both the lowering of apprehension and the increase in positive communication behaviors

(McCroskey & Beatty, 1986).

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