

**TO BE ANXIOUS OR NOT TO BE ANXIOUS—
THAT IS THE QUESTION IN PUBLIC SPEAKING**

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ABSTRACT

Phobia of public speaking is a form of social behaviour. Students may underachieve at work or at school because of anxiety and often avoid speaking in classroom settings. They may drop a course which requires a lot of oral presentations. The main objective of this research is to investigate if the teaching of affective learning strategies helps reduce their public speaking anxiety. McCroskey's (1992) 'Personal Report of Public Speaking Anxiety (PRPSA) questionnaire was used to collect data on their feelings towards giving a speech. The same questionnaire was administered at the beginning and end of a course in public speaking. Paired T-test was employed to measure the difference of nervousness in the same semester. A total of 202 university technical students majoring in engineering and computing were chosen as subjects. The findings revealed that they significantly experienced less anxiety after they had been taught how to manage their stress. Although this can alleviate their anxiety level, future research is indispensable to evaluate the casual nature of public speaking among university students.

Keywords: public speaking anxiety, affective strategies, speech

INTRODUCTION

Anxiety is defined as a state of uneasiness and apprehension or fear caused by the anticipation of something threatening. Public speaking anxiety is very common among college students and the general public. Persons with public speaking anxiety often avoid anxiety-producing social or performance situations, but when unavoidable, these situations are endured with feeling of intense anxiety and distress. Also, anticipatory anxiety frequently occurs as an individual imagines the situation in advance of the actual experience (e.g., worrying each day about a presentation to be given in a class several weeks in the future). Although individuals with these types of anxious responses recognize that their fear is excessive and/or unreasonable, they are unable, without assistance, to change their responses in these situations.

Individuals with public speaking anxiety most often experience a variety of symptoms in a public speaking situation, including palpitations, sweating, gastrointestinal discomfort, diarrhea, muscle tension, and confusion (North & Rives, 2001). Burnley et al. (1993) states that, "Approximately 85 percent of the general population report experiencing some level of anxiety about speaking in public." Rossi and Seiler (1989) indicate that, "Public speaking or stage fright has been investigated and studied since the mid-1930's."

Background of research

In the past two decades, there has been a great deal of research in language anxiety. It is defined as a distinct complex of self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings, and behaviours related to using a language for communication beyond the classroom. Most people have experienced language anxiety. Even if anxiety might not be the most important reason for failure or success in learning, we cannot ignore its affection. It cannot be denied that learning a language is important especially English since it is the most widespread and important language in the world today.

English is a major language of international business, diplomacy, science and the professions; an official language of many international and professional

organizations; and is used not only for communication between native speakers of English but also between non-native speakers.

The implications of the study are discussed and a number of recommendations are made to assist students in dealing with their anxiety level. This study assumes that the language anxiety is debilitating and the possible causes of anxiety are investigated using quantitative method.

Significance of the Study

This research is significant and beneficial to the lecturers because it offers insights into the causes of anxiety faced by the students. It is also a starting point to understand the causes of language anxiety and subsequently create strategies to help students overcome their stress. Furthermore, the findings are not only applicable to students and lecturers but also are helpful to others who are facing the same problem of language anxiety.

Limitations of the Study

The scope of the study was limited to engineering and computing undergraduate students in Universiti Malaysia Pahang and does not represent other technical universities. Thus, the sample might not be relevant to non-technical universities because the level of anxiety may be different and the findings may also differ. The subjects are non-native speakers of English, namely, Malays, Malay Chinese, and Malay Indians. English is their second language.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Anxiety is a physiological response and generally defined as "a state of apprehension, a vague fear" (Scovel, 1991, p.134). It seems difficult to describe in a simple and exhaustive manner, as it raises many kinds of sources associated with particular contexts or situations that individuals perceive threatening according to their unique frame of reference (Eharman, 1996). Previous anxiety research suggests that there

are roughly two types that can be experienced at different psychological levels (Spielberger, 1983; Levitt, 1980).

At a global level, anxiety is viewed as a permanent trait, as some people are predisposed to be anxious. At a more local or situational level, anxiety can be experienced in response to a particular situation or act (Brown, 1994), for instance, in giving a speech. However, the question of how these constructs relate to second language learning contexts is still under debate, although several interpretations of language anxiety are offered in terms of situational nature of anxiety (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991).

According to Tobias (1979, 1980, 1986), anxiety may work as a mental block to cognitive performance at all three cognitive stages: Input, Processing, and Output. In other words, anxiety arousal, which is typically associated with self-deprecating thoughts, fear of failure, or worry over performance procedures, may compete for cognitive resources that normal cognitive processing will demand.

RESEARCH DESIGN

Research Questions

This study attempts to answer the following questions:

1. Who has a greater amount of anxiety, male or female students, before giving a speech?
2. What can be done to help students reduce their anxiety in speaking publicly?

Hypotheses

1. Male and female students are equally anxious in public speaking since this is a normal physiological response.
2. If students are taught and made use of affective strategies, their stress will be reduced. They are anxious because they do not recognize these strategies beforehand.

Participants

202 undergraduate students chosen from the Faculties of Mechanical Engineering and Computer Systems and Software Engineering participated in this study. There were 101 male and 101 female students composing of Malays, Chinese and Indians. English is their second language. They attended a course in 'Public Speaking' for fifty-six hours.

METHODOLOGY

Data Collection

The research was carried out in two phases. The first measuring was conducted at the beginning of the first semester. In the first phase of research the students were asked to fill out the *Personal Report of Public Speaking Anxiety (PRPSA)* (McCroskey, 1970; McCroskey & Richmond, 1992) questionnaire by approximating the level of distress that they experience while holding a public presentation. Then, they were taught how to use 9 affective learning strategies in order to reduce public speaking anxiety during one semester or 56 hours of English language lectures.

The following 9 affective strategies were adapted from Kostić-Bobanović (2004):

- ❖ *I try to relax my muscles by breathing deeply every time I feel nervous about speaking English.*
- ❖ *I listen to music for relaxation.*
- ❖ *I laugh in order to relax, whenever I feel nervous about speaking English.*
- ❖ *I make encouraging statements to myself to take wise risks in language learning even though I might make some mistakes.*
- ❖ *I give myself a reward when I have done something well in my language learning.*
- ❖ *I pay attention to physical signs of stress.*
- ❖ *I use a list in which I register my feelings, motivation and attitudes about English language learning.*
- ❖ *I write down my experiences in a language learning diary.*
- ❖ *I talk to someone I trust about my feelings concerning the language learning process.*

In the second phase, after the teaching of affective strategies at the end of the semester, the students were given the same PRPSA questionnaire, with the above described instructions. The questionnaire consists of 34 questions measuring feelings associated with giving a presentation and has been reported to be uni-dimensional. Subjects were asked to indicate the degree to which the statements apply to them, by marking whether they strongly agree (1), agree (2), are undecided (3), disagree (4), and strongly disagree (5) with each statement. The scale is highly reliable (alpha estimates > .90).

The questionnaire was completed without any personal identification (except sex and code) to ensure anonymity and increase the probability of honest responses. The reliability of the scale in this investigation is 0.82.

Data analysis

The results from the questionnaires were processed using SPSS for Windows (Statistical Package for Social Sciences). The difference between public speaking anxiety in the first and second semester was investigated by paired t-test.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

Table 1: PRPSA at the beginning and end of semester for male and female students

CATEGORIES OF ANXIETY	NUMBER OF STUDENTS			
	BEGINNING OF SEMESTER		END OF SEMESTER	
	Male	Female	Male	Female
<i>Low</i>	8	7	20	23
<i>Moderately low</i>	10	12	17	20
<i>Moderate</i>	37	36	46	43
<i>Moderately high</i>	19	18	10	8
<i>High</i>	27	28	8	7
Sub-total	101	101	101	101
TOTAL	202		202	

The result in Table 1 supported the hypothesis that male and female students are equally anxious in public speaking before giving a speech.

Table 2: PRPSA at the beginning and end of semester for all students

CATEGORIES OF ANXIETY	NUMBER OF STUDENTS	
	BEGINNING OF SEMESTER	END OF SEMESTER
	<i>Low</i>	12
<i>Moderately low</i>	15	31
<i>Moderate</i>	75	102
<i>Moderately high</i>	42	20
<i>High</i>	58	10
Total	202	202

The above table revealed that at the beginning of the semester, a great number of students experienced high (n=58) and moderately high (n=42) levels of public speaking anxiety.

After the teaching of affective strategies, the PRPSA numbers varied in comparison with the previous attained results. Namely, a smaller number of students reported high (n=10) and moderately high (n=20) levels of distress while speaking in public. Subsequently, a greater number of students reported low (n=39) and moderately low (n=31) levels of public speaking anxiety.

The researcher wanted to investigate the difference in communication competence between the beginning and end of the semester and that was why a paired t-test was used. A paired sample t-test indicated that there was a statistical difference between the above mentioned periods. At the beginning of the semester students' PRPSA was significantly higher than that at the end of the semester, $t_{(202)} = 4,137$; $p < .001$. Based on the t-test results, it can be concluded that the use of affective strategies can reduce high levels of public speaking anxiety.

DISCUSSION

Fear of public speaking is a very common form of social phobia. Individuals who fear speaking in public may find their career choices limited and avenues for promotion far away from them, resulting in considerable personal distress, frustration, and depression.

The purpose of this research was twofold: a) to survey who has a greater amount of anxiety, male or female students, before giving a speech; and b) to investigate if the use of affective strategies will alleviate the level of public speaking anxiety. The results indicated that both male and female students were equally anxious before giving a speech and all students experienced significantly less anxiety after they had been taught how to manage their distress, by means of affective strategies.

The recommendations for second language anxiety include: a) recognize own feelings; b) share feelings with others; and c) practise speaking since practice makes perfect. To

conclude, anxiety is typically understood as a physiological response. We cannot make it go away, but we can help it work for us instead of against us. According to the findings, a great number of our students were able to change their perception of anxiety level by the end of the course. Teaching affective strategies to students appears to be an effective way to reduce anxiety in public speaking; however, future research is needed to evaluate its casual nature among university students.

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