



Classroom Consequences Of Communication Apprehension

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A recent report from the U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare estimates that about 4,752,000 (almost eleven percent) of the 44,389,000 young people in public elementary and secondary schools are handicapped.¹ These figures include young people who are speech impaired, learning disabled, mentally retarded, emotionally disturbed, hard of hearing, deaf, crippled, partial-

ly sighted, or blind. Each of these young people presents a problem to the classroom teacher. These "special children" need special help in order to maximize their learning potential. Fortunately, most school districts recognize these problems and provide special programs for these individuals, albeit often not fully adequate programs.

Another group of handicapped children is not included in the HEW figures, nor are they provided the special attention they need in our schools. These are the thousands, probably millions, of children and young people who are "communication apprehensives."

"Communication apprehension" re-

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¹ A. S. Metz, *Number of Pupils with Handicaps in Local Public Schools, Spring, 1970*, Department of Health, Education, and Welfare pub. no. (OE) 73-11107 (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1973).

fers to an anxiety syndrome associated with either real or anticipated communication with another person or persons. Apprehension about communication may take many forms, only a few of which have yet been carefully measured and their effects studied.

Apprehension about oral communication is probably the most common form of communication apprehension, and it is the one which has received the most attention in scientific research. Fear of oral communication was reported as the number one fear of Americans in a recent nationwide survey of adults.² Results from data collected from nearly 20,000 college students at Michigan State University, Illinois State University, and West Virginia University over the past eight years, suggest that between 15 and 20 percent of American college students suffer from debilitating communication apprehension. By "debilitating" is meant apprehension of sufficient magnitude to interfere seriously with the individual's functioning in normal human encounters. Figures provided by colleagues in other colleges and universities, both large and small, indicate that what has been observed in the three universities noted above is typical, although some schools seem to have an even higher percentage of apprehensives.

Over the past two years another form of communication apprehension has begun to receive attention. This is apprehension about written communication.³ While apparently not quite as common

as oral communication apprehension, apprehension about writing is also a problem for many college students. Judging from data from over 1800 students at West Virginia University, it appears that 10 to 15 percent of college students suffer from severe apprehension about writing.

More recently a special variant of oral communication apprehension has been isolated and measured, apprehension about singing.⁴ While normative data are not yet available, preliminary results from both college students and adults suggest that 5 to 10 percent of the population may suffer from severe levels of singing apprehension.

It is clear that many young people suffer from the various forms of communication apprehension, at least 15 to 20 percent from oral communication apprehension alone. If all of the forms of communication apprehension were highly correlated, we might be able to conclude that the 15-20 percent figure exhausts the size of the problem. Unfortunately, that is not the case. The three forms isolated to date have low correlations. Oral and written apprehension are correlated at approximately .35, while oral and singing apprehension have only a .10 correlation. Thus, while many individuals suffer from more than one form of communication apprehension, others suffer from only one. At this point it is not possible to make a precise estimate of how many people in the population suffer from communication apprehension, but the percentage clearly represents at least a large minority.

Before we examine the impact of communication apprehension on learning, we need to make at least two distinctions clear. First, oral communication apprehension is not just a new term for "stage

² "What Are Americans Afraid of?" *The Bruskin Report*, 1973, No. 53.

³ John A. Daly and Michael D. Miller, "The Empirical Development for an Instrument to Measure Writing Apprehension," *Research in the Teaching of English*, 9 (1975), 242-249; John A. Daly and Michael D. Miller, "Apprehension of Writing as a Predictor of Message Intensity," *Journal of Psychology*, 89 (1975), 175-177; J. A. Daly and M. D. Miller, "Further Studies on Writing Apprehension: SAT Scores, Success Expectations, Willingness to Take Advanced Courses and Sex Differences," *Research in the Teaching of English*, 9 (1975), 250-256.

⁴ Janis F. Andersen, Peter A. Andersen, and John P. Garrison, "Measurement of Singing Apprehension," unpublished paper, West Virginia University, 1975.

fright." While oral communication apprehensives will usually suffer stage fright in public performances, not everyone who suffers from stage fright is an oral communication apprehensive. Oral communication apprehension refers to a broad-based apprehension about oral communication, from talking to a single peer to giving a speech on television. To experience nervousness while giving a public speech is normal, but to have a similar experience when talking to a peer or participating in a bull session is not. The oral communication apprehensive has both problems.

Second, apprehension about written communication is not just fear of turning in a required theme for English. The written communication apprehensive fears all forms of writing to various degrees, just as the oral communication apprehensive fears all forms of oral communication.

EFFECTS OF COMMUNICATION APPREHENSION IN THE CLASSROOM

While communication apprehension is clearly a severe personal problem for the individual suffering from it, our major concern here is with its impact, if any, in the learning environment. If no effect could be found, it would be a problem that the individual classroom teacher might safely ignore. Unfortunately, communication apprehension does have an impact on learning, and that impact is negative.

The most obvious effects are those in classes specifically related to one form of communication apprehension, e.g., public speaking for oral communication apprehensives, English composition for written communication apprehensives, vocal music for singing apprehensives. Two things should be expected. First, the student will seek to avoid the class, if possible. Second, the student's apprehension will interfere with successful completion

of assignments, if he or she cannot avoid the class. Obviously, in the elementary school every apprehensive will be in classes that will cause problems. But, our attention should not be restricted to these special cases. Rather, let us consider the more general indicants of a possible effect.

Standardized Achievement Tests. One of the least biased methods of determining a student's level of learning is by use of standardized achievement tests. Such tests are routinely administered during the final two years of secondary school. Two studies have been reported that indicate that a person's level of communication apprehension has a major impact on general achievement. McCroskey and Andersen found that communication students who were highly apprehensive scored significantly lower than less apprehensive students on the American College Test (ACT), both on the overall or composite score and on the four individual subscores for social science, natural science, mathematics, and English.⁵ Similar effects were observed by Bashore on the ACT, as well as the Illinois State High School Test, the verbal portion of the College Entrance Examination Board Test, and the Preliminary Scholastic Aptitude Test.⁶ Taken together, these studies clearly indicate that high communication apprehensives learn less than low communication apprehensives throughout their elementary and secondary education.

Grade Point Average. A study of 1,454 college students examined the impact of communication apprehension on grades awarded by teachers. The students stud-

⁵ James C. McCroskey and Janis F. Andersen, "The Relationship Between Communication Apprehension and Academic Achievement Among College Students," *Human Communication Research* (in press).

⁶ David N. Bashore, "Relationships Among Speech Anxiety, Trait Anxiety, I.Q., and High School Achievement," unpublished M.S. thesis, Illinois State University, 1971.

ied had completed from one to four years of college at the time the data were collected. The results indicated a sharp distinction between students who were high communication apprehensives and those who were low communication apprehensives. The low communication apprehensives had GPA's across all courses taken that were approximately one-half grade point higher than the high communication apprehensive students on a four-point scale (0.0 to 4.0).⁷

Achievement in Small Classes. From the studies noted above it is evident that high communication apprehension is associated with lower overall student achievement. Other research has investigated the effect of communication apprehension in particular types of instruction. Two studies have examined the impact of communication apprehension in small classes with enrollment of from 20 to 30 students. High communication apprehensives were found to receive lower scores on both objective tests and instructor-evaluated written projects than low communication apprehensives in small college classes.⁸ A similar result was observed on grades in small classes at the junior high school level.⁹

Personalized Instruction. In recent years there has been increased emphasis on personalizing and individualizing instruction. A variety of instructional methods, sometimes referred to as "Personalized Systems of Instruction," or "PSI," have been implemented at all levels of education. Crucial character-

istics of most of these systems include criteria-referenced testing and grading, multimedia dissemination of information (often through a learning center), and individual contact with an instructor or tutor. While the primary learning of information in such systems is normally dependent on the mediated materials, students with problems have access to the instructor or tutor for individual help. While the advantages of such instructional systems have been strongly promoted in educational circles, it is clear that one-to-one communication with the instructor or tutor is vital for students with problems in mastering the information in the course. It might be expected, therefore, that communication apprehension could have an impact on those students.

A study reported by Scott, Yates, and Wheelless confirmed that expectation.¹⁰ The study found that high communication apprehensives, as compared to lows, not only were taking the tests on the modules more times (repeated testing to demonstrate mastery was permitted in the course) but also they were completing fewer modules. Thus, it was concluded, the PSI system was not proving effective for students with high communication apprehension.

Lecture Classes. While small classes and PSI systems not only allow student-teacher interaction but also require it in many cases, the typical mass lecture class does neither. Thus, while communication apprehension has been found to impact learning in other instructional systems, there is little reason to expect such an impact in a mass lecture course. Thus, it is not surprising that in a study of 709

⁷ McCroskey and Andersen.

⁸ M. D. Scott and L. R. Wheelless, "An Exploratory Investigation of Three Types of Communication Apprehension on Student Achievement," unpublished paper, West Virginia University, 1976.

⁹ H. T. Hurt, R. Preiss, and B. Davis, "The Effects of Communication Apprehension of Middle-School Children on Sociometric Choice, Affective and Cognitive Learning," paper presented at the annual convention of the International Communication Association, Portland, Oregon, 1976.

¹⁰ M. D. Scott, M. P. Yates, and L. R. Wheelless, "An Exploratory Investigation of the Effects of Communication Apprehension in Alternative Systems of Instruction," paper presented at the annual convention of the International Communication Association, Chicago, Illinois, 1975.

students in a mass lecture course, no relationship between communication apprehension and achievement whatsoever was observed.¹¹

CAUSES OF CLASSROOM EFFECTS

It is clear from the research noted above that communication apprehension has a very negative impact on learning in most instructional environments. It is important, therefore, to examine the possible causes of the effects observed.

Intelligence. Since it is well established that intelligence and achievement are strongly associated, intelligence must be considered to be a potential cause for any achievement differences observed. In this case, however, intelligence must be rejected as a causal agent for two reasons. First, intelligence and communication apprehension have not been found to be correlated.¹² Second, even if there were a correlation between the two, since high communication apprehensives were found to achieve less than low communication apprehensives in some instructional environments but not in others, that correlation could not account for the differential results.

Teacher Expectation. Since the publication of *Pygmalion in the Classroom*,¹³ considerable attention has been directed toward the correlation between the expectation a teacher has for a student and that student's actual achievement. The correlation appears to be substantial. In a number of studies it has been observed that the teachers' expectations predict differential achievement between students even when there is no difference in

the students' actual abilities.¹⁴ Thus, at least in some situations, teachers' expectations become self-fulfilling prophecies. The relevant question here, therefore, is whether teachers form differential expectations for high and low communication apprehensive students.

Research on the expectations teachers have of high and low communication apprehensive elementary school students shows a major difference in expectations.¹⁵ This research indicated that teachers expect low communication apprehensive students, as opposed to highs, to do better in all academic subjects, to have a much more promising future in education, and to have much better relationships with their peers.

Although other research already noted indicates that the teachers' expectations are more than likely correct, the causal relationship is elusive. While the expectations of the teachers may be a major contributor to the eventual effects, it may be that the expectations are the product of the teachers having seen the effects occur in the past and would occur inevitably whether the teachers expected them to or not. Very probably, however, we have an instance of reciprocal causality, not unlike that of the chicken and the egg.

Student Attitudes. Since communication apprehension has such a major impact on people's behavior, it is reasonable to expect that it would also have an impact on many attitudes. As almost any teacher can testify, students' attitudes toward school in general and those toward specific classes can have an impact on their achievement. It is important, therefore, to consider whether com-

¹¹ McCroskey and Andersen.

¹² James C. McCroskey, John A. Daly, and Gail A. Sorensen, "Personality Correlates of Communication Apprehension," *Human Communication Research* 2 (1976), 376-380.

¹³ R. Rosenthal and L. Jacobson, *Pygmalion in the Classroom: Teacher Expectation and Pupils' Intellectual Development* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1968).

¹⁴ J. B. Dusek, "Do Teachers Bias Children's Learning?" *Review of Educational Research*, 45 (1975), 661-684.

¹⁵ J. C. McCroskey and J. A. Daly, "Teachers' Expectations of the Communication Apprehensive Child in the Elementary School," *Human Communication Research* (in press).

munication apprehension has an impact on students' school-related attitudes. Three studies have been reported in this area.

In a study of junior high school students, Hurt, Preiss, and Davis found a substantial correlation between communication apprehension and attitude toward school in general.¹⁶ As level of communication apprehension increased, the attitude toward school became more negative. A study of college students found the same pattern.¹⁷ In a study of student attitudes toward specific types of classes, McCroskey and Andersen found that low and moderate communication apprehensives preferred small classes to mass lecture classes, but the exact opposite pattern was observed for high communication apprehensives.¹⁸

The relationship between attitudes and achievement is clear in these studies. High communication apprehensives achieve less and like school less than low communication apprehensives. Both high and low communication apprehensives indicate a preference for the type of class that they do best in. But, once again, the causal agent is elusive. Does communication apprehension cause negative attitudes which result in lower achievement? Does communication apprehension cause lower achievement which results in negative attitudes? It is clear that communication apprehension is associated with both negative attitudes and lower achievement, but the research noted above does not explain why.

Student Withdrawal. With the exception of the mass lecture class, most instructional methods require the student to communicate, with teachers and/or peers, in order to learn. Research clearly

indicates that people who suffer from high communication apprehension consistently withdraw from communication in settings outside the classroom. If a similar pattern can be found within the instructional setting, this would provide the best causal explanation for the relationship between communication apprehension and student achievement.

Two studies have been reported that indicate such is the case. In the Scott, Yates, and Wheelless study of communication apprehension in a PSI course noted above, a record was kept of how many times each student went to a tutor for help in the course. Tutors were available all day and evening during the semester, and students were encouraged but not required to seek assistance. Analysis of those data indicated that, although high communication apprehensives were having much more difficulty mastering the modules in the course, low communication apprehensives sought help from the tutors almost three times more often than highs.¹⁹

Research reported on interaction in typical small classrooms has indicated that there are certain seats from which most of the student participation emanates, generally in the center of the room towards the front. Teachers call on students in these seats more, and students in these seats volunteer more comments and questions than do other students.²⁰ Thus, students in these seats are more likely to determine their deficiencies and correct them, as well as to request needed information, than are students sitting in other parts of the room.

Recent research indicates that while low communication apprehensives are twice as likely to sit in this high interaction area (20 percent of the total seats) as they are to sit anywhere else (80 per-

¹⁶ Hurt, Preiss, and Davis.

¹⁷ McCroskey and Sheahan, "Communication Apprehension, Social Preference, and Social Behavior," unpublished paper, West Virginia University, 1976.

¹⁸ McCroskey and Andersen.

¹⁹ Scott, Yates, and Wheelless.

²⁰ R. Sommer, *Personal Space* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1969).

cent of the total seats), high communication apprehensives are four times as likely to sit outside this interaction area as they are to sit in it.²¹

These studies suggest, therefore, that the causal link between communication apprehension and achievement is the communication withdrawal behavior of high communication apprehensives in comparison with the communication seeking behavior of the low communication apprehensives. Students must communicate to learn. Those who communicate less, learn less.

IMPLICATIONS FOR THE CLASSROOM TEACHER

The implications of the research on communication apprehension are of considerable importance to all classroom instructors, and even more central to teachers of speech. No instructor, with the possible exception of the teacher of a voluntary class in public speaking, is likely to ever face a class that contains no high communication apprehensive students. The traditional interaction-oriented instructional system presents a severe handicap to these students. An obvious answer to the problem is to teach all classes as mass lecture classes, but that solution is unsatisfactory because it would penalize all those students who are not high communication apprehensives. Some other approach is needed.

Little can be done to cure communication apprehension in the regular classroom. Requiring the student to partici-

pate will only aggravate the student's problem. Requiring the student to give formal presentations could have disastrous results. But the classroom teacher can avoid hurting the communication apprehensive student. The teacher can eliminate grading on "participation"; he or she can provide options for assignments other than formal presentations; the teacher can permit voluntary seating choices so that the communication apprehensive student can be comfortable in the classroom; he or she can avoid calling on communication apprehensive students and forcing involuntary participation; and, most important, the teacher can attempt to structure the course so that students can obtain all necessary information without having to seek extra communication contact with either the teacher or peers.

While all of the suggestions noted above are relatively simple to implement and should be helpful, the real solution to the problems of communication apprehension is treatment. Several methods of treating communication apprehension have been developed and can be implemented in any school system.²² The concerned teacher should push for implementation of such programs. Between now and the time such programs are widely available, it is vital that the professional training of teachers include instruction in the nature and effects of communication apprehension in the classroom. Both pre-professional and in-service training programs for teachers need to include such instruction.

²¹ J. C. McCroskey and M. E. Sheahan, "Seating Position and Participation: An alternative Theoretical Explanation," paper presented at the annual convention of the International Communication Association, Portland, Oregon, 1976. This study involved college students. The observed relationship was replicated in a study of high school students. See James C. McCroskey and Thomas Knutson, "Seating Choices and Communication Apprehension Among High School Students," unpublished paper, West Virginia University, 1976.

²² See, for example, J. C. McCroskey, D. Ralph, and J. E. Barrick, "The Effects of Systematic Desensitization on Speech Anxiety," *Speech Teacher*, 19 (1970), 32-36; J. C. McCroskey, "The Implementation of a Large Scale Program of Systematic Desensitization for Communication Apprehension," *Speech Teacher*, 21 (1972), 255-264; and W. J. Fremouw and M. G. Harmatz, "A Helper Model for Behavioral Treatment of Speech Anxiety," *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, 43 (1975), 652-660.