

Anxiety in Public Speaking
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Abstract

‘Butterflies in Your Stomach’
How to overcome anxiety in Public Speaking?

Anxiety has a profound impact upon oral communication, especially when that communication takes the form of a public address. Public speakers are significantly influenced by various affective factors that greatly contribute to the quality of the oral presentation. Although some individuals tend to experience more anxiety about public speaking than others (Scott, Yates & Wheelless, 1975; McCroskey 1976), research has shown that anxiety does indeed have significant negative effects on an individual's oral communication. The impact of such anxiety may reveal itself in different ways.

Communication anxiety is closely associated with communication avoidance. People who experience great anxiety about public speaking naturally avoid speaking in public. Anxiety is also associated with language proficiency. SL researchers have long been aware that anxiety is a major obstacle to achieving oral fluency in a second language, especially if the learner lacks proficiency in the language. Language confidence, then, is a key factor contributing to anxiety in public speaking.

However, the negative effects of such anxiety upon a public speaker can be offset by utilizing psychological strategies (e.g. positive thinking, self-confidence boosting) as well as practical ones like adequate preparation and practice. Furthermore, negative tension and stress can actually be transformed into a positive upsurge of energy that empowers a speech and gives it charisma and speaker ‘presence’.

This paper aims to examine the causes and effects of anxiety in public speaking and several methods by which such anxiety can be successfully overcome.

Introduction

Public speaking is considered to be of paramount importance to students. Those who equip themselves with effective public speaking skills are able to handle magnificently their interpersonal communication problems during their working life. Students of today are leaders of tomorrow. As future leaders they would find themselves in situations where they would have to persuade their subordinates impressively during their interpersonal communications. Generally people judge and assess a speaker by the way he or she speaks. The first impression would usually be a lasting impression that would be registered in the minds of the people who come into contact with the speaker. A good public speaking skill would enhance their employment opportunities and marketability. As a consequence, there is an urgent need for students to hone their public speaking skills.

Anxiety in Second Language Learners

An individual's anxiety has an impact on his oral communication behavior, (Burgoon, 1976; Zimbardo (1977). Some people experience more anxiety in Public speaking than others (Scott, Yates & Wheelless, 1975; McCroskey 1976). Research has shown clearly that such an anxiety has negative effects on an individual's communication behavior. Communication anxiety does not just apply to formal communication tasks, such as public speaking, because almost everyone feels some form of anxiety in such a setting (Hurt, Scot & McCroskey, 1978). Indeed, communication anxiety has been shown to be highly affective in the classroom setting. In a study conducted by McCroskey (1979), approximately one in five college students suffered extreme communication anxiety.

Human communication research has provided empirical evidence regarding the problem of oral communication anxiety and its impact on human behavior. For instance, McCroskey (2001) has indicated that anxiety in public speaking has a widespread implication.

One reason for concern is that there is close association of communication anxiety with communication avoidance. In other words, people who fear communication, are apprehensive about communicating in a given situation, tend to avoid communicating.

There are findings that established correlations between anxiety and measures of language proficiency, for instance, that of Swain and Burnaby (1976), Tucker, Hamayan and Genese (1976).

Second Language researchers and theorists have, for a long time, been aware that anxiety is often associated with language learning. Lecturers, language teachers, and language instructors, as well as students themselves, have expressed the fact that anxiety is a major obstacle to be overcome in learning to speak the second language (L2).

However, positive thinking can overcome anxiety by instilling the power of confidence in a person. . If a person thinks he or she can do, then, that person might be able to achieve the objective. On the other hand, if one predicts disaster and doom, it is almost certain, that is what the person will get. This is especially true when it comes to public speaking. Speakers who think negatively about themselves are much more likely to be overcome by stage fright and anxiety than others who think positively (Lucas, 2004).

According to Stuart (1989), in her book "Effective Speaking," she cites a survey in the USA where 3000 adults were asked to list ten worst fears. Speaking in Public came out as the number one fear – above even fears of financial ruin and death. Public Speaking makes most of us breathless, shaky and ready to run for cover. Among the reasons attributed for this nervousness are unfamiliar situation, lack of confidence, sense of isolation, self-consciousness, and fear of looking foolish in public and fear of the consequences.

Some researchers such as Horwitz and Young (1998) and McCroskey (2001) are still engaged in identifying foreign language anxiety as a distinct variable in foreign language learning. They are attempting to interpret it within the context of existing theoretical perspectives and empirical work on specific anxiety reactions. In fact, it is felt that, the symptoms and consequences of foreign language anxiety should become easily identifiable to those concerned with foreign language learning and teaching, Gardner (1988).

For many years, researchers have considered about the anxiety provoking potential of learning a foreign language. Stevick (1980) discusses in detail the defensive position imposed on the learner by most language methods. Guiora (1983) argues that language learning itself is a "profoundly unsettling psychological proposition" because it directly threatens an individual's self-concept and world-view.

Kleinmann (1977) found that English as Second Language (ESL) students with high levels of impending anxiety made different types of grammatical errors than low level anxiety ESL students; whereas Steinberg and Horwitz (1986) found that students who find themselves under anxiety conditions made less meaningful messages than those under more relaxed condition. These studies indicated that anxiety could affect the communication strategies employed by students in language class. In other words, more anxious students tend to avoid trying out difficult speeches or personal interactions in second language.

These findings seem to be consistent with the research on other types of specific communication anxiety. Researches studying writing in a native language have found that students with higher levels of writing anxiety write shorter compositions than calmer counterparts (Daly, 1991).

Psycho-physiological symptoms and behavioral responses of the anxious foreign language students experience apprehension, worry and even dread. They seem to have difficulty concentrating on the speech. They become forgetful, sweat, and suffer palpitations. They exhibit a negative avoidance behavior such as missing class and postponing their homework. Clinical findings with foreign language students in university classes and the Learning Skills Center (LSC) at the University of Texas suggest several discrete problems caused by anxiety and illustrate poignantly how these problems can interfere with language learning (Horwitz, 2001).

Difficulty in speaking in class probably becomes the most frequently cited concern of the anxious foreign language students that seem to seek help at the Learning Skills Center (Horwitz, 2001).

Foreign language anxiety frequently seems to show up when students sit for tests Richmond and McCroskey (1998). The problem can also be identified by way of persistent "careless" errors made in spelling or syntax during the test. The student realizes, usually, sometime after the test, that he or she knew the correct answer but had put down the wrong one due to nervousness. If the student is aware that he or she is making some preventable errors during the test, then the student's anxiety and errors – become more escalated.

Some students, who seem to be more concerned about their performance, may become so anxious when they make errors that they may attempt to compensate by studying more. But what awaits them is frustration when they find that their compulsive effort does not lead to improved grades. The reverse behavior is also a possibility. Anxious students may try to avoid studying and in some cases skip classes entirely in an effort to alleviate anxiety Horwitz (2001).

Sometimes, certain beliefs about language learning might also contribute to the student's tension and frustration in the classroom. The researchers, Horwitz and Horwitz (1986), noted that a number of students believed nothing should be said in the foreign language until it can be said correctly and that it is not right to guess on an unknown foreign language word. Beliefs, such as this, could produce anxiety since students are expected to communicate in the second language (L2) before fluency is attained. And even excellent language students make mistakes or forget words due to extreme anxiety Horwitz and Horwitz 1986).

Krashen (1980) argues that the extraction of meaning from second language messages (second language acquisition in his terminology) is the primary process in the development of second language learning. According to him, anxiety contributes to an affective filter that makes the individual unreceptive to language input. Thus the learner fails to "take in" the available target language messages. Hence, language acquisition does not seem to progress. Whilst Savignon (1997) stresses the vital role of spontaneous conversational interactions in the development of communicative competence and language learning.

The knowledge that one's performance is going to be evaluated leads to language anxiety. Researchers have identified three types of language anxieties. (1) communication apprehension; (2) test anxiety; and (3) fear of negative evaluation. Due to its emphasis on interpersonal interactions; the construct of communication apprehension is quite relevant to the conceptualization of foreign language anxiety, McCroskey (2001).

Communication apprehension is a type of shyness characterized by fear of anxiety about communicating with people. Communication apprehension has been classified as audience-based apprehension, context-based apprehension situational apprehension and traitlike apprehension. Difficulty in speaking in dyads or groups (Oral communication anxiety) or in public ("stage-fright"), or in listening to or learning a spoken message (receiver anxiety), is all manifestations of communication apprehension. People, who typically have trouble in speaking in groups, are likely to experience even greater difficulty speaking in a foreign language class where they have little control of the communication situation (McCroskey, 2001).

Since performance evaluation is an ongoing feature of most foreign language classes, test anxiety is also relevant to a discussion of foreign language anxiety. Test anxiety refers to a type of performance anxiety arising from a fear of failure (Sarason, 1980). Text-anxious students often put unrealistic demands on themselves and feel that anything less than a perfect test performance is a failure. Students who are test-anxious in foreign language class probably experience considerable difficulty since tests and quizzes are frequent and even the brightest and most prepared students often make errors.

Fear of negative evaluation, defined as "apprehension about others" evaluations, avoidance of evaluative situations, and the expectation that others would evaluate oneself 'negatively' is a third anxiety related to foreign language learning. Fear of negative evaluation has a broader scope. It may occur in any social or evaluative situations, such as interviewing, for a job of speaking in a foreign language class, McCroskey (2001).

Although communication apprehension, test anxiety, and fear of negative evaluation provide useful conceptual building blocks for a description of foreign language anxiety, it is not simply the combination of these fears transferred to a foreign language-learning situation. Rather, they conceive foreign language anxiety as a distinct complex of self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings, and behaviors related to classroom language learning arising from the uniqueness of the language learning process.

Second language communication involves risk taking and is more problematic than native language communication because of the complex and nonspontaneous mental operations that are required in order to communicate in a second language. To speak in a second language, it is likely to challenge an individual's ability as a competent speaker and it may lead to fear or even panic.

Current theories and research in second language learning thus suggest that, the problem of anxiety and the accompanying beliefs about language learning discussed here represent serious impediments to the performance of students in Public Speaking.

Conclusion

The findings confirmed that there is a negative association between anxiety and Public Speaking. If students' anxiety is high their achievement in Public Speaking is low. Conversely, if students' anxiety is low their achievement in public speaking is high.

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ANXIETY IN PUBLIC SPEAKING
(Butterflies in your stomach)

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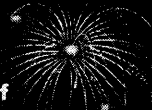
◦ **Definition: Public Speaking (PS)**
– delivering an address to a public audience in a structured and planned manner. It is a form of communication that adds to the knowledge and wisdom of the audience.

◦ **Anxiety:** In this study anxiety is taken to mean the feeling of fear or nervousness that affects the performance of students in PS.


Is Public Speaking Important?

◦ **Public Speaking :** Considered to be of great importance to students. Students who equip themselves with effective PS skills are able to handle their interpersonal communications very well.


◦ **Students who grab the opportunity to hone their PS skills will undoubtedly emerge as great leaders of tomorrow.**



- **Prominent Public Speakers of yesteryears: Great Greek philosophers like Socrates, Plato and Aristotle. Roman orator- Cicero. Founding fathers of PS.**
- **PS is not a simple art to conquer. Students face a lot of challenges and obstacles along the journey to master PS which is a form of liberal art.**



- **One of the most serious challenges a PS student may face is: ANXIETY – the state of feeling nervous**
- **This was one of the IV's in my study whereas the DV was achievement in PS.**
- **This study was carried out amongst students who took the course on PS at UUM.**



- **When a student is called to speak in front of an audience he or she might immediately feel the phenomenon "Butterflies in the stomach."**
- **This is due to the production of adrenaline hormone that is suddenly released into the bloodstream in response to a physical or mental stress.**
- **The sudden shot of adrenaline makes your heart beat faster, your hands shake, your knees tremble and your skin perspire. Every Public Speaker experiences all these reactions to some extent – Lucas (2003)**

◦ Anxiety normally produces a negative impact on the student.

◦ One out of five college students suffers acute anxiety in PS - McCroskey (2001).

◦ Human Communication Research has provided empirical support for oral communication anxiety - McCroskey (2001).

◦ Some researchers believe that a good Public Speaker can transform anxiety from a negative force to a positive force. You are not victimized by it; instead, you are vitalized by it - Lucas (2004).



◦ Sometimes communication anxiety may lead to communication avoidance. This is a serious problem.

◦ This is a matter of great concern to 2L educators. Students tend to avoid trying out difficult speeches or personal interactions in English thus creating the communication divide.

◦ Stuart (1989) cites a survey in USA where 3000 adults were asked to list 10 worst fears. PS came out as the No.1 fear. PS makes one breathless, shaky, and really run for cover.




◦ The thought of PS can create constant worry and dread and it can lead to psycho-physiological symptoms.

◦ Students may become nervous and forgetful. They may sweat and suffer palpitations.


◦ It may also lead to negative avoidance behavior such as getting absent from class and perhaps postponing the completion of assignments - Horwitz (2001).

◦ In extreme cases students may even forget words or make mistakes in their speech due to stress and tension.







- **Why does one feel nervous ?**
- **1. Lack of confidence**
- **2. Fear of looking foolish in public**
- **3. Self consciousness**
- **4. Sense of isolation**
- **5. Unfamiliar environment**
- **6. Unfamiliar people.**
- **7. Fear of consequences e.g. Fear of failure.**





- **Another phenomenon is that some students believed that nothing should be said in foreign language until it can be said correctly and that it is not right to guess on an unknown foreign language word – Horwitz and Horwitz (1986).**
- **Communication in 2L is more problematic than native language because it requires more complex and non-spontaneous mental operations.**
- **To speak in 2L, it is likely to challenge an individual's ability as a competent speaker and it may even lead to fear or panic.**




- **Current theories and research in 2L suggest that anxiety can cause serious impediments to students' performance in PS.**
- **The findings of this research confirm that there was negative association between anxiety and PS.**
- **Anxiety was significantly, negatively correlated with students' achievement in PS. (Cronbach's Alpha = 0.933).**


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- **If students' anxiety is high their achievement in PS is low.**
 - **Conversely, if students' anxiety is low their achievement in PS is high.**
 - **These findings were consistent with that of Chastian (1975), McIntyre & Gardner (1988),**
 - **Spielberger & Sumner (1994), Beck & Shipherd (1997), Behnke & Sawyer (2001).**

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- **How to overcome your anxiety?**
 - **Choose a topic that interests you. Sometimes you are more concerned with your personal appearance and performance than your topic.**
 - **Talk about subjects that you are familiar with. Knowledge about your topic increases your confidence and helps you to control your nervousness.**

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- **Realize that tension and nervousness are normal and sometimes they can even be beneficial to students. Learning how to control your fear and make it work for you, is one form of relieving your tension.**




◦ **Tension can be psychologically reduced by the act of speaking. As you talk and discover that your audience is responding positively to what you are saying, your nervousness will tend to disappear.**



◦ **Analyze the situation and your audience. The more you know about your audience the less you will fear e.g. their background, interest, age group etc.**

◦ **Prepare your speech thoroughly. Preparation is the key to confidence.**

◦ **Practise your speech. As the saying goes 'Practice makes perfect.' It builds your courage and strengthens your confidence.**



◦ **Think positively. If you think you can do it, you usually can. On the other hand, if you think you can't do it, you may not.**

◦ **Think that no one is perfect. Everyone feels nervous. If others can handle it, I can handle it too.**

◦ **Learn to speak up in class discussions. Engage yourself in conversations with your friends and contribute your ideas in meetings. This will help you to gain experience and confidence.**