

COMMUNICATION APPREHENSION AND SELF-PERCEIVED COMMUNICATION COMPETENCE OF AT-RISK STUDENTS

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One in five eighth-graders is at serious risk of failing in school or dropping out before graduating from high school. While other characteristics have been identified, few descriptions of the attitudes of academically at-risk students toward communication have been provided. This study examined the attitudes toward communication of 2,793 academically at-risk students at fourteen urban, large, predominantly minority middle or junior high schools from throughout the U.S. Primary attention was devoted to students' fear of communication and self-perception as competent communicators. Compared to national norms, academically at-risk students were found to be more apprehensive of communication and lower in self-perceived communication competence. Several pedagogical strategies for responding to academically at-risk students in the classroom are suggested.

In its 1990 report *Educating America: State Strategies for Achieving the National Education Goals*, the National Governors' Association reported, "Our nation is facing a major crisis in education, one larger and more significant than was realized even a few short years ago. The challenges are substantially greater than those envisioned in *A Nation At Risk*, or even in *Time for Results*, a report released by the Governors just four years ago" (p. 7). In the Governors' view, at-risk students constitute a major factor in this national education assessment: "As long as 23 percent of six-year-olds live in poverty, 7 percent of all live births are low-birthweight babies, 23 percent of children live in single-parent families, 12 percent of births are to teenage mothers, and 20 percent of all high school seniors have used an illicit drug in the last month, no school in America will be able to address the enormous challenge" (p. 7; cf. Bush, 1990). Indeed, one in five eighth-graders is at serious risk of failing in school or dropping out before graduating from high school (Otten, 1990).

Effective oral communication is likely to play a critical role in reversing the outcome predicted for at-risk students. In dealing with at-risk students, the educational mission cannot only be to achieve excellence; it also should be designed to attain inclusiveness. In other words, all students, and particularly at-risk students, must be able to participate actively, orally, and literately, in the

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quest for educational excellence. The Pew Higher Education Research Program (1990, p. 2) aptly concluded that the national education goal "ought to be inclusiveness and excellence. The latter without the former will lead to a nation at war with itself; and participation without a commitment to demonstrated excellence will yield only national mediocrity, voiding any future claim to international competitiveness." In this context, the National Governors' Association (1990, p. 37) maintained that "national education goals" should include a commitment, not only to having students "communicate effectively," but to "demonstrate an advanced ability" to "communicate effectively."

In this analysis, we initially define at-risk students, identify some of the kinds of communication problems they are likely to encounter, and then attempt to determine the degree to which communication apprehension and self-perceived communication competence are factors in their ability to succeed in academic environments. We conclude by suggesting classroom strategies likely to be useful for instructors dealing with at-risk students.

CHARACTERISTICS OF AT-RISK STUDENTS

Academically at-risk students are less likely to achieve minimum performance standards in school and are also more likely to drop out of school before high school graduation. The Council of Chief States School Officers defines academically at-risk students as those most likely to experience "school failure" (1990, p. 13). Concluding that "a growing number [of students] can be identified as being 'at risk,'" the National Center for Education Statistics, an agency of the U.S. Department of Education, more specifically defines academically at-risk students as those "failing to achieve in school or of dropping out" (1990b, p. v).

The National Center for Education Statistics (1990b) identified six primary risk factors and the percentage of students associated with each: single parent family (22%), an annual family income of less than \$15,000 (21%), home alone more than three hours a day (14%), parents have no high school diploma (11%), has a sibling who dropped out (10%), and has limited proficiency with English (2%) (cf. National Center for Education Statistics, 1989; Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education et al., 1988).

At-risk factors are designed to predict the likelihood of academic difficulties in school. For example, the National Center for Education Statistics (1990b, p. vi) concluded,

Risk factors are related to education outcomes and expectations. As the number of risk factors increases, the percentage of children with educational problems increases. . . . [S]tudents with two or more risk factors are twice as likely as those with no risk factors to be in the lowest grade quartile (38% vs. 18%) and lowest test quartile (44% vs. 16%) [and are also] six times as likely as those with no risk factors not to graduate from high school (4% vs. 0.6%).

In terms of the students examined in this study, three additional at-risk factors should be noted. First, a geographic or urbanization factor has been correlated with higher dropout rates. The National Center for Education Statistics (1990a, p. vi) reported that the annual dropout rate is "higher in the central cities (6.2 percent) than in suburbs (3.7 percent) or rural areas (4.0 percent)." Second, racial and ethnicity differences have been correlated with higher and lower dropout rates.¹ The National Center for Education Statistics

(1990a, p. vi) reported that the annual dropout rates “for blacks (6.8 percent) and Hispanics (7.9 percent) were greater than for whites (4.1 percent).” Third, a critical period for minimizing at-risk factors appears to be when students are in sixth through eighth grades. As Table 1 indicates, by the time students enter ninth grade, dramatic increases in dropout rates have already occurred.

TABLE 1
YEARS OF SCHOOL COMPLETED BY PERSONS AGE 18 OR OVER*

	Less Than Eight Years	Eight Years	One to Three Years of High School	Total Less Than Four Years of High School
All Students	6.1%	4.7%	12.6%	23.4%
White Students	5.4%	4.7%	11.8%	21.9%
Black Students	10.5%	4.9%	19.8%	35.2%
Hispanic Students	24.3%	6.3%	16.7%	47.3%

*Derived from data contained in: U.S. Department of Education (1989), p. 16.

COMMUNICATION AND AT-RISK STUDENTS

At-risk students reflect all other students in several respects, but they also encounter exceptional circumstances that uniquely affect their fears and self-perceived competencies as oral communicators. Some of the characteristics affecting the oral communication competencies of at-risk students are shared by all other students. For example, Vangelisti and Daly (1989) reported that 25.6% of all of the nation's young adults “cannot adequately communicate orally” after completing high school or college.

At the same time, at-risk students encounter unique communication problems. Many have unusually high rates of limited English proficiency, possess nonstandard language variations or dialects, live in environments that restrict options and opportunities for the development of oral communication skills, and have experienced prior education failures that affect their readiness to communicate orally (Delpit, 1990; National Center for Education Statistics, 1990b). These factors contribute to decreased oral communication competence and suggest that at-risk students may have characteristics as oral communicators that are worthy of exploration.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Without more detailed and adequate information, the unique communication problems encountered by at-risk students do not readily point to any single explanation or hypothesis. Functioning in extremely complex social environments and societal systems, all that can be said with confidence is that the decreased oral communication competence of at-risk students could theoretically manifest itself in any number of ways and could be due to any number of causal explanations.

Focusing upon at-risk students in classrooms narrows the fields of anticipated communicative behaviors and explanations to some degree. While cognitive and psychomotor variables remain to be examined, motivational issues also can be expected to affect the oral communication competence of at-risk students. For example, many of the experiences of at-risk students suggest that they may

lack the confidence to communicate in the classroom. By definition, at-risk students already have experienced "school failure" in classrooms and, for many of them, their classroom experiences are reinforced by the fact that their parents also were unable to secure a high school diploma and that at least one of their siblings already has dropped out of school. For these students, the classroom would not seem to be an environment that encourages communication. Additionally, for at-risk students, limited English-proficiency itself is a decisive factor in their ability to communicate orally in the classroom.

In a study that focused on the fear and shyness of elementary school students, McCroskey, Andersen, Richmond, and Wheelless (1981, p. 132) found that "some factor or combination of factors causes increases in CA [communication apprehension] during the early elementary school years that are sustained into adulthood." Such factors provide a foundation for at least exploring the possibility that the fear of and lack of self-confidence about oral communication might be correlated with the at-risk status of some students.

Three research questions guided the present study:

- RQ₁: Do students in at-risk environments, when compared to national norms, have an unusually high fear of communication with others?
- RQ₂: Do students in at-risk environments, when compared to national norms, have unusually low perceptions of their own competence as communicators?
- RQ₃: Is ethnicity related to communication orientations of students in at-risk environments?

METHOD

SAMPLE AND POPULATION ISSUES

The middle schools surveyed in this study were the participating members of the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development's (ASCD) Urban Middle Grades Network, established in 1989, with a grant from the Edna McConnell Clark Foundation. The two-year project was designed to assist participating schools in developing high performing systems to improve the educational experiences of urban disadvantaged adolescents in grades six through nine.

The ASCD initiative focused on the need to make major changes in the way middle schools educate 10- to 15-year-old disadvantaged students—children scoring below the 40th percentile on standardized tests or children eligible for reduced lunch programs—and underscored the importance of bridging the achievement gap between low- and high-income youngsters.

Schools were selected for the ASCD Network in April and May 1989, and the first meeting was held in Washington, DC, in August 1989. Teams of parents, teachers, administrators, and community members represented each school.

The focus of the first four meetings was to establish standards of expectations for schools and students in terms of "high content, high expectations, and high support": ASCD's 3-High Model. The model was clarified for teams and employed as a foundation for undertaking systemic school improvement efforts. Team members received training and experiences designed to enhance faculty members' skills in raising academic standards. A major focus of activities was to enlist a team effort from among the faculty and central office personnel, parents, and the community at large in reaching significant goals in terms of measurable performance standards.

In July 1990, the Speech Communication Association (SCA) became formally involved with the ASCD program. At its July 20–22, 1990 meeting in Vail, CO, Deborah Atwater, James C. McCroskey, and James W. Chesebro, representing SCA, participated in a series of oral communication workshop sessions in which six-member teams from each of the fourteen schools were introduced to basic principles of speech communication and fundamental issues in teaching speech communication. In Fall 1990, each of the teams administered the two questionnaires to students at their schools.

Fourteen urban, large, predominantly minority middle or junior high schools from throughout the U.S. participated. Eleven (79%) of the schools provided instruction for grades 6 through 8; two (14%) provided instruction for grades 7 and 8; and one (7%) provided 7 through 9 grade instruction. Thirteen (93%) of the schools were located in urban environments with populations of 100,000 or more; one (7%) was located in an area classified as "suburban." The participating schools had relatively large enrollments. Eleven (79%) had enrollments between 500 and 999 students; three (21%) had enrollments between 250 and 499 students. All of the schools had predominantly minority student enrollments (e.g., Black, Hispanic, and Asian). Twelve (86%) of the schools had student minority enrollments of 50% or more; two (14%) of the schools had student minority enrollments of 25% to 49%. Two (14%) were located in the Southwest region of the U.S., four (29%) in the Southeast region, four (29%) in the Western region, one (7%) in the Northeastern region, and two (14%) in the Central region.

Prior to SCA's involvement in the program, the middle schools did little to establish formal training in oral communication. One (7%) of the schools required a "speech course" to be taken by all sixth graders. Thirteen (93%) did not offer "speech" on a regular or elective basis. When asked to "estimate the percentage of students who would typically enroll in a speech course on an elective basis," 10 (71%) of the school principals or their designated representatives predicted that no students would enroll in a speech course if it were offered as an elective course, three (21%) predicted that less than 10% of students would enroll in a speech course if it were offered as an elective course, and one (7%) predicted that 10% to 35% of students would enroll in an elective speech course.

A total of 2,793 students from 14 schools participated in this study. Data were collected by classroom instructors on a time-available basis. Thus, some students completed one of the measures in the study and some completed both. It should be recognized that not all students in the participating schools were "at-risk students." Data were provided by all students available in a given class at the time of the study. Thus, these data represent students in at-risk *environments* rather than at-risk students, *per se*. Hence, differences noted in comparisons between the data obtained in this study and norms from the larger population are very conservative estimates of whatever real differences might exist between "at-risk" and "not at-risk" students in the population as a whole.

Although it would have been highly desirable, because of our third research question, to identify each participating student by ethnic background, the sensitive nature of such inquiries precluded obtaining such information on a student-by-student basis. Analyses directed toward answering that research

question, therefore, were based on ethnic dominance in given schools obtained from general enrollment information in the individual schools. Once again, therefore, differences based on ethnic considerations in this study should be considered exploratory and very conservative estimates (i.e., underestimates) of any differences that might exist in the population as a whole.

MEASUREMENT INSTRUMENTS

Communication apprehension

Communication apprehension was measured by use of the Personal Report of Communication Apprehension (PRCA-24; McCroskey, 1970, 1982). The PRCA-24 is a 24-item, Likert-type questionnaire that yields scores ranging from 24 to 120.² The PRCA-24 was selected because it is the most widely used measure of communication apprehension and because its reliability and validity are well established (Levine & McCroskey, 1990; McCroskey, Beatty, Kearney, & Plax, 1985). Alpha reliability of the instrument in the current study, with a sample of 2,289, was .85.

In addition, national norms have been established for the PRCA-24, using large national samples of both college students and adult non-students. Because previous research suggests that levels of communication apprehension tend to remain constant after the fifth grade (McCroskey et al., 1981), the existence of national norms provides an opportunity to compare the levels of communication apprehension found in the at-risk environments measured in this study with national norms.

Communication competence

Since the concern of this study was with the way students view their own competence (as opposed to the way an external observer might judge it), the Self-Perceived Communication Competence scale was employed (SPCC; McCroskey & McCroskey, 1988). Although this is a much newer instrument than the PRCA, it has been found to be reliable when used with college student populations (alpha reliability = .92) and has strong face validity (Richmond, McCroskey, & McCroskey, 1989).³ It is composed of 12 items asking the respondent to estimate on a 0–100 scale how competent she or he is in a variety of communication settings.⁴ It was anticipated that middle-school students would not have difficulty with the response format since it is analogous to the typical grading system they have been accustomed to in school for several years. Alpha reliability of the instrument in the current study, with a sample of 2,444, was .85.

RESULTS

COMMUNICATION APPREHENSION

Analysis of the PRCA-24 responses indicated that the mean for the total score on the instrument for this group of students was 68.5 with a standard deviation of 13.5. The mean is only slightly higher (4.4%) than the normative mean of 65.6. Based on the national norms, 18.1% of the present sample were categorized as highly communication apprehensive, compared to the normative 16.7%. This certainly is not an alarming difference. However, ethnic differences (discussed below) suggest a possible problem may exist that is not reflected in the overall scores.⁵

Examination of the subscores on the instrument indicate a less positive picture (see Table 2). While these students were slightly less apprehensive about public speaking than the adult⁶ norms and slightly more apprehensive about speaking in meetings, they were substantially more apprehensive about speaking in groups (11% higher) and speaking in dyads (21% higher).⁷ This is problematic in that the predominate form of communication between student and teacher is dyadic and group interaction is the foundation of many learning activities assigned by teachers.

TABLE 2
MEANS ON INSTRUMENTS FOR THE NORM GROUP, THE PRESENT SAMPLE, AND SUBSAMPLES

Instrument	Norm	Group			
		Present Sample	White Sample	Black Sample	Hispanic Sample
PRCA-24	65.6	68.5	64.4	64.3	70.2
Public	19.3	18.9	17.5	18.8	19.3
Meeting	16.4	16.9	15.5	17.0 ^a	17.2 ^a
Group	15.4	16.4	16.2	16.4 ^a	16.7 ^a
Dyad	14.5	16.3	15.1	16.2 ^a	17.0 ^a
N=	—	2,289	162	1,346	344
SPCC	74.2	61.3	71.1	61.8	57.2
Public	68.2	59.8	69.6	61.3	53.8
Meeting	68.3	55.2	65.2	55.7	51.8
Group	75.6	64.2	74.6	64.7	59.3
Dyad	80.9	66.0	74.7	65.7	63.8
Stranger	54.9	30.6	45.7	27.9 ^a	31.1 ^a
Acquaintance	76.8	66.1	75.7	69.4 ^a	57.1 ^a
Friend	88.1	87.2	91.7	88.2	83.2
N=	—	2,444	241	1,331	317

^aEthnic samples sharing a subscript for an instrument score do not differ significantly ($p > .0001$). All others differ significantly ($p < .0001$).

SELF-PERCEIVED COMMUNICATION COMPETENCE

Analysis of the SPCC scores indicated that the mean for the total score on the instrument for this group of students was 61.3 with a standard deviation of 18.9. The mean is substantially below the normative mean of 74.2 and the standard deviation is larger than the norm of 15.6. Based on the national norms, 44% of the present sample were categorized low in self-perceived communication competence, compared to the normative 16.7%. This is a substantial difference. As was the case with the communication apprehension scores, ethnic differences (discussed below) suggest an even more serious problem.

Examination of the subscores on the instrument indicate that virtually all of the difference in perceived communication competence with these students compared to the norms was a function of their feeling less competent to communicate with acquaintances and strangers (see Tables 2 and 3). The difference with regard to communicating with friends was less than one scale unit.

A total of 2,076 students completed both the PRCA-24 and the SPCC. This permitted an examination of the relationship between students' perceptions of their own communication competence and their apprehension about communi-

TABLE 3
PROPORTION OF GROUP IN HIGH, MODERATE, AND LOW CATEGORIES ON PRCA-24 AND SPCC

	Category		
	High	Moderate	Low
PRCA-24 Norm	16.7	66.6	16.7
Total Present Sample	18.1	72.4	9.5
Predominate White	14.2	69.1	16.7
Predominate Black	15.2	75.6	9.1
Predominate Hispanic	25.0	66.0	9.0
SPCC Norm	16.7	66.6	16.7
Total Present Sample	7.8	48.1	44.0
Predominate White	20.3	56.0	23.7
Predominate Black	7.6	48.9	43.5
Predominate Hispanic	4.7	38.5	56.8

cation. The correlation between these two perceptions was $-.36$. This suggests only a moderate relationship exists between these perceptions (approximately 13% shared variance) for these young people.

The observed relationship is much smaller than the one observed for U.S. college students ($r = -.63$, shared variance = 40%). Employing a Fisher's log z test, the difference is statistically reliable ($p < .0001$). The observed relationship between these two perceptions also is smaller than those observed in several cultures outside the U.S.: Australia, $-.64$; Finland, $-.59$; Sweden, $-.52$; and Micronesia, $-.49$ (Burroughs & Marie, 1990; McCroskey & Richmond, 1990; Sallinen-Kuparinen, McCroskey, & Richmond, 1991).

The substantially higher relationship between perceptions of competence and apprehension in the earlier research could be interpreted as suggesting the presence of one factor (or group of factors) that might be influencing both how confident one feels about her or his ability to communicate and the degree to which she or he is apprehensive about communicating. Given the comparatively low relationship between the students' two perceptions in this study, however, such an interpretation would appear inappropriate. It would appear that to a large extent these perceptions are independent, at least for students at the age of those in this study. It is likely, therefore, that attending to only the problem of low self-perceived competence or only the problem of high communication apprehension should not be expected to result in substantial positive impact on the other problem.

ETHNIC DIFFERENCES

Three subsamples were formed based on the proportion of ethnic-group presence in the various schools. Data from the various schools were placed into one of the three categories (Hispanic, Black, or White) if students from one ethnic group composed a sufficiently large portion of the total enrollment (approximately half or more). It should be recognized that only two schools reported 100 percent of their students came from a single ethnic group. Thus, the students included in the ethnic groups listed in Tables 2 and 3 are predominately from that group, but not exclusively so. Thus, the differences observed are possibly larger in the general population than those observed in this study.

Table 3 reports the proportion of students found to be High, Moderate, and Low on the measure of communication apprehension and the measure of self-perceived communication competence. With regard to communication apprehension, the Hispanic group included a substantially greater proportion of highly apprehensive students than the other groups or the normative groups. Both the Black and Hispanic groups included a much greater proportion of the students who saw themselves as lower in communication competence than the norm. The White group also included a higher proportion of students seeing themselves as less competent, but the deviation from the norm was much less than for the other groups.

The means reported in Table 3 establish a foundation for a better understanding of the ethnic differences. Generally, on average, the Black and Hispanic groups report being more apprehensive than the White group. The pattern on self-perceived competence is the reverse; that is, the Whites see themselves as more competent. Students in the Black group generally see themselves as more competent than do students in the Hispanic group, although on some subscores the pattern is reversed.

DISCUSSION

Our first research question was, "Do students in at-risk environments have unusually high fear of communication with others?" Results of this study suggest the answer to this question is a qualified yes. In general, these students reported only modestly higher communication apprehension than would be expected based on previous norms. However, results indicate that these students are substantially more apprehensive about communication in dyads or small groups than would be expected. This suggests a potentially serious problem for these students in an academic system that places heavy emphasis on instructional systems that involve dyadic and/or small group interactions with teachers or other students.

Our second research question was, "Do students in at-risk environments have unusually low perceptions of their own competence as communicators?" Results of this study suggest a firm yes. These students reported substantially lower perceptions of communication competence overall and particularly in circumstances that involve communication with acquaintances and strangers. Only in circumstances involving communication with friends did these students report competence at a level approximating previously observed norms.

Since teachers usually begin communicating with students as strangers and seldom pass beyond the acquaintance level with more than a few of their students, these results suggest a substantial proportion of the students in the groups studied do not feel competent to communicate with their teachers. Since much of the communication between students and teachers in the classroom must be student-initiated (asking questions about course material, for example), it is probable that students who feel communicatively inadequate do not engage in many of the important learning activities available in the class.

Our third research question was, "Is ethnicity related to communication orientation of students in at-risk environments?" Although our answer to this question is limited because we had to examine data on the basis of the predominant ethnic group of each school, the present data point to a firm yes. In fact, if

ethnicity were not a *very strong* indicator of differential perceptions, we should have found nothing at all in our analyses, since most of the schools studied were ethnically diverse. Ethnicity was highly predictive of both the proportion of students classified as highly communication apprehensive (one-fourth of the Hispanic group) and the proportions of students being classified as seeing themselves as low in communication competence (almost half of the Black group, and over half of the Hispanic group).⁸

It is important to note that ethnicity was found to be "predictive" of differential student orientations; it was not found to be a "cause" of differential student orientations. While there is reason to believe that genetics plays a role in the development of communication apprehension (McCroskey, 1984), there is absolutely no evidence supporting an ethnicity-based genetic link to either communication apprehension or self-perceived communication competence, and the results of the present study do not provide such evidence. In the present case, the suspected causative factors for differential perceptions as a function of ethnicity are differences in language development and use. Many Hispanic children are raised in an environment where English is a second language. Similarly, many Black children are raised in an environment where the dialect of English spoken differs in substantial ways from the English dialects spoken in the larger culture of the society. One should not be surprised to find children raised in either of these environments to be more apprehensive about communicating in the school environment or to be less confident of their abilities to communicate with others, particularly when those others are strangers or acquaintances who speak a different language or dialect. The finding of higher apprehension for the Hispanic group, for example, is consistent with earlier research in Puerto Rico (Fayer, McCroskey, & Richmond, 1985). In that research, it was observed that students whose first language was Spanish were quite low in communication apprehension when speaking in that language, but were highly apprehensive when speaking in English.

STRATEGIES FOR RESPONDING TO AT-RISK STUDENTS IN THE CLASSROOM

When devising pedagogical strategies for responding to academically at-risk students, several techniques can be employed with a reasonable degree of confidence that these strategies will enhance the skill with which academically at-risk students deal with the oral communication process. These strategies are grouped below in terms of apprehension and self-perceived competence, pronunciation and dialects, multiculturalism, and instructional goals and activities.⁹

APPREHENSION AND SELF-PERCEIVED COMPETENCE

Effective communication between teachers and students is the essence of effective instruction. Although computers and other mediated communication systems have a role to play in contemporary education, the central instructional system in most classrooms is live interaction between teachers and students.

While much of the communication in the classroom is initiated by teachers, some of the most important communication is initiated by students—asking questions about the subject matter, requesting clarification of assignments, and so on. Students who are apprehensive about communication and/or have little

confidence in their competence to communicate with their teachers are less likely to initiate such communication and are more likely to withdraw from such communicative exchanges, even if the teacher takes the initiative.

Teachers need to direct attention to three areas of concern: (a) reducing the level of student's communication apprehension; (b) increasing student self-esteem, particularly as it relates to the student's self-perceived communication competence; and (c) helping students to increase their communication skills.

Apprehension about communication, as measured by the PRCA-24, is a trait of the individual student. That is, communication apprehension is personality-based and not easily subject to change without direct intervention. Appropriate intervention strategies have been developed, such as systematic desensitization (McCroskey, 1972) and visualization (Ayers, 1988; Ayers & Hopf, 1985), and are well within the potential of classroom teachers to implement. Besides one-to-one intervention, it is possible for teachers to do many things that reduce the impact of communication apprehension in the classroom (McCroskey, 1977; McCroskey & Richmond, 1991). The most important thing teachers can do is to be sensitive to the problem—to not force communication on students, to avoid making initiation of communication necessary for a student to learn, and to avoid making students speak in order to demonstrate achievement (McCroskey, 1972).

Many students have problems with low self-esteem. These problems may be compounded for minority students when they perceive their language to be unacceptable to their teacher and/or student peers. In addition to many of the usual techniques that teachers use to help students enhance their self-esteem, teachers need to teach students in multicultural classrooms that "everyone's speech is special." This involves teaching students the concepts of "accent" and "dialect" and helping them understand that no single dialect or accent is used by a majority of people in the U.S., and as a result, *everyone* speaks with a minority accent and in a minority dialect.

In almost every community, whether there is a substantial ethnic minority or not, there are numerous students who speak with an accent and/or dialect that is not "mainstream." Whether they speak with an Appalachian accent, or that of West Texas, or Southern Mississippi, or New Jersey, or "down east" Maine, their speech is immediately recognized as "different." This places these students at a disadvantage if they are to mature and seek employment in the mainstream society. These students have a skill deficit that teachers need to help them overcome or the students will not only be at a disadvantage in the school, they will face discrimination in the job market because of their inability to speak in a manner acceptable to the mainstream community. If they are to be responsive to such instruction, students need to be assured their present speech is fine for many purposes, but that they need to learn another way to speak for other purposes. Thus, students with divergent accents and/or dialects should be taught a more mainstream style of speech as a "second language," rather than as a replacement for the speech they learned at home.

The pedagogical strategies employed to deal with communication apprehension and self-perceived communication competence do not and should not be isolated from other classroom activities. The teaching techniques employed to deal with communication apprehension and confidence should be consistent

with how related topics are handled. The ways in which issues such as pronunciation and dialects, multiculturalism, and specific oral communication skills training are handled in the classroom will have a direct impact on how apprehensive and confident students are about communication. Accordingly, while this investigation did not explore the relationships between at-risk students and pronunciation and dialects, multiculturalism, and specific oral communication skills training, the relationships should not be ignored. Based upon our survey of the literature dealing with these topics, we believe it would be valuable, from a heuristic perspective, to consider possible relationships between at-risk students and pronunciation and dialects, multiculturalism, and specific oral communication skills training. Therefore, our conclusions at this point are not firm, and we invite teachers and researchers to consider alternative approaches to these issues when dealing with at-risk students. But, we are convinced that we need to consider these relationships, posit hypotheses regarding these relationships, and encourage research that would confirm or disconfirm the relationships suggested here.

PRONUNCIATION AND DIALECTS

At-risk students frequently have non-standard pronunciation patterns and unique dialects reflecting the norms of the subcultures in which they were raised. Focusing on minority students, Delpit (1990), Hudelson (1990), and Scott (1990) have suggested techniques for responding to non-standard pronunciation and dialects within classroom environments. Although all of their recommended techniques cannot be summarized here, some guidelines for approaching non-standard pronunciation patterns and subculture dialects are worthy of note as illustrations of a basic approach to teaching oral communication in at-risk environments.

In terms of "proper" pronunciation, five basic conceptions are likely to be useful to oral communication instructors: (a) learning to orally produce an alternative pronunciation form is not principally a function of cognitive analysis and thereby not ideally learned from protracted rule-based instruction and correction; (b) teaching students to monitor their speech while speaking reduces interest in learning (e.g., intonation is lost), inhibits talking, and may ultimately produce silence and increase resentment against the instructor; (c) unconscious acquisition is far more effective than rule-based instruction; (d) the less stress attached to learning the form, the easier it is to accomplish; and (e) learning alternative pronunciation forms comes from exposure, comfort level, motivation, familiarity, and practice in real communication contexts.

In approaching unique dialects in multicultural and at-risk environments, the instructor may find it useful to consider the following: (a) dialects are frequently viewed as a reflection of one's personal identity, family, and community; therefore, for an instructor to attack a dialect may be to attack a student's identity, family, and community; (b) in multicultural environments, by the age of eight or nine, most students have the ability or competence to express themselves in standardized forms, but may choose not to (i.e., an issue of performance); (c) code variations from one dialect to another may indicate a difference in meaning; (d) what is "correct," that is, satisfies written language rules, may not be "communicatively competent" (e.g., oral diction may be

preferred to or be more appropriate than written diction); (e) code-switching (e.g., mixing two dialects) is generally a characteristic of fluent bilingual speakers; (f) when offering instruction in learning code variations in another dialect, focus on using a new dialect to do something (i.e., a content emphasis) rather than on drills (i.e., the language itself); and (g) to avoid negative stereotyping of another dialect, bi-cultural role-playing scenarios of the same social situation can frequently be employed effectively in classroom environments.

MULTICULTURALISM

Another pedagogical dimension in at-risk student instruction frequently requires that the multicultural nature of the classroom formally and pervasively inform the techniques employed by an instructor. Ratliffe (1990, p. 2) suggested that the governing teaching philosophy in such classrooms should emphasize that:

all cultures will be celebrated in the classroom. . . . This philosophical approach results in the entire class learning from each other things that will help us survive in and contribute to our multicultural community. At the same time, we retain and have a greater appreciation of our first cultures by understanding the universals that span most cultures and by seeing how these universals are played out uniquely in each culture.

In terms of curriculum planning, Ratliffe (1990, p. 1) has specifically recommended "helping [at-risk students] succeed in the classroom in at least four ways: 1. By designing and offering special courses in speaking and listening skills. 2. By providing a center where students can talk with English-speaking adults on a regular basis. 3. By participating in a funded program to assist limited English speaking (LEP) students in vocational certification programs. 4. By developing intercultural components to all speech courses in the curriculum."

INSTRUCTIONAL GOALS AND ACTIVITIES

In terms of the specific oral communication skills considered in the classroom, instruction should appropriately emphasize three interrelated pedagogical dimensions: (a) cognitive understanding of the communication process; (b) an understanding and mastery of the affective or social-interpersonal skills employed during communication; and (c) an understanding and mastery of the psychomotor skills (i.e., coordinated verbal and nonverbal communicative behaviors) involved in actual communication performances (Rubin, 1990; cf. Allen, Willmington, & Sprague, 1991). Feezel (1985) has proposed a model for integrating the cognitive, affective, and psychomotor dimensions of communication in classroom activities and exercises.

Based upon these specific concepts, during the initial stages of classroom performance, at-risk students would be encouraged to achieve three outcomes as speakers. First, *cognitive*: increase students' ability to describe and subsequently to analyze the oral communication process. Second, *affective*: increase students' ability to relate personally with audiences. And third, *psychomotor*: increase students' use of bodily activity (nonverbal communication) and subsequently to coordinate bodily and linguistic (verbal) activity (Freezel, 1985, pp. 6-7).

From a teacher's perspective, during the initial stages of instruction, feedback

should be designed to: (a) extract generalizations from students about their speeches in ways that explain the functions and significance of oral communication (cognitive dimension); (b) encourage students to speak again and emphasize the social-interpersonal nature of each speaking situation (affective dimension); and (c) specify the particular verbal and nonverbal behaviors that will be assessed before a speaking assignment and after the speech, and then only these behaviors should be the focus of the assessment (the psychomotor dimension). Additional details regarding this approach have been previously outlined (Chesebro, 1990a, 1990b, 1991).

NOTES

¹We do *not* mean to imply that racial and/or ethnic group or class membership should be viewed or treated as an at-risk factor. Rather, in policy and pragmatic terms, we are merely recognizing that a significant correlation exists between race/ethnicity and high annual dropout rates, and that education institutions need to structure programs that respond to these relationships. As the Pew Higher Education Research Program (1991, pp. 1A-2A) concluded when considering the "at-risk population," "in practical terms, [dealing with the at-risk population] means bringing more blacks, Hispanics, and other minorities into the nation's economic and educational mainstream."

²The PRCA-24 requires respondents to state their level of agreement, using a scale of strongly agree, agree, undecided, disagree, or strongly disagree, to 24 statements concerning their feelings about communication with other people. The statements are grouped into four settings: (a) *group* (e.g., "I dislike participating in group discussions"); *meeting* (e.g., "Generally, I am nervous when I have to participate in a meeting"); *dyadic* (e.g., "Ordinarily I am very tense and nervous in conversations"); and *public* (e.g., "Certain parts of my body feel very tense and rigid while giving a speech").

³Statistical analyses supporting the validity of the SPCC have not been provided, although McCroskey and McCroskey (1988) have reviewed the literature regarding the validity of the relationships between communication competence and self-report measures and McCroskey et al. (1981) have reviewed the literature regarding the validity of the relationships between communication competence and environment. Further research regarding the validity of the SPCC are required, and this study provides a foundation for such explorations.

⁴The SPCC identifies 12 situations in which respondents might need to communicate. Respondents are asked to estimate their competence in each, using a scale ranging from 0 (completely incompetent) to 100 (completely competent). The situations include: (1) Present a talk to a group of strangers; (2) Talk with an acquaintance; (3) Talk in a large meeting of friends; (4) Talk in a small group of strangers; (5) Talk with a friend; (6) Talk in a large meeting of acquaintances; (7) Talk with a stranger; (8) Present a talk to a group of friends; (9) Talk in a small group of acquaintances; (10) Talk in a large meeting of strangers; (11) Talk in a small group of friends; and (12) Present a talk to a group of acquaintances. Scores are computed as follows: Public = $(1 + 8 + 12)/3$; Meeting = $(3 + 6 + 10)/3$; Group = $(4 + 9 + 11)/3$; Dyad = $(2 + 5 + 7)/3$; Stranger = $(1 + 4 + 10)/4$; Acquaintance = $(2 + 6 + 9 + 12)/4$; Friend = $(3 + 5 + 8 + 11)/4$; and Overall SPCC = $(\text{Stranger} + \text{Acquaintance} + \text{Friend})/3$.

⁵McCroskey et al. (1981) reported communication apprehension scores in a preliminary study for 2,228 kindergarten through twelfth grade students and 875 college students, as well as the scores of 5,795 elementary and secondary students in a second study. However, these scores were derived using the Personal Report of Communication Fear (PRCF) and Shyness Scale (SS) that differ significantly from the PRCA-24 used in this study. Accordingly, the 1981 scores and the scores reported here are not comparable.

⁶In terms of communication apprehension, fourth- through twelfth-grade students do not appear to differ significantly from adults. McCroskey et al. (1981, p. 128) reported that "the mean PRCF scores were virtually identical for all grade levels except K-3."

⁷The results reported here are statistically significant at the .0001 level. However, the meaningfulness of these differences is subject to interpretation. The magnitude of differences—11% and 21%—is noteworthy and indicates a relationship worth exploring. Although the large sample size might account for some of the observed differences, some differences show extremely large scale differences that are unlikely to be explained solely by sample size. Additionally, the test of significance was set at the extremely conservative level of .0001.

⁸Given the design of the study employed here, with its focus on the predominant ethnic emphasis of each school, we cannot technically rule out the possibility that other differences among students—such as geographic differences, different teaching styles from one school to the next, and/or differences in the support that different school districts offer—might account for some of these reported differences. However, the statistical significance of the ethnic differences reported should not be ignored.

⁹In identifying these strategies, we do not believe that sufficient evidence exists to assume that at-risk students lack basic educational skills or that they require more intensive basic skills training than other groupings of students. For example, the six indicators developed by the National Center for Education Statistics (1990b) do not indicate that students are at-risk educationally because they lack basic educational skills. Accordingly, until other evidence emerges, in terms of a basic skills orientation, we assume that at-risk students should be treated

like other students and provided with a set of educational opportunities that balances basic skills training and the development of higher order critical skills. Thus, in the absence of contrary evidence, the educational policy developed by the National Governors' Association (1990, p. 37) would seem relevant to all students: "National education goals" should include a commitment not only to having students "communicate effectively," but to "demonstrate an advanced ability" to "communicate effectively."

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