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*Research Article*

# **Anxiety and Communication Competence in the Honors Basic Public Speaking Course: An Intervention and Formative Assessment**

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## **Abstract**

*This case study examines the effectiveness of a formative assessment intervention in an honors section of a basic public speaking course. Previous research has found significantly higher levels of public speaking anxiety among honors students than among non-honors students and has therefore identified them as a population at risk for high public speaking anxiety (PSA). This analysis tested a one-hour tutoring session designed to aid students in maximizing learning outcomes for the first speech of the course and to enhance markers of student development through reduced PSA and increased self-perceived communication competence (SPCC). Results indicated significant and sustained reductions in honors students' PSA directly after the intervention and significant increases in these students' SPCC after the classroom delivery of the first speech. We posit that students may have benefited from a sleeper effect due to the intervention, needing the catalytic event of the speaking experience to activate their enhanced feelings of competence. Implications include the potential to harness the effectiveness of such tutoring sessions to assist at-risk students.*

*Keywords: Honors Students, Assessment*

## **Introduction**

The basic communication course has served honors student education since the 1950s when honors public speaking courses emerged as part of communication program curricula (Jensen & Williams, 1998). Since that time, research and assessment, although exceptionally limited, have examined a handful of variables associated with the honors basic communication course. One area that has received expansive attention in the traditional basic course literature surrounds students' public speaking anxiety (PSA) and communication competency (CC), yet an examination of literature points to a scant number of studies that examine these same variables in the honors context. However, Butler, Pryor, and Marti (2004) assessed communication apprehension (CA) in a basic public speaking course and found that although honors students may seem well prepared and knowledgeable in the classroom, when tasked with preparing and presenting a speech for a class they face anxiety at significantly higher levels than traditional undergraduate students do. Based on this finding, the related findings regarding high PSA among honors students (Demos & Weijola, 1966; Rice, Leever, Christopher, & Porter, 2006), and in light of the continued call for increased assessment of the basic course and its different iterations, the current study details and evaluates an out-of-class tutoring intervention designed to reduce PSA and increase CC amongst students in the honors basic course. This intervention provides an outlet to "re-channel" anxiety into adaptive behaviors; a strength honors students display more readily than their non-honors peers (Castro-Johnson & Wang, 2003, p. 112).

## **Literature Review**

### **Markers of Student Development**

Westwick, Hunter, and Chromey (2018) suggested that PSA and CC were important markers of student development in the basic course because they focus on emotional growth and self-efficacy. Rodgers (1990) defined student development as "the ways that a student grows, progresses, or increases [their] developmental capabilities as a result of enrollment in an institution of higher education" (p. 27). Assessing and guiding such development is essential because student learning and student development are "inextricably intertwined" (King & Baxter Magolda, 1996, p. 163), "with both essential to mastery of higher-education outcomes" (Broido & Schreiber, 2016, p. 66). Current student development theory states that "all aspects of development [are] interdependent" (Broido & Schreiber, 2016, p. 66), such that

emotional and personal growth cannot be separated from progress in academic and cognitive areas. Therefore, to assess the impacts of the aforementioned tutoring intervention in an honors section of the basic public speaking course, this study assessed whether the intervention was successful at reducing PSA and enhancing students' CC.

**Public speaking anxiety.** Public Speaking Anxiety, a fearful or anxious reaction to the anticipation of an expected or actual presentation (Bodie, 2010), affects one's abilities to create and decipher communication messages and to decipher the messages of others. Therefore, the treatment of PSA has been a long-standing concern of communication scholars and educators (Bodie, 2010). Some immediate symptoms associated with PSA include increased heart rate, negative self-talk, and behavioral concomitants (Daly, McCroskey, Ayres, Hopf, & Ayres, 1997). Further, this malady may result in lasting negative implications such as personal and career-related challenges (Bodie, 2010; Richmond, Wrench, & McCroskey, 2013). PSA is related to the much broader construct of communication apprehension (CA), which focusses on apprehension in group, meeting, dyad, and public speaking contexts (McCroskey, 1970). However, PSA is a unique form of communication apprehension, and consequently, individuals who feel anxious about public speaking might not feel the same level of apprehension in other contexts of communication. Since public speaking can have a significant and lasting impact on an individual's academic and career successes, it is essential to address this issue within the basic communication course, especially when the basic course focuses specifically on public speaking (Hunter, Westwick, & Haleta, 2014).

A wealth of communication research has identified and explored techniques used to reduce communication apprehension and public speaking anxiety. Three primary techniques that can aid in the reduction of public speaking anxiety include exposure therapy, cognitive modification, and skills training (Hunter et al., 2014). While the intervention tested in this analysis is primarily a skills-training exercise, it also provided an opportunity for the student to gain exposure to the speaking context in an environment less threatening than the classroom and for the instructor to supplant fear-based thoughts with more realistic thinking. Thus, the intervention assessed in this course provided skills training along with elements of exposure therapy and cognitive modification to help students "re-channel" their anxiety into the adaptive behaviors recommended in the session, and, consequently, to manage their fears.

Shroeder (2002) found a significant correlation between skills training and decreased CA for students enrolled in a basic public speaking course. Skills training provided the knowledge and experience that allowed “even the highly apprehensive student to receive a greater ability to fulfill expectations of communication interchanges following completion of the basic speech course” (Shroeder, 2002, p. 386). Additionally, Finn, Sawyer, and Schrodt (2009) placed students into small groups in which they were required to present three times in front of their peers. They found that merely exposing students to speaking in front of an audience decreased speaking anxiety.

**Communication competence.** Communication competence “generally refers to the quality of interaction behavior in various contexts” (Canary & Spitzberg, 1987, p. 43) or the effectiveness of an individual’s communication behavior. Competence has been operationalized in several ways, including objective observation, subjective observation, receiver-report, and self-report (McCroskey & McCroskey, 1988). One of the more consistently used measures in research has been the self-report method, especially when CC is linked to PSA (Rubin, Rubin, & Jordan, 1997). Previous studies have shown public speaking anxiety inversely correlates with self-perceived communication competence (SPCC) (Ellis, 1995; Rubin et al., 1997; Teven, Richmond, McCroskey, & McCroskey, 2010). “This indicates that people with higher communication apprehension see themselves as less competent communicators” (Teven et al., 2010, p. 267).

One of the primary contexts examined in CC research is the public speaking classroom (Canary & MacGregor, 2008; Rubin et al., 1997). Numerous studies have associated students’ self-perceived competence levels with reported levels of anxiety, suggesting that students with greater anxiety report lower perceptions of their CC (MacIntyre & MacDonald, 1998; Rubin et al., 1997). However, communication instruction can make a salient and positive difference for students, relative to anxiety and competence (Rubin, Welch, & Buerkel, 1995). Multiple scholars have reported a decrease in communication apprehension and an increase in communication competence for college students throughout a single semester of public speaking instruction when the course was infused with the right blend of treatment modalities (Ellis, 1995; Hunter et al., 2014; Rubin et al., 1997).

### Honors Students as an At-Risk Population

Despite the infusion of honors instruction in the basic course over the past 70 years, relatively little instructional communication research has focused on this particular portion of our student population, especially in relationship to the basic course. This lack of research is surprising considering the relatively robust body of literature that exists on honors students, instruction, and programming. Although much of the research on honors student characteristics is outdated (Rinn & Plucker, 2004), and honors programs vary in their membership and criteria for entry (Kampfe, Chasek, & Falconer, 2016; Nichols & Chang, 2013), scholarship has found some personality characteristics that are generally heightened in honors students.

Honors students tend to take their studies more seriously than other students (Hickson & Driskill, 1970; Mathiasen, 1985; Rinn & Plucker, 2004), and they possess a high need for achievement that often lends itself to a propensity toward perfectionism (Laycock, 1984; Parker & Adkins, 1995), as well as a tendency toward increased concern over grades as compared with their non-honors peers (Harte, 1994). Rice et al. (2006) further noted that these higher levels of perfectionism among high achieving students might increase levels of self-discrepant and self-critical perceptions in comparing expectations to performances, resulting in heightened risk for anxiety, social isolation, and disconnection. Therefore, studies have examined the occurrence of speaking anxiety or communication competence within this population.

A previous study on “gifted children” (McEachron-Hirsch, 1993), as well as other studies on first-year honors students (Demos & Weijola, 1966; Rice et al., 2006), found a relationship between high levels of CA and high academic achievement. Additional research has found that honors students suffer significantly higher PSA than non-honors students; thus, identifying them as an “at risk” population for high PSA (Butler et al., 2004). As a result, Butler et al. (2004) called for the “need for special attention being devoted to the treatment of speech-based apprehension in honors classes” (p. 295). They stated, “such special attention might focus on honors-based tutoring or remediation speech classes” (p. 295). Because of this call, this study uses formative assessment to explore PSA and CC in honors sections of the basic communication course.

## Assessment

Edman (2002) asserted, “the honors instructor should understand assessment as far more than giving grades; it is how we give our students feedback, and feedback is essential in good teaching” (p. 108). Assessment in the basic course remains a critical concern for basic course directors, faculty, and administrators (Meyer, Kurtz, Hines, Simonds, & Hunt, 2010). However, assessment is another area of scholarship that has left honors sections of the basic communication course relatively unexamined. Communication scholars have asserted that assessment efforts “should be incorporated as a part of effective teaching so as to advance the discipline’s pedagogical content knowledge” (Meyer et al., 2010, p. 8). This valuation can occur through summative assessment (e.g., the assessment of learning), which is “designed to determine a student’s academic development after a set unit of material” (Dunn & Mulvenon, 2009, p. 3), or formative assessment (e.g., assessment for learning; Altman, Fleming, & Heyburn, 2010), which is “designed to monitor student progress during the learning process” (Dunn & Mulvenon, 2009, p. 3). While both summative and formative assessment can be used to strengthen basic course design, administration, and student learning outcomes, this study focuses on a formative assessment based on a one-shot investigation of the impact of a single activity—an out-of-class tutoring session between the instructor and two students at a time.

Both formative assessments (e.g., Frey, Simonds, Hooker, Meyer, & Hunt, 2018; Rattenborg, Simonds, Hunt, 2005) and summative assessments (e.g., Suwinvattichaiorn & Broeckelman-Post, 2016; Westwick et al., 2018) have been used to provide assessment data for the basic course. Because formative assessment focuses on “all those activities undertaken by teachers, and/or by their students, which provide information to be used as feedback to modify the teaching and learning activities in which they are engaged” (Black & Wiliam, 1998, p. 10), basic course instructors and administrators may find great value in further emphasis on and reporting of assessments that focus specifically on formative assessment. This investigation focuses on a formative assessment of the aforementioned out-of-class tutoring session designed to help students enrolled in honors sections of the basic public speaking course with PSA and CC; two markers of student development that have plagued honors students.

Although treatment of speaking anxiety should revolve around a central platform to assist all students, it is important to make allowances for differences among various constituencies of the course that may affect the causes and impacts of their

PSA (Bodie, 2010). Such differences may include the honors student population, hence the focus of the current study. The need to address PSA and CC is intensified due to the higher levels of perfectionism that have been noted amongst honors students (Rice et al., 2006) and the previous research on honors students' heightened PSA (Butler et al., 2004).

Therefore, based on previous research regarding honors students and speaking anxiety, we have proposed the following hypothesis to guide our assessment of the impact of our course intervention:

H1: Students in an honors basic public speaking course will experience decreased public speaking anxiety after an individual skills-based training.

Further, based on the relationship between public speaking anxiety and communication competence, we have proposed the following hypothesis to guide our assessment of the impact of our course intervention:

H2: Students in an honors basic public speaking course will experience increased communication competence after an individual skills-based training.

## **Methodology**

To assess the impacts of the tutoring intervention on honors public speaking students' PSA and CC, this study employed a pretest/posttest design to test for immediate impacts of the tutoring intervention and a follow-up measure to test for sustained effects.

### **Description of the Honors Basic Public Speaking Course**

Eligibility for enrollment in honors sections of the basic communication course at our institution requires the student meets at least one of the following three criteria: an ACT score of 27 or higher, an SAT score of 1280 or higher, or placement in the top 10% of the student's high school graduating class. However, on rare occasions, students may also enroll based on professor recommendation. Consequently, we have observed that, while the students enrolled in honors communication courses are generally academically proficient, they are not necessarily

confident public speakers. Thus, similar to traditional sections of the course, the beginning of the honors basic public speaking course focuses on community building and reducing speaking apprehensions and communication anxieties.

Honors sections of the basic course, like our traditional sections, are limited to 24 students. The honors course meets face-to-face exclusively (we do not offer honors sections of the basic public speaking course online) and aims to meet the same learning objectives as the traditional course. However, the honors program asks that the instructor design the course with an environment that promotes intensified academic rigor and increased expectations as compared with other traditional sections. Therefore, specific elements of the course design were crafted to heighten student preparation through more intensive focus on nonverbal communication in delivery techniques, intensified research expectations, and more varied modes of delivery for their public speaking performances.

Students are required to deliver five presentations throughout the semester. The tutoring intervention tested in this analysis occurred after a group discussion assignment, but before delivery of the first individual speech. While the first speech in the traditional classroom assigns each student to discuss reasons why he or she holds a particular personal attitude, the first individual speech assignment in the honors section asks each student to critically examine a particular societal value. This more rigorous expectation is assigned to excite the honors students' intellectual processes by enabling the students to analyze the class as a community, break down power differentials, and encourage viable solutions to promote equity within the classroom. However, these topics can also produce a high level of anxiety due to the heightened requirements for research, organization, delivery, and grade expectations, as well as the potential for fear of negative responses to their stances.

### **The Tutoring Exercise Intervention**

The course requires each student to attend a single, one-hour, ungraded tutoring session with the instructor, who served as the tutor, and a single classmate. The one-hour session was divided equally, allowing each participant to present their six to seven minute speech in front of the instructor and his or her classmate. After his or her speech, each student received supportive and constructive feedback from the instructor and their partner, and the instructor worked with each student to reduce anxiety about the speech, to develop and strengthen problematic parts of the oral presentation through skills training, and to facilitate faculty-student interaction. The

feedback was immediate and varied by each student. However, the feedback followed the peer evaluation form with focus on speech content, organization, use of language, and delivery. The feedback was supportive, constructive, and detailed. While the tutoring intervention was primarily skills-based, it also included elements of exposure therapy and cognitive modification to help these students manage their fears—all three treatments previously discussed (Bodie, 2010) were integrated into this approach.

Such tutoring exercises promise to serve honors students well in enhancing their motivation to learn. Schick and Phillipson (2009) found that among high academic achieving German students, while intelligence was a predictor of learning motivation, such motivation could not be predicted by academic abilities alone. A far larger percentage of these students' variance in learning motivation was explained by characteristics such as self-awareness and self-criticism—characteristics that may be enhanced through such direct tutelage as that provided in the teaching exercise tested in this study. Furthermore, “compared to their non-Honor peers, when Honors students experience negative emotions (e.g., test anxiety), they are better able to re-channel the negative thoughts and feelings associated with these emotions into adaptive behaviors (e.g., spending more time on test preparation” (Castro-Johnson & Wang, 2003, p. 112). Therefore, such an exercise also plays to the strengths of honors students regarding their unique capability to harness academic anxieties and channel them as energy toward planning and preparation.

## Participants

The participants of the study ( $N = 94$ ) included undergraduate students ( $n = 31$  men,  $n = 63$  women) enrolled in honors sections of the basic public speaking course at a mid-sized Midwestern university. Subjects ranged in age from 18 to 23 ( $M = 18.7$ ,  $SD = .853$ ). Most of the participants were first-years (66), followed by sophomores (23), juniors (3) and seniors (2). Students are required to complete the oral communication general education requirement within their first 60 credits hours. Thus, any junior or seniors enrolled in the course were transfer students. Because this course fulfills a university general education requirement, a variety of student majors were represented.

## Procedures

After reviewing important information on human subject research, participants who agreed to take part in the assessment were asked to complete two different instruments at three different points during the same semester. First (time 1), subjects completed the PRPSA and SPCC instruments in person directly before the one-hour intervention. Second (time 2), subjects completed the same instruments in person immediately after the one-hour intervention. Finally, (time 3) students completed the same two instruments during class following the oral presentation of the speech that was rehearsed during the tutoring intervention. The in-class presentations typically took place one week following the tutoring intervention.

## Instrumentation

PSA was operationalized for numerical analysis by utilizing McCroskey's (1970) Personal Report of Public Speaking Anxiety (PRPSA). The questions on the PRPSA are written on a 5-point Likert-type scale with 1 being *strongly agree* and 5 being *strongly disagree* to indicate how well each statement applies to the participant. This questionnaire consists of 34 statements that measure levels of anxiety that are solely speech related. The results of the survey show whether the individual has high (131 and above), moderate (98-130), or low anxiety (below 98). The PRPSA scale has proven to be highly reliable (Smith & Frymier, 2006). The reliability for PRPSA in this study was  $\alpha = .93$  ( $M = 110.21$ ,  $SD = 25.83$ ) at time 1,  $\alpha = .94$  ( $M = 105.72$ ,  $SD = 24.68$ ) at time 2, and  $\alpha = .93$  ( $M = 102.14$ ,  $SD = 23.46$ ) at time 3.

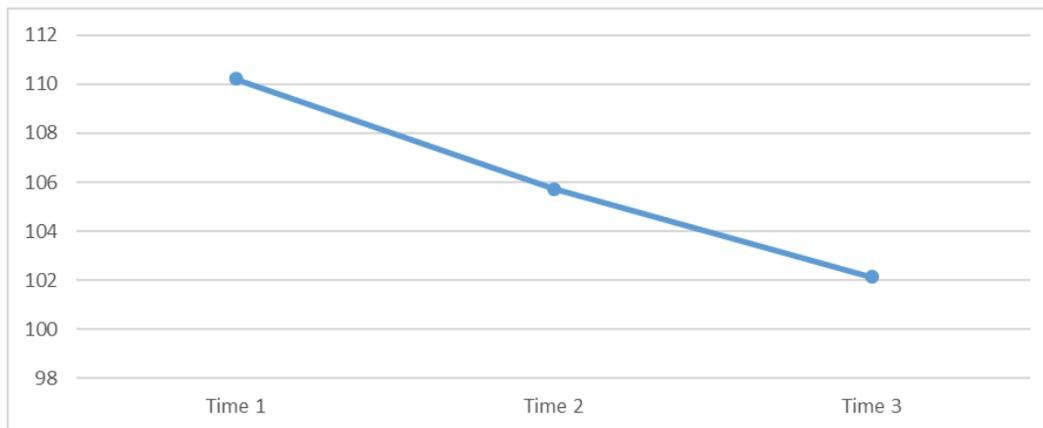
Communication competence was operationalized by using McCroskey and McCroskey's (1988) Self-Perceived Communication Competence Scale. The questions on the scale ask respondents to rate their perceived communication competence for 12 different scenarios. Participants are asked to score their competence from 0 (*completely incompetent*) to 100 (*fully competent*). Each statement represents a communication scenario such as "talk in a large meeting of acquaintances." The score for the instrument is obtained using a mathematical formula that provides the total for the SPCC scale, indicating the level of competence a person perceives that she or he possesses. For the total SPCC score, any number above 86 denotes that the participant has a high perceived level of SPCC while scores below 51 indicate a low perception of one's SPCC. The scale has proven to be reliable (McCroskey & McCroskey, 1988). The reliability for SPCC in the

current study was  $a = .87$  ( $M = 78.16$ ,  $SD = 12.67$ ) at time 1,  $a = .90$  ( $M = 78.81$ ,  $SD = 12.65$ ) at time 2, and  $a = .91$  ( $M = 81.48$ ,  $SD = 13.86$ ) at time 3.

## Results

To test H1, which predicted that honors students would experience significant decreases in public speaking anxiety after an individual skills-based training, a repeated-measures ANOVA was calculated comparing the PRPSA scores at the three different times measured: directly before the training, immediately after the training, and after the speech delivery in class. A significant effect was found,  $F(2, 180) = 9.83$ ,  $p < .01$ . Follow-up  $t$ -tests revealed that scores decreased significantly from time 1 ( $M = 110.21$ ,  $SD = 25.83$ ) to time 2 ( $M = 105.72$ ,  $SD = 24.68$ ), but not from time 2 to time 3 ( $M = 102.14$ ,  $SD = 23.46$ ). These results are depicted in Figure 1. The mean score decreased substantially from time 1 to time 2 but was followed by a minimal decrease from time 2 to time 3.

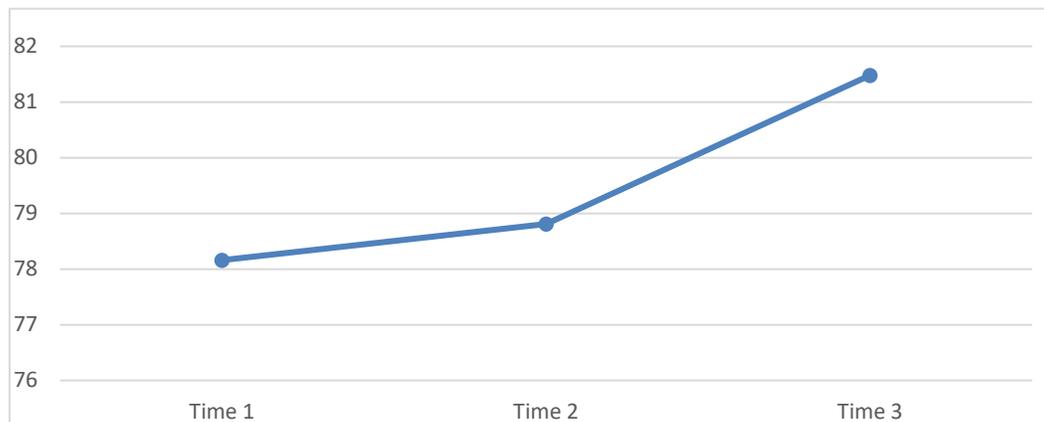
**Figure 1**  
**Results of One-Way Design using PRPSA**



In testing H2, that students in the honors public speaking course would experience a significant increase in communication competence after an individual skills-based training, a repeated-measures ANOVA was calculated comparing the SPCC scores at the three different times: before the training, immediately after the training, and after the speech delivery. A significant effect was found,  $F(2, 186) = 7.80$ ,  $p < .01$ . Follow up  $t$ -tests revealed that communication competency scores did not increase significantly from time 1 ( $M = 78.16$ ,  $SD = 12.67$ ) to time 2 ( $M = 78.81$ ,  $SD = 12.65$ ), but did increase significantly from time 2 to time 3 ( $M = 81.48$ ,  $SD =$

13.86). Figure 2 illustrates these results. The mean SPCC scale score increased substantially from time 2 to time 3 following a minimal increase from time 1 to time 2.

**Figure 2**  
**Results of One-Way Design Using SPCC**



### Discussion and Implications

The current study's purpose was two-fold. The first purpose was to determine the extent to which a skills-based instructor tutoring intervention could reduce PSA and enhance CC for students in honors sections of the basic public speaking course. The findings provide data that support the intervention's success in doing so. The second purpose was to determine the utility of such an intervention as a potential formative assessment exercise. Consequently, the results of this study have implications for basic course instructor training as well as classroom instruction. Although the results of the present study are limited to the institution where the study took place, these results can inform basic course directors at other universities about the potential for a tutoring-based formative assessment to enhance student development for members of their honors sections.

Public speaking anxiety can affect anyone at any time. However, the aforementioned research has shown that honors students may be a population most at risk (Butler et al., 2004; Demos & Weijola, 1966; Rice et al., 2006), but that treatments involving skills training, exposure therapy, and cognitive modification can mitigate this malady (Bodie, 2010). This study tested an out-of-class tutoring intervention involving the instructor working with pairs of students. Findings

showed that students experienced reduced PSA from time 1 (directly before the tutoring intervention) to time 2 (immediately after the tutoring intervention). Although honors students did not experience a significant decrease from time 2 to time 3 (following the in-class delivery of the speech), a small, though non-significant, decrease occurred. More importantly, the significant reduction from time 1 to time 2 was sustained. The immediate impact of the intervention is of particular note for instructors tasked with teaching summer courses or on the quarter system, in which the instructor's available time to help students overcome their anxiety is more limited. In such courses, this intervention can allow the instructor to help students mitigate a significant amount of their anxiety within a relatively short period. The additional, though non-significant decrease from time 2 to time 3 is likely due to the continuation of the graduated exposure effect garnered by the remaining speech experiences in the class, as well as the enhanced classroom community that continued to build throughout the course. For this reason, future research could explore the impact of continued instructor tutoring interventions on students' anxiety and communication competence. Further mitigation of speaking anxiety may be possible through additional instructor-based tutoring interventions.

In regard to communication competence, students experienced a slight, though non-significant, increase from time 1 to time 2. This result means that these students did not gain a large amount of confidence in their communication abilities directly after the skills training. However, they experienced a significant increase in CC from time 2 to time 3, indicating that these students felt more competent in their communication abilities after giving their speech. A dearth of studies have investigated measures of student anxiety and competence at multiple stages during the college semester, so future studies should examine such dynamics further.

Furthermore, students did not seek additional instructional support between the time of the intervention and the time of the speech delivery. Because the intervention was primarily focused on skill development through feedback, each student left the tutoring session with specific details on areas for speech improvement. We speculate that the reason for the increase in CC from time 2 to time 3 stemmed from the students' own time, energy, and effort spent in the development of the speech presentation based on the precise, directive instructor feedback they received during the tutoring session. Hunter et al. (2014) suggested that their own students' decreased anxiety and increased CC was based on the right mixture of treatment modalities. Thus, it is possible that the delayed increase in students' CC resulted from a blend of continued exposure to the anxiety-producing

stimulus (giving speeches) and from the cumulative effect of continuing to apply instructor direction. This direction included the new, more confident thoughts the instructor urged the students to supplant for their prior, anxiety-producing ones. Additionally, it is likely the delayed, significant change is a result of the students having experienced the success of their speech experiences and seeing the direct connections between this success and their instructors' guidance. Furthermore, by semester's end, these students will have taken the time to reflect on the intervention feedback and its impact on the success on the development of the presentation, thereby strengthening the intervention's positive impacts.

These findings suggest three major implications for basic course directors. The first implication is that instructor tutoring can serve an at-risk population, such as honors students, well. H1 found that instructor tutoring provides an immediate and enduring impact on decreasing the heightened PSA of honors students, and H2 found significant increases in these students' CC later, after the classroom delivery of the first individual speech. These findings resonate with teaching strategies long-recommended for honors student learning styles by scholars such as Butler et al. (2004), who called for the "need for special attention being devoted to the treatment of speech-based apprehension in honors classes" (p. 295) and stated that "such special attention might focus on honors-based tutoring or remediation speech classes" (p. 295). Additionally, tutoring exercises promise to serve honors students well in enhancing their motivation to learn. This result echoes Schick and Phillipson's (2009) finding that self-awareness and self-critique can be more significant predictors of student motivation than intelligence alone. Unlike intelligence, these traits may be enhanced through such direct tutelage as that provided in the teaching exercise tested in this study.

Second, the delayed increase in CC indicates that students may have benefited from a sleeper effect due the intervention, needing catalytic events such as further speech preparation or the speaking experience itself to activate their enhanced feelings of competence. Perhaps, such an exercise plays to the unique strengths of honors students. One such strength is their capability to harness academic anxieties and channel them as energy toward planning and preparation, as discussed by Castro-Johnson and Wang (2003). For a student who, like many honors students, is prone to anxiety, being provided with directive coaching regarding the specific, evidence-based practices recommended by the expert-instructor (who also holds the grade book) is bound to provide an especially comforting set of alternate actions to re-channel one's anxiety. The added time and energy the student was likely to spend

in preparing for the speech, coupled with the added confidence due to the clarity and direction provided by the individually-targeted skills training and cognitive modification provided in the intervention, may act as catalysts in significantly enhancing these students' CC. This finding points to the need for testing similar interventions in the non-honors population, especially among other groups deemed at-risk for high PSA. Honors students are already good at re-channeling their fears, while a more general student population may be less so.

Third, tutoring sessions can provide the basis for formative assessment findings. Formative assessment provides clear and meaningful feedback (Edman, 2002), not only on student learning outcomes but also on teaching activities (Black & Wiliam, 1998). Therefore, these assessments can inform future instructional decisions even in the semester in which they are conducted. Although only the tutoring intervention was evaluated for this assessment, the instructor of the honors course used the results of the formative assessment to modify her instructional methods toward more targeted strategies for working with each student during the remainder of the semester. This is another implication of the present study that can serve both honors and non-honors students. We contend that instructors in the communication discipline, especially in the basic public speaking course, are already performing a plentitude of exercises and activities like the one studied here. Likely, basic course instructors of honors and non-honors sections are already engaged in formative assessment; yet, these outcomes appear to be under-reported – despite their potential for salient and significant results. Therefore, basic course instructors and administrators may find great value in performing further case studies such as this one to measure and document the formative assessments that can influence student learning.

### **Limitations and Future Directions**

A primary caveat regarding the interpretation of this study's results is the potential for the conflation of the terms gifted, academically-talented, and honors students. First, as asserted in the theory of multiple intelligences (Gardner, 2011), students may be gifted in ways not apparent in typical academic settings. Secondly, academic challenges and learning disabilities may mask high aptitudes and hinder students' academic success (Rinn & Plucker, 2004). Thirdly, students deemed academically talented opt in and out of honors programs for a variety of reasons (Kampfe et al., 2016; Nichols & Chang, 2013). Therefore, honors programs contain a subsection of the overall academically-talented population, and an even smaller

subset of those who may be gifted in one intelligence or another. The present study was limited to students enrolled in the honors program at our institution, as opposed to claiming to assess all our academically-talented or gifted students. Furthermore, since students can qualify for the honors program based on various criteria, future research should examine whether these students' needs differ dependent upon their admittance criteria (e.g., ACT or SAT score, rank placement, versus professor recommendation).

Additional limitations of this study include the small sample size, the lack of a control group, the lack of semester-long pre-test/post-test data, and the sheer amount of time the instructor put into the skills training, which makes it difficult to replicate the study. Basic course directors and instructors could consider ways to alter the treatment to reduce the extra time required by the instructor. The use of undergraduate teaching assistants or peer mentors may mitigate this issue for instructors who are faced with large class size, limited availability, or schedule conflicts. Future research should test whether undergraduate teaching assistants who had previously taken the course might provide equally effective tutoring to that given by the instructor. Further, additional studies should also test the impacts of out-of-class interventions on building and enhancing students' trust in their instructor. Finally, scholars should examine additional formative assessments and their impacts on summative assessments of the basic communication course.

### **Conclusion**

This investigation tested a formative assessment of an out-of-class tutoring exercise that was designed to help students enrolled in honors sections of the basic public speaking to reduce PSA and enhance CC, challenges that have plagued honors students who strive for academic excellence. The results of this study indicate that out-of-class, skills-based tutoring sessions led by the instructor of an honors speech course were effective at decreasing PSA and increasing CC. In addition to providing formative assessment data, such tutoring sessions can help mitigate lifelong anxieties associated with public speaking and enhance speaker feelings of competence.

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