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Academic Success in the Basic Course: The Influence of Apprehension and Demographics

Charles A. Lubbers
Diane Atkinson Gorcyca

As instructors in basic communication courses, we are constantly telling our students that one of the best methods of dealing with communication apprehension, especially in the public speaking context, is repeated experience. A cursory examination of various texts for basic communication courses rendered the following examples of this counsel:

Repeated experiences in front of an audience tend to reduce fear and permit the learning of communication skills that have application both inside and outside the classroom (Pearson & Nelson, 1991, p. 326).

Experience will help speakers who feel moderate degrees of apprehension. Experience will show you that a public speech can be effective despite your fears and anxieties (DeVito, 1991, p. 336).

The more experience you get in speaking, the more able you are to cope with nervousness (Verderber, 1984, p. 280).

Another aid in controlling apprehension is to do what you are doing now: learn about giving speeches. When you understand the process and devices needed to give a speech you will feel more comfortable in the public communication context. Like any other skill, public speaking can be practiced and improved (Buerkel-Rothfuss, 1985, p. 296).

If you are an inexperienced speaker, please know that you will learn to control your nervousness as you get more and more practice in public speaking, both in your speech class and in your career. You should welcome this expe-
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rience as a way to further your personal and professional growth (Gregory, H., 1990, p. 54).

To cope with speech anxiety we must realize that the potential for failure always exists, but that we can't let it stop us from trying (Seiler, 1988, p. 217).

This investigation sought to empirically test the existence of a causal relationship between communication apprehension and academic success in the basic communication course. Will prior experience in communication courses and prior experience in extracurricular communication activities such as debate, forensics and theater, affect the level of communication apprehension as reported by students enrolled in a basic communication course? Additionally, this research sought to determine the impact of several demographic variables on both communication apprehension and final grade in the basic communication course.

Communication apprehension, operationalized in terms of an individual's score on the PRCA and defined as "...an individual's level of fear or anxiety about real or anticipated communication with another person or persons" (McCroskey, 1977, p. 78), is one of the dominant issues in communication research. The existence of high apprehension levels in college students has been widely documented (see McCroskey, 1970; Bowers, 1986). The quotes from basic course texts mentioned above illustrate the relevance that authors have attached to the concept. While few colleges and universities may operate some form of treatment program for apprehension (Hoffman & Sprague, 1982), most instructors of basic communication courses would acknowledge the impact of apprehensive students on their development of teaching strategies.

A number of studies have examined the relationship between communication apprehension and the basic course in terms of interaction, performance and final grade. Butterfield (1988) found high communication apprehensives attend to, comprehend and remember class content less effectively.
Freimuth (1976) determined that high apprehensives perform oral communication tasks less effectively.

A more extensive body of research has explored the relationship of communication apprehension and achievement. Communication apprehension significantly effects the academic achievement of elementary and secondary students (Comadena & Prusank, 1988; Davis & Scott, 1978; McCroskey, Andersen, Richmond & Wheeless, 1981). Additionally, high communication apprehension has deleterious effects on a student's overall academic achievement (Scott & Wheeless, 1977b). Some examples of these effects include lower scores on standardized tests as well as lower grade point averages (McCroskey & Andersen, 1976). McCroskey (1975) found lower grade point averages for high apprehensives than for moderate apprehensives. Using a personal survey approach, not the PRCA, Bowers (1986) found no correlation between classroom communication apprehension and grade point average.

McCroskey and Sheahan (1976) and Hurt, Preiss and Davis (1976) report that high degrees of apprehension and negative attitudes toward school are related. High apprehensive college students dropped out of school at a significantly higher rate than low apprehensives (McCroskey, Booth-Butterfield & Payne, 1989). The same investigation found high CA's had a significantly lower grade point average during the first two years of college, but not in the third and fourth years. While there may be an indication of a negative performance relationship with apprehension, McCroskey, Daly and Sorensen (1976) found no significant relationship between apprehension and intelligence in college students.

Upon reviewing the literature related to communication apprehension and academic achievement, Powers and Smythe (1980, p. 146) argue that "...high levels of communication apprehension yield negative academic outcomes." These negative outcomes undoubtedly result from "...a high degree of
communication apprehension [that] can be a serious learning disability" (Scott, Wheelees, Yates & Randolph, 1977, p. 543).

Because of the negative effects on academic achievement, researchers have attempted to determine how communication effects an individual's performance in an academic setting. Page (1980) noted that research generally agrees that those who appear anxious tend to be judged as less effective communicators than those who appear more calm. Rubin and Graham (1988) noted that perceptions of communication competence were tied to communication apprehension. They argued that those exhibiting high communication apprehension were judged to be less competent communicators. Powers and Smythe (1980) found "...that low CA students are evaluated significantly higher than their high CA counterparts" (p. 150).

To further determine the relationship of communication apprehension to academic success in a college basic communication course, this investigation assessed the impact of various demographic variables and apprehension level on final grades. The demographic variables of age, sex, year in school, year since last attended school, previous communication courses taken and extracurricular involvement in communication activities were reported by the subjects. Bowers (1986) found no relationship between class level and classroom communication apprehension, and a slight (p < .06) relationship between age and apprehension, with students 25 and older experiencing less apprehension.*

Based on the previous review of literature, the following research questions were developed for investigation:

* The reader will note that the mean subject age for this investigation was 22.6. Subjects attend a small midwestern college where over 30% of the students are "non-traditional" with the large majority of these females. The investigators noted a determination on their part to over-achieve, while simultaneously exhibiting high apprehensive behaviors.
Q1: What is the impact of a variety of demographic variables and communication apprehension on final grade achieved?

Q2: What is the impact of demographic variables on self-reported communication apprehension?

METHODS

Subjects

The subjects in this investigation consisted of 401 undergraduate students (165 men and 236 women) enrolled in sixteen sections of a basic speech communication course. The course was offered at a small state-supported college in the midwest with an enrollment of approximately 4,500 students. The 401 students were included in the analysis because they completed the PRCA-24 and completed most of the demographic questionnaire.

The ages ranged from 17 to 55 with a mean of 22.5. 378 subjects indicated their current grade in college: 211 freshman (55.8%), 100 sophomores (26.5%), 39 juniors (10.3%), and 28 seniors (7.4%). The 350 subjects providing a self-reported GPA had a mean of 2.87 and a median of 3.0 on the 4.0 scale.

Data Collection

During the first or second class period of the semester all students enrolled in the basic communication course completed the PRCA-24 and a questionnaire which collected all of the information described below. At the end of the semester, the final course grades were collected and matched to the earlier responses of the students.

Communication apprehension was measured by McCroskey's 24 item Personal Report of Communication
Apprehension (PRCA-24). In 1978, Daly reported that there were at least 25 self-report measures of communication anxiety. The PRCA-24 was chosen because of its applicability to the variables proposed for analysis, its excellent development over the last two decades; and its consistently strong reliability and validity.

McCroskey, Beatty, Kearney and Plax (1985) note that, "The Personal Report of Communication Apprehension (PRCA) has evolved as the dominant instrument employed by both researchers and practitioners for measuring trait-like communication apprehension" (p. 165). The dominant position of the PRCA as a diagnostic and research tool is due, in part, to its long tradition in development.

A variety of demographic and descriptive information was collected at the start of the semester. The subject's gender, age, grade level, and self-reported GPA were collected with the PRCA-24. Additionally, subjects were asked to identify the number of communication courses they had taken in the past, whether or not they had ever been involved in public speaking intensive extracurricular activities (debate, forensics, theater, etc.), and how many years it had been since they last attended school.

**Analysis of Data**

The research questions were analyzed using stepwise multiple regression. A standard confidence level of .05 was adopted for this research. All tests were conducted using the SPSSx statistical analysis package.
RESULTS

Research Question 1

What is the impact of a variety of demographic variables and communication apprehension on final grade achieved?

To test research question one a stepwise regression was conducted with the final course grade as the dependent variable and twelve independent variables. The independent variables included the other eight described in the methods section. Additionally, the scores for the four subscales of the PRCA-24 were included as independent variables.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Step</th>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Beta</th>
<th>R²</th>
<th>Stepwise F</th>
<th>Sig F</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Reported GPA</td>
<td>-.2169</td>
<td>.0359</td>
<td>11.6424</td>
<td>.0007</td>
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<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Grade Level</td>
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<td>3</td>
<td>Public Communication Apprehension</td>
<td>-.1175</td>
<td>.0897</td>
<td>10.1864</td>
<td>.0000</td>
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</table>

*aBeta (standardized regression coefficient) values were taken from the coefficient table produced in the final step, rather than coefficients reported at each step.*

Table 1 presents the description of those variables which were included in the regression equation developed for the independent variable of final grade. The negative values for each of the three variables produces the following conclusions. First, the higher the student's self-reported GPA the higher
the final grade in the course. Second, students in higher grade levels were more likely to receive higher final grades. Finally, the higher the score on the Public Communication Apprehension subscale of the PRCA-24, the higher the final course grade.

**Research Question 2**

*What is the impact of demographic variables on self-reported communication apprehension?*

Two stepwise regressions were conducted to answer research question number two. One used the PRCA-24 score as the dependent measure and the second used the score on the Public Speaking subscale of the PRCA-24 as the dependent variable. Both regressions used the seven demographic and descriptive variables (sex, age, GPA, grade level, extracurricular participation, communication courses taken, and years since attending school) as independent measures.

Table 2 presents the results for the stepwise regression with the overall PRCA-24 score as the dependent variable. The results indicate that the two variables related to prior communication experience were in the equation. Essentially, the more communication courses a subject had taken previously, the or lower higher reported CA level. Additionally, those students who were involved in communication-intensive extracurricular activities reported lower CA levels.

Table 3 presents the three variables which loaded into the regression equation developed for the dependent variable of the public speaking subscale. The two variables related to communication experience again appeared in the equation. However, the variable of subject sex was added to the equation. The results indicate that the females in the subject sample reported higher levels of public speaking apprehension than did the males.
Table 2
Stepwise Multiple Regression:
Dependent Variable – Communication Apprehension

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Step</th>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Betaa</th>
<th>R²</th>
<th>Stepwise F</th>
<th>Sig F</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
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<td></td>
<td>Courses</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Extracurricular</td>
<td>-.1898</td>
<td>.1090</td>
<td>19.0279</td>
<td>.0000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Beta (standardized regression coefficient) values were taken from the coefficient table produced in the final step, rather than coefficients reported at each step.

Table 3
Stepwise Multiple Regression:
Dependent Variable – Public Speaking Apprehension

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Step</th>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Betaa</th>
<th>R²</th>
<th>Stepwise F</th>
<th>Sig F</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Courses</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Subject Sex</td>
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<tr>
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<td>.0000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Beta (standardized regression coefficient) values were taken from the coefficient table produced in the final step, rather than coefficients reported at each step.

DISCUSSION

The first research question asked which demographic variables would impact on final grade achieved. Self-reported GPA, grade level in college and public CA were significant on the stepwise regression analysis. On an intuitive level, it was
of no surprise that there was a positive relationship between self reported GPA and final grade achieved in the basic communication source. Success in other courses, at either the high school or college level, is a good predictor of success in the basic course.

The second variable which entered the regression equation, grade level, suggests that the common belief that upper-division students exhibit superior performance in the basic communication course has a realistic foundation.* The first two variables which entered into the stepwise equation, GPA and grade level, are empirical confirmations of instinctive beliefs held by basic course instructors.

The variable entered in the third step of the equation, the public speaking subscore, indicated that higher grades were achieved by students with higher scores on the public communication subscale, in contrast with previous research (Butterfield, 1988; Freimuth, 1976). This may lend support to the notion that apprehension can serve a functional role in academic success. The students may demonstrate extra motivation compared to those with lower apprehension, and this results in superior academic achievement. In the basic communication course used in this present investigation, assignments ranged from oral presentations, written essays and objective tests. The oral presentations composed roughly 30-35% of the total grade and may have served to motivate the student on all assignments in order to compensate for their perceived inabilities in public communication. Future research should address the question of grade differences based on oral and written assignments. With the variation between seven instructors as far as teaching techniques, this issue was not addressed by the present research.

Research question two addressed the relationship between the demographic variables and self-reports of communication apprehension. Two stepwise regressions were con-

* Particularly since this is an open admissions policy college
ducted: the first to determine the impact on the PRCA-24 score, and the second to determine the relationship to the public speaking subscore. The first regression confirmed the sage advice of communication texts and instructors that "experience helps." Both previous communication courses and extracurricular communication activity serve to reduce the level of overall communication apprehension. The fact that the public communication subscore was significantly related to academic success in the basic course, encouraged a post hoc third regression to determine the relationship of demographics to public speaking apprehension. Again, the experience factor (courses and extracurricular activities) had a positive influence of lower apprehension.

A surprising factor, subject sex, appeared in the second step of the equation. Females were more likely to experience public speaking apprehension than males. It is significant to note that subject sex did not load in any other regression equation. Again, while we may intrinsically feel that females are more circumspect than males, combined with the large number of non-traditional females, especially in the public speaking context, the results of the third stepwise regression do not provide clear evidence of this explanation.

This research has abundant strengths and limitations. The subject size was large, over 400, which can allow for reasonable confidence in the results. However, there were seven different instructors involved in the sampling. Each of the seven approach apprehension in a diverse manner and no attempt was made to control for this variance. The instructors were handed the PRCA-24 scores for their students and were not admonished to refrain from analyzing the scores. Likely, some instructors did know the apprehension scores for certain students and this could have effected their instruction and grading. However, given the large sample size, the impact of this behavior should be relatively negligible.

In total, these results present numerous research possibilities. The significance of the public speaking subscore in the
regression equation indicates the need to further analyze grading patterns in the basic communication course. Will there be a significant difference on the grades of high apprehensives on oral and written assignments, as compared to low and moderate apprehensives? How can we motivate the low apprehensive student in the basic course? When we cover the concept of apprehension in class are we reducing their level of motivation, since this is an unexperienced anxiety? Finally, it would be relevant to determine the relationship of academic success, apprehension and teaching styles? Is there a more significant relationship with some instructors than with others? What factors might explain this variability?

The concept of demographic characteristics impacting on communication apprehension may render support for "homespun" wisdom. These results may also indicate the essential accomplishment of communication experiences during early educational settings. At the present time, when we are faced with severe funding cutbacks in the area of education, many state, county and local education governing bodies may consider the elimination of speech and drama programs and extracurricular activities. If in fact communication apprehension has a detrimental impact on overall academic achievement, and previous experience significantly reduces the level of apprehension, then a compelling case could be constructed for preserving such programs.

REFERENCES


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communication course. *Human Communication Research*, 6, 146-152.


