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Communication Apprehension in the Basic Course: Learning Styles and Preferred Instructional Strategies of High and Low Apprehensive Students

*John Bourhis
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INTRODUCTION

To succeed in the school environment, students must effectively communicate with each other and their teachers. Students who experience "broad-based fear or anxiety related to the act of communication" are at a distinct disadvantage in school (McCroskey, 1984; Richmond & McCroskey, 1989; Bourhis, 1988). Compared to students who are low in communication apprehension (LCA's), high communication apprehensives (HCA's) have lower overall grade point averages, develop more negative attitudes towards school, receive lower grades, score lower on standardized achievement test, and are perceived less positively by their teachers and classmates (McCroskey, 1977; Richmond & McCroskey, 1989; Bourhis & Berquist, 1989). Because HCA students typically avoid courses that emphasize communication (McCroskey, 1977), these negative effects become particularly acute when HCA students are required to complete any course in communication as part of a general academic program. In short, HCA students who are required to take a basic course in communication will

not be as successful as their low or moderately apprehensive (MCA) counterparts.

Although treatment is the preferred long-term approach for dealing with high levels of communication apprehension, training, time and resource limitations may preclude implementation of this approach in most Basic Courses. A complimentary approach is to have teachers implement instructional strategies that can enhance the short-term educational experience of the HCA student until more extensive treatment modalities become available (Neer, Hudson & Warren, 1982; Booth-Butterfield & Butterfield, 1986; Booth-Butterfield, 1988; Bourhis, 1988; Beatty, 1988). The goal of the research reported here is to determine if communication apprehension is related to a student's preferred learning style and his/her preferred instructional strategies.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Learning Style

One question of interest to the authors is whether or not communication apprehension is related to learning style. Learning style is "primarily related to intellectual ability differences, process and modality differences in learning, cognitive style differences, and noncognitive personality difference" (Andersen & Bell-Daquilante, 1). This study relies upon Kolb's (1976) conceptualization of learning as experientially based, involving four different learning abilities: (1) concrete experience – a receptive, experience-based approach to learning that relies heavily on feeling-based judgments; (2) abstract conceptualization – an analytical, conceptual approach to learning that relies heav-

ily on logical thinking and rational evaluation; (3) active experimentation – an active, "hands on" orientation that relies heavily upon experimentation; and (4) reflective observation – a tentative, impartial, and reflective approach that emphasizes careful observation in making decisions (Kolb, 1976; Anderson & Daquilante, 1980). Based upon a profile of scores obtained for their learning abilities, students are classified into one of four learning styles: (1) the diverger, who emphasizes concrete experience (CA) and reflective observation (RO); (2) the converger, who learns best through abstract conceptualization (AC) and active experimentation (AE); (3) the accommodator, who is best at concrete experience (CA) and active experimentation (AE); and (4) the assimilator, who prefers abstract conceptualization (AC) and reflective observation (RO) (Andersen & Bell-Daquilante, 1980; Kolb, 1976). This conceptualization is based upon a two dimensional model involving abstract versus concrete and active versus passive dimensions.

Previous studies have demonstrated that student performance is enhanced when students are taught through their preferred learning style (Farr, 1971; Douglas, 1979; Trautman, 1979; Cafferty, 1980; Carbo, 1980). If HCA and LCA students differ in preferred learning style, adapting instructional strategies to their preferred learning style should enhance their academic performance. This research replicates and extends, in part, a portion of an earlier study by Andersen and Daquilante (1980) which compared scores on Kolb's Learning Style Inventory with a measure of communication apprehension. Andersen and Daquilante (1980) concluded that CA and learning style were related. The following research questions were used in an effort to confirm this finding:

RQ1: Is there a relationship between the four learning abilities of Kolb's Learning Style Inventory and communication apprehension?

RQ2: Is there a relationship between the four learning styles of Kolb's Learning Style Inventory and communication apprehension?

RQ3: Is there a relationship between the active/passive and concrete/abstract dimensions of Kolb's Learning Style Inventory and communication apprehension?

Preferred Instructional Strategies

Closely related to a student's learning style are the instructional strategies that a teacher might use in instructing students. Performance is enhanced when an appropriate match exists between a student's preferred learning style and the instructional strategies used by the teacher. On any given topic a teacher might choose to present a lecture, lead the class in a discussion, put students into groups, show a film, engage in a socratic dialogue with the class or have students "role play" a particular situation. Neer, Hudson and Warren (1982) found that in public speaking courses, HCA, MCA and LCA students preferred different grading, speech preparation, speaking order, topic selection and administration procedures. Booth-Butterfield (1988) reported that anxiety and avoidance of HCA students could be moderated by manipulating context, motivation, and acquaintance factors in the classroom. One would also expect differences between HCA and LCA students in a course in interpersonal communication. For example, the HCA student should prefer listening to a lecture on interpersonal conflict versus role-laying a conflict in front of his/her classmates. In contrast, the LCA student should prefer an experiential exercise that illustrates nonverbal communication versus viewing a film on the topic. The following research question addresses this issue.

RQ4: Is there a difference between the instructional strategies preferred by HCA, MCA and LCA students?

METHOD

Subjects

Data were collected from undergraduate students enrolled in an eighteen week Basic Course in interpersonal communication at a midwestern university. Forty to fifty sections of this Basic Course are offered every semester serving approximately 1200 to 1500 students per year. The Basic Course is divided into a mass lecture component and individualized instruction provided in "laboratories." The course in interpersonal communication is one of two Basic Courses offered by a Department of Communications and is required by a majority of academic programs at the university. Eleven sections (25%) of a forty-four section Basic Course in interpersonal communication were randomly selected yielding 332 subjects. Six instructors taught all of the sections using a common syllabus. The average age of respondents was 19 ($SD=2.56$, range: 17-47). There were fewer male ($n=122$, 36.7%) than female ($n=210$, 63.3%) subjects. The majority of the subjects were freshmen ($n=254$, 76.5%), and were primarily undeclared ($n=132$, 39.8%), Business ($n=36$, 10.8%) or accounting ($n=31$, 9.3%) majors.

Procedures

At the end of the semester, students in each of the eleven sections were given an opportunity to earn "extra-credit" points by voluntarily participating in the study. Students

were informed that the survey was part of an on-going project to improve the quality of instruction provided in the Basic Course. Subjects signed a consent form, filled out a short demographic questionnaire and completed a survey consisting of Kolb's Learning Style Inventory (LSI), McCroskey's PRCA-24, and an Instructional Strategies questionnaire. This survey was one of several instances when students were asked to provide feedback about instruction in the Basic Course. Primary statistical procedures included t-tests, Pearson correlations and one-way analysis of variance.

MEASURES

Communication Apprehension

McCroskey's PRCA-24 operationalized communication apprehension. The PRCA-24 has "evolved as the dominant instrument employed by both researchers and practitioners for measuring trait-like communication apprehension" (McCroskey *et al.*, 1985, 165). The instrument has well-established predictive and construct validity as well as high reliability (McCroskey, Daly, Richmond, & Falcione, 1977). Based on their scores on the PRCA-24 ($M=66.69$; $SD=15.87$), subjects were classified as either LCA's ($n=60$), Moderate CA's ($n=221$) or HCA's ($n=61$).

Preferred Instructional Strategies

Preferred instructional strategies were assessed by having students rate twenty-two instructional strategies compiled by the authors. Subjects were requested to indicate

how effective each strategy was in helping them to learn. Ratings of the instructional strategies were measured using Likert-type scales similar to those of the PRCA-24. Responses ranged from very effective to very ineffective in "helping you" to learn. Instructional strategies included such items as: lectures, speeches, a variety of writing assignments (short papers, term papers, in-class and take-home), various testing formats (true or false, multiple choice, essay, and short answer), films, field trips, and educational games. The instrument used to assess preferred instructional strategies is provided in Figure 1.

Learning Styles

Learning style was operationalized using Kolb's Learning Style Inventory. The LSI is a self-report instrument in which subjects rank order four possible works in each of nine different sets. Each word represents one of four learning abilities: watching (RO); feeling (CE); doing (AE); thinking (AC). The LSI is one of the most widely publicized learning style instruments (Kolb, Rubin & McIntyre, 1971; Kolb & Wolfe, 1975; Kolb, 1978; Lemoine & Rasberry, 1980; Andersen & Bell-Daquilante, 1980) as is suggestive of a relationship between communication variables and learning style (Andersen & Bell-Daquilante, 1980).

The items in this section are designed to gather information about which teaching strategies are **MOST EFFECTIVE** in helping **YOU** to learn. Please identify how effective each of these strategies is for **YOU** by circling the appropriate response opposite each item.

5=very effective (VE)

4=effective (E)

3=undecided (U)

2=ineffective (I)

1=very ineffective (VI)

	VI	I	U	E	VE
Lectures	1	2	3	4	5
Class discussions	1	2	3	4	5
Small group discussions	1	2	3	4	5
Oral reports	1	2	3	4	5
Speeches	1	2	3	4	5
Small group projects	1	2	3	4	5
In-class writing activities	1	2	3	4	5
Short papers written outside of class	1	2	3	4	5
Term papers	1	2	3	4	5
Guest lecturers	1	2	3	4	5
Self-assessment instruments	1	2	3	4	5
Films	1	2	3	4	5
Being called upon by your instructor	1	2	3	4	5
Role-playing activities	1	2	3	4	5
Objective tests in general	1	2	3	4	5
True or false format	1	2	3	4	5
Multiple choice format	1	2	3	4	5
Short answer format	1	2	3	4	5
In-class essay tests	1	2	3	4	5
Take-home essay tests	1	2	3	4	5
Field trips	1	2	3	4	5
Educational games	1	2	3	4	5

Figure 1. Instructional Strategies

RESULTS***Communication Apprehension and Learning Styles***

Results suggest the existence of a relationship between communication apprehension, learning abilities, learning styles and the active/passive dimension of Kolb's LSI. Table 1 indicates that communication apprehension is related to the following learning abilities: concrete experience ($r=.1643, p < .05$), active experimentation ($r= -.2134, p < .001$), and reflective observation ($r=.4873, p < .001$). Communication apprehension was not related to Kolb's abstract conceptualization learning ability ($r=.0247, p < .05$). Table 2 indicates that a difference was found between the four learning styles and communication apprehension ($df=3, F=9.61, p=.001$). The means and standard deviations for communication apprehension and each of the four learning styles is reported in Table 3.

Table 1
Person r Correlations Between Communication Apprehension (HCA and LCA Subjects) and Kolb's Learning Abilities

	(n=121)	
Learning Ability	r	p
(CE) Concrete Experience	.1643	.036*
(AC) Abstract Conceptualization	.0247	.394
(AE) Active Experimentation	-.2134	.009**
(RO) Reflective Observation	.4873	.000***
*$p < .05$	**$p < .01$	***$p < .001$

Table 2
Communication Apprehension and Learning Style

Style	SS	df	MS	F
Between	6733.76	3	2244.59	9.61*
Within	76590.90	328	233.51	
Total	83324.66	331		

* $p < .001$

Table 3
Mean Communication Apprehension Scores by Learning Style

Style	M	SD	n
Assimilator	77.96	17.08	27
Diverger	70.65	13.84	102
Accommodator	64.56	16.39	152
Converger	60.24	13.47	51

Communication apprehension was also related to the active/passive dimension of Kolb's LSI ($r = -.4075$, $p = .001$) but not to the abstract/concrete dimension ($r = -.0774$, $p > .05$).

Table 4
Pearson r Correlations Between Communication Apprehension (HCA and LCA Subjects) and Active/Passive and Concrete/Abstract Dimensions of Kolb's LSI

Dimension	r	p
Abstract/Concrete	-.0774	.199
Active/Passive	-.4075	.000*

* $p < .001$

Communication Apprehension and Preferred Instructional Strategies

Table 5 indicates that LCA and HCA students prefer different instructional strategies. Differences were found between LCA and HCA students on 11 of the twenty-two instructional strategies rated by subjects. LCA students preferred class discussions ($t=4.08, p < .001$), group discussions ($t=8.26, p < .001$), oral reports ($t=9.07, p < .001$) speeches ($t=9.33, p < .001$), group projects ($t=6.39, p < .001$), being called upon by their instructor ($t=10.33, p < .001$), role playing activities ($t=5.92, p < .001$), take home essays ($t=3.84, p < .001$), in class essays ($t=2.33, p < .05$) and educational games ($t=2.30, p < .05$). HCA subjects reported a preference for lecturing as an instructional strategy ($t=-3.08, p < .01$). Table 6 indicates that the five most preferred instructional strategies for LCA subjects were: class discussion ($M=4.40, SD=1.01$), group discussion $M=4.38, SD=1.04$), educational games ($M=4.25, SD=1.01$), role playing ($M=4.12, SD=1.01$), and being called upon by their instructor ($M=4.02, SD=0.89$). In contrast, HCA subjects reported field trips ($M=3.85, SD=.95$), guest lectures ($M=3.84, SD=0.97$), lecturing by their instructor ($M=3.80, SD=1.28$), films ($M=3.77, SD=0.82$), and educational games ($M=3.77, SD=1.20$) as their five most preferred instructional strategies. Table 7 indicates that LCA students reported the least preference for lectures ($M=3.12, SD=1.11$), in class essays ($M=3.17, SD=1.15$), true or false questions ($M=3.22, SD=1.32$), term papers ($M=3.25, SD=1.20$), and speeches ($M=3.33, SD=1.20$). HCA students least prefer speeches ($M=1.56, SD=0.92$), oral reports ($M=1.64, SD=0.93$), being called upon by their instructor ($M=2.23, SD=1.01$), group discussions ($M=2.39, SD=1.55$), and in class essays ($M=2.69, SD=1.10$).

Table 5
***t*-Tests Between LCA/HCA Students and Preferred**
Instructional Strategies

Strategy	LCA (<i>n</i> =60)		HCA (<i>n</i> =61)		<i>t</i> -value
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	
Lecture	3.12	1.11	3.79	1.28	-3.08**
Class	4.40	1.00	3.69	0.92	4.08***
Discussion					
Group	4.38	1.04	2.40	1.60	8.26**
Discussion					
Oral Reports	3.32	1.10	1.64	0.93	9.07***
Speeches	3.33	1.16	1.56	0.92	9.33***
Group Projects	3.85	1.07	2.44	1.34	6.39***
In-Class Writing	3.43	0.93	3.39	0.86	0.25
Short Papers	3.45	1.03	3.43	0.92	0.13
Term Papers	3.25	1.20	3.13	0.92	0.61
Guest Lecture	3.80	0.94	3.84	0.97	-0.21
Self-Assessment	3.60	0.96	3.48	0.96	0.71
Films	3.47	1.21	3.77	0.82	-1.61
Questioning	4.02	0.89	2.23	1.01	10.33***
Role Play	4.12	0.99	3.00	1.08	5.92***
Objective Tests	3.72	0.94	3.80	0.70	-0.57
True/False	3.22	1.32	3.03	1.02	0.86
Multiple Choice	3.72	1.32	3.57	0.92	0.69
In-class Essay	3.17	1.15	2.69	1.10	2.33*
Take Home	3.92	1.03	3.20	1.03	3.84***
Essay					
Short Answer	3.62	1.03	3.43	0.85	1.22
Field Trips	4.07	1.12	3.85	0.95	1.14
Educational	4.25	1.10	3.77	1.19	2.30*
Games					

p* < .05*p* < .01****p* < .001

Table 6
MOST Preferred Instructional Strategies for LCA/HCA
Students

LCA Students (n=60)			HCA Students (n=61)		
Strategy	M	SD	Strategy	M	SD
Class	4.40	1.01	Field Trips	3.85	0.95
Discussion					
Group	4.38	1.04	Guest lecture	3.80	0.97
Discussion					
Educational	4.25	1.10	Lecture	3.80	1.28
Games					
Role Play	4.12	1.01	Films	3.77	0.82
Questioning	4.02	0.89	Educational	3.77	1.20
			Games		

Table 7
LEAST preferred Instructional Strategies for LCA/HCA
Students

LCA Students (n=60)			HCA Students (n=61)		
Strategy	M	SD	Strategy	M	SD
Lectures	3.12	1.11	Speeches	1.56	0.92
In-class	3.17	1.15	Oral Reports	1.64	0.92
Essay					
True/False	3.22	1.32	Questioning	2.23	1.01
Term Papers	3.25	1.20	Group	2.39	1.55
			Discussion		
Speeches	3.33	1.20	In-class Essay	2.69	1.10

DISCUSSION

Communication Apprehension and Learning Style

Although this study does not clarify the exact nature of the relationship, communication apprehension, learning ability and style appear to be related. Concrete experience ($r=.1643$, $p < .05$) and reflective observation ($r=.4873$, $p < .001$) are associated with higher levels of communication apprehension while active experimentation ($r=-.2134$, $p < .01$) is associated with lower communication apprehension. This, in part, reflects the relationship found between HCA's who are more passive in their approach to learning and LCA's who are more active ($r=-.4075$, $p < .001$). No relationship was found between the concrete/abstract dimension of Kolb's LSI and communication apprehension ($r=-.0774$, $p > .05$). This finding is consistent with work by Andersen and Bell-Daquilante (1980) who argue that the active/passive dimension of Kolb's LSI may be operating with more validity when the concrete/abstract dimension. Higher levels of communication apprehension are associated with the learning styles of assimilation ($M=75.96$, $SD=17.08$) and divergence ($M=70.65$, $SD=13.84$) while lower levels are associated with accommodation ($M=64.56$, $SD=16.39$) and convergence ($M=60.24$, $SD=13.47$). This finding is consistent with Kolb's conceptualization of learning style in which assimilators and divergers (HCA's) are less active (relying upon reflective observation as a learning ability) than accommodators and convergers (LCA's) who rely more upon active experimentation as a learning ability. The results suggest that LCA and HCA students differ in how they approach the process of learning. Additional research should be conducted to clarify more precisely the nature of this relationship.

Communication Apprehension and Preferred Instructional Strategies

The results of this study demonstrate that LCA and HCA students express different preferences for instructional strategies. As one might suspect, HCA students generally prefer instructional strategies that are less active (field trips, lectures, and films) over those that require greater interaction with others (speeches, oral reports, being called upon by their instructor, and group activities). In contrast, the LCA student prefers those strategies that actively engage him or her in the learning process (discussions, educational games, role playing and being questioned by their instructors) while expressing less preference for more passive strategies, particularly writing activities. Additional research should be conducted to assess the relationship between educational outcomes such as performance, achievement, satisfaction and retention as they relate to preferred instructional strategies. What are the effects on educational outcomes when instructors rely upon instructional strategies that are not preferred by their students? Who will be effected more, the LCA student who is taught using passive instructional strategies or the HCA student who is forced to be active? We would predict that educational outcomes for both groups would be enhanced by relying upon those strategies they most prefer, and that LCA students are less effected when taught using less preferred strategies.

Implications for Teaching and the Basic Course

This study suggests that in the typical classroom, students differ in terms of their orientation to the process of

learning and the instructional strategies they perceive to be most effective in teaching them. Previous research indicates that instructional strategies that are consistent with a student's learning style will enhance academic performance. Instructional strategies are the means by which an instructor can adapt to and operationalize learning style. The implications for teaching are: (1) recognize and acknowledge the diversity in student learning styles and preferences for instructional strategies and (2) adapt to these differences by incorporating a variety of instructional strategies on any given topic. HCA students can be helped by incorporating instructional strategies that allow them to passively engage information while LCA students prefer more active involvement. For example, we could design a unit on conflict that incorporated instructional strategies to meet the needs of both LCA and HCA students. Material on conflict could be presented using a combination of short lecture, film, and educational games (HCA preferences) with a class discussion and questions directed to LCA students (LCA preferences). Incorporating a variety of strategies in the instructional process will help insure that neither group is significantly disadvantaged in the process. This assumes, of course, that we, as teachers, are willing and able to make the adaptations that are suggested by this study.

Instruction in the basic course is even more problematic. Basic courses are charged with the mandate to effectively teach large numbers of students using limited resources at the lowest cost per student. Often this leads to the instruction of students in large mass lecture settings coupled with individual instruction in smaller, multi-section laboratories. One possible implication of this study is to consider the feasibility of identifying and then assigning students into sections based upon their learning style and preferred instructional strategies. The process would be similar to identifying HCA students and then tracking them into

sections of public speaking that are designed for them specifically. Instructors would be able to adapt more easily by knowing that a particular group of students is more homogeneous in their learning style and preferred instructional strategies.

The challenge of adapting to student learning style and instructional strategy differences is compounded when an instructor faces an audience of three-hundred, versus a class of thirty students. Often times the "path of least resistance" is taken by relying upon the traditional lecture format as the most "cost effective" instructional strategy. Here too, incorporating a variety of instructional strategies can assist in meeting the different learning needs of students. The mass lecture may require greater creativity and effort to insure variety, but the context itself does not inherently preclude adaptation. The same combination of strategies we might use in a class of thirty students, can, with greater effort and creativity, be applied to the larger mass lecture context. Lecturing, combined with audio-visual material, skits performed on stage before the audience, and questions directed to the audience can help insure the variety in instructional strategies that will be of greatest benefit to students.

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