The Relationship of Teacher Clarity and Teacher Immediacy with Students' Experiences of State Receiver Apprehension

Joseph L. Chesebro and James C. McCroskey

This study examined the impact of state receiver apprehension in the instructional context. Because of its negative relationship with information processing effectiveness, receiver apprehension is an experience which can act as a barrier to effective learning. Teacher clarity and teacher immediacy were examined in terms of their relationship with student state receiver apprehension during the learning process. Main effect analyses revealed that both increased clarity and increased immediacy produced main effects for reducing student state receiver apprehension. The results also revealed that clarity and immediacy produced a magnitude interaction. The combination of high clarity and high immediacy was even more effective in reducing student receiver apprehension in the classroom than would be predicted by the two main effects alone.

KEY CONCEPTS teacher clarity; teacher immediacy; receiver apprehension; teacher behaviors

Joseph L. Chesebro (Ed.D., West Virginia University, 1999) is an Assistant Professor, Department of Communication at the State University of New York, Brockport, NY 14420. **James C. McCroskey** (Ed.D., Pennsylvania State University, 1966) is a Professor of Communication Studies at West Virginia University, Morgantown, WV 26506-6293.

Through the years instructional research has demonstrated the value of clear and immediate teaching in terms of positive outcomes related to student motivation, affect, and cognitive learning. In addition to these well-studied instructional outcomes, Receiver Apprehension (Wheeless, 1975) may play an important role in the instructional process. Students who are experiencing anxiety as a result of trying to assimilate incoming information may have problems learning information efficiently. As with other classroom outcomes, teachers may be able to play a valuable role in helping students reduce their apprehension with effective teaching behaviors.

The present study examines teacher clarity and immediacy in terms of their potential association with lower levels of state receiver apprehension. Both clear and immediate teaching behaviors might help reduce students' receiver apprehension

when listening to lectures. Immediate teaching behaviors can be effective at increasing positive student affect for the instructor and the course material (Frymier, 1994). Given this positive affect, students with immediate teachers are likely to be more comfortable in the classroom environment and probably will be less likely to experience anxiety when listening to an immediate teacher. Clear teaching also is associated with positive classroom outcomes (Chesebro, 1998; Civikly, 1992); clear teachers may facilitate student listening and information processing by structuring content appropriately and speaking in a fluent manner that does not cause the listener to struggle to comprehend the lecture.

RECEIVER APPREHENSION

The study of receiver apprehension grew out of the study of oral communication apprehension. Recognizing that communication apprehension was being studied from a source perspective even though "we spend more of our time as receivers than sources," Wheeless (1975) began to focus on apprehension associated with the reception of messages (p. 261). He reasoned that the nature of fear or anxiety related to sending information was different from that of receiving information. Specifically, he conceptualized trait receiver apprehension as "the fear of misinterpreting, inadequately processing, and/or not being able to adjust psychologically to messages sent by others" (p. 263). Receiver apprehension involves an amount of anxiety associated with the decoding process. This anxiety may be in terms of listening competently, or a concern with having to listen to messages which psychologically are difficult for one to hear.

Subsequent research on receiver apprehension has attempted to examined its origin. Wheeless, Preiss, and Gayle (1997) discuss four explanations of receiver apprehension. The first three explanations represent the earliest perspectives while the fourth is a relatively recent addition to the receiver apprehension literature. The first holds that receiver apprehension occurs as a situational fear of encountering new information. The second explanation relates to an individual's ability to assimilate (McReynolds, 1976) incoming information in terms of that individual's cognitive complexity (Beatty, 1981; Beatty & Payne, 1981). Individuals with less cognitive complexity are likely to have greater difficulty assimilating incoming information, and therefore are likely to be apprehensive receivers. A third component of receiver apprehension is based on the use of interpretive schemes or strategic repertoires to respond to incoming messages (Delia, O'Keefe, & O'Keefe, 1982). Thus, a lack of schemata to process messages may lead a receiver to experience apprehension out of a fear of misinterpreting or inadequately processing messages.

Recently, Ayres, Wilcox, and Ayres (1995) offered a fourth explanation of the origin of receiver apprehension, arguing that receiver, message, and situational variables lead to receiver apprehension. They demonstrated the role of evaluation and listener motivation in the development of receiver apprehension. Specifically, listeners who will be evaluated based on their ability to remember incoming information are likely to experience receiver apprehension. Also, those who are motivated to remember all of the information (regardless of whether they are being evaluated) also are likely to be apprehensive receivers. Regardless of whether the reason is an upcoming evaluation or a personal interest in the material, students may consider course information to be important. Based on this rationale, we advanced our first hypothesis regarding the extent to which course material is important to students:

H1. Students whose course material is more important to them are more likely to experience state receiver apprehension.

In addition to the research on the development of receiver apprehension, there is a body of research related to its various outcomes. Receiver apprehension has been linked to lower student achievement scores (Scott & Wheeless, 1977). A meta-analysis by Preiss, Wheeless, & Allen, 1990) revealed that receiver apprehension is negatively related to listening effectiveness and information processing effectiveness. However, due to a number of conflicting results, the negative overall relationship between receiver apprehension and listening effectiveness should be noted with caution. Some have found little or no relationship even when using a variety of listening tests (Clark, 1989; Fitch-Hauser, Barker, & Hughes, 1990). Roberts (1986) noted a strong negative relationship which also was curvilinear, but this was not confirmed by Fitch-Hauser et al. (1990). Cumulatively, the research on receiver apprehension implies that apprehensive receivers listen in different ways than non-apprehensive receivers. Findings that receiver apprehension is related to reduced information processing effectiveness are relevant to the instructional context. Those students who experience receiver apprehension are likely to be less effective at processing information and therefore less likely to learn course material sufficiently. These findings on trait receiver apprehension are likely to be observed in specific instances in which people are experiencing state receiver apprehension. Because of this, research should investigate teacher behaviors which might reduce student receiver apprehension in the classroom. The present study investigates teacher clarity and immediacy as effective teaching behaviors which have the potential to reduce student receiver apprehension in the classroom.

CLARITY

Teacher clarity is defined as a variable which represents the process by which an instructor is able to effectively stimulate the desired meaning of course content and processes in the minds of students through the use of appropriately-structured verbal and nonverbal messages (Chesebro, 1998). This definition represents the integration of a diverse body of research related to teacher clarity and therefore is based on a firm research foundation. In addition, it is more precise than previous definitions, is not circular, and is aligned with current thinking among instructional communication scholars that teacher clarity is a relational variable which also is concerned with the clarity of instructional processes (Civikly, 1992; Kendrick & Darling, 1990; Simonds, 1997).

Research on teacher clarity has examined characteristics of verbal messages and the ways in which presentations are structured. In examining the clarity of verbal messages, research has explored vagueness, disfluencies, and verbal mazes as indicators of a lack of clarity. In a review of ten studies in which vagueness terms were manipulated, Smith and Land (1981) indicate that the presence of vagueness terms reduced student achievement in every study. Mazes reduced achievement in three of four studies. In the one study which manipulated specific fluency behaviors such as "uh," the relationship between fluency and achievement was negative but non-significant (Smith, 1977). In addition to these findings regarding the clarity of oral messages, Sidelinger and McCroskey (1997) report that the clarity of written

instructional messages is positively related to increased student affect.

Research related to teacher clarity has included investigations of the structure of presentations. Concepts which are related to the structuring of presentations include advance organizers, organization, note taking facilitation, discontinuity, and internal connectors or transitions. Advance organizers (Ausubel, 1963) are concepts introduced before material is covered which are on a more general or abstract level than the material which is to be covered. Although research on the use of advance organizers primarily is related to their use with written material, their presence in oral presentations, both verbally and visually, increases achievement (Alexander, Frankiewicz, & Williams, 1979). Also related to the structuring of presentations, skeletal outlines given to students prior to lectures also appear to be an effective component of structure which can contribute to the clarity of the messages presented (Hartley, 1976). Another component related to structure involves the effective use of transitions. Teaching behaviors related to the effective use of transitions were cited as important in a number of the studies (reviewed in Cruickshank & Kennedy, 1986). These include "teaching things in a related step-by-step manner," and "orienting and preparing students for what follows" (p. 56). This body of research on advance organizers, skeletal outlines, transitions, and discontinuity suggests that the effective use of structure is another means by which teachers can be more clear.

Given the verbal and structural of components of clarity which appear to aid listeners in their reception of messages, clarity also may be related to reduced student state receiver apprehension. By structuring information, providing previews, reviews, summaries, and teaching at an appropriate pace, clear teachers present course content in ways which should be beneficial to apprehensive receivers. Structure helps remove the ambiguity from the lesson. Appropriate pacing allows for the processing difficulties apprehensive receivers may have. Hence, we advanced our second hypothesis:

H2. Teacher clarity is inversely related to student state receiver apprehension during the learning process.

IMMEDIACY

A solid body of experimental and correlational evidence had demonstrated the impact of a number of behaviors on desired instructional outcomes. These behaviors include eye contact, the use of gestures, movement about the classroom, smiling, vocal variety, and the use of humor. Early research on these behaviors labeled them as teacher enthusiasm or teacher expressiveness (Coats & Smidchens, 1966; Ware & Williams, 1975; Abrami, Leventhal, & Perry, 1982) while research on the same behaviors conducted by communication researchers labels them as immediacy behaviors (McCroskey & Richmond, 1992), in that they increase perceptions of physical and psychological closeness. Regardless of the label, these behaviors have been identified as effective teaching behaviors, both in experimental and correlational research.

In an experiment conducted by Coats and Smidchens (1966), participants taught by more dynamic presenters scored 20 percent higher on recall tests than those attending non-dynamic lectures. Experiments conducted by Ware and Williams (1975) yielded similar results and found that teacher enthusiasm was a greater predictor of evaluations of instruction than the amount of information covered.

Similar results in ratings of the instructor and presentation were reported by Andersen and Withrow (1981). A meta-analysis by Abrami, Leventhal, and Perry (1982) of experiments concerning expressiveness indicated that expressive teaching behaviors led to higher ratings of instruction and that to a lesser extent they led to greater achievement. In a more recent experiment by Kelley and Gorham (1988), instructor immediacy was significantly related to student recall of novel material. Other recent research studies indicate that expressive behaviors lead students to feel a greater sense of control in the classroom (Perry, 1985). Perry and Penner (1990) also report that students who viewed a video lecture of an expressive teacher achieved higher scores on a homework assignment based on the lecture, demonstrating that expressive teaching can improve both short and long-term achievement.

In addition to experimental evidence, there is significant correlational evidence that effective teacher nonverbal behaviors are related to positive instructional outcomes. The majority of this research has been conducted on the relationship between teacher immediacy and outcome variables. Immediacy consistently has been related to positive affect both for subject matter and for teachers (Andersen, 1979; Christophel, 1990; Frymier, 1994; Richmond, 1990). It also has been related to state student motivation to learn (Christophel, 1990; Frymier, 1994; Richmond, 1990). Students with immediate teachers also report that they learn more in class (Christophel, 1990; Frymier, 1994; Richmond, 1990; Richmond, Gorham, & McCroskey, 1987). Immediate teachers are perceived as using more pro-social behavioral alteration techniques (Plax, Kearney, McCroskey, & Richmond, 1986). The absence of immediacy behaviors is perceived as misbehavior even when no operationally defined misbehaviors are used (Thweatt & McCroskey, 1996; 1998). Immediacy behaviors also have been found to be effective across cultures (McCroskey, Sallinen, Fayer, Richmond, & Barraclough, 1996; Powell & Harville, 1990).

Clearly, teacher immediacy is important in the instructional process. It has been linked to more positive affect towards courses and instructors, greater motivation to learn, greater achievement, and greater perceptions of control. Given these findings, teacher immediacy may be linked to lower levels of student state receiver apprehension when learning. Students with greater perceptions of control (Perry, 1991) and increased positive affect (Frymier, 1994) are likely to experience less anxiety while learning. Furthermore, answers to open-ended questions about situational factors which lead to receiver apprehension (Wheeless et al., 1997) indicate behaviors related to a lack of immediacy: boring lectures, teachers who criticize, lack of vocal variety, and nervous (p. 157). Students of immediate teachers feel more positive about their classes and feel more in control of their learning environment. It is reasonable to suspect that reactions such as these to immediate teaching may help alleviate concerns about obtaining and understanding the course material. Though those concerns might exist, a positive classroom environment may help students maintain their concern without becoming anxious about receiving course content. It is for these reasons that we hypothesized a negative relationship between teacher immediacy and student state receiver apprehension is probable.

H3. Teacher immediacy behaviors are negatively related to student state receiver apprehension in the learning process.

METHOD

Participants

Students (N=359) from a large Mid-Atlantic University were asked to participate in a study involving instructional communication. Students were offered an attendance credit which contributed to their total attendance score. This total score accounted for about 5% of their total course grade. Also, student participation was voluntary. Students were drawn from general service courses, which are taken by students from most majors across the university.

Procedures

Students were asked read one of eight scenarios and respond to a state receiver apprehension measure, as well as three manipulation checks which were completed after the receiver apprehension measure. The use of scenarios created a 2 x 2 x 2 factorial design in which two levels of teacher clarity, teacher immediacy, and the importance of the content were manipulated. The scenario representing the high conditions for clarity, immediacy, and importance is below.

> Let's assume that you are enrolled in a course that you must pass with an excellent grade (*high importance*). The teacher you are listening to is funny, has a dynamic delivery, is energetic, and frequently makes eye contact with you (*high immediacy*). The teacher's lecture is clear and therefore the material is easy to understand and follow (*high clarity*).

The scenario representing the low conditions of each variable is below.

> Let's assume that you are enrolled in an elective course on material that you are comfortable with and understand quite well (*low importance*). The teacher you are listening to is not very funny, has a monotonous delivery style, seems quite tired, and rarely makes eye contact with you (*low immediacy*). The teacher's lecture is not very clear and therefore the material is very difficult to understand and follow (*low clarity*).

Subsequent scenarios were constructed by forming every possible combination of the variables, for a total of eight scenarios. The material in parenthesis above are included here for clarity, but were not in the scenarios on which the students reported. Instruments with the various scenarios were shuffled so students received different scenarios randomly (the test booklets were randomly shuffled). This approach has been used to advantage in other instructional communication research (Ayres et al., 1995).

Manipulation Checks

To assess the effectiveness of the manipulations employed in the scenarios, students completed two 7-point bipolar semantic differential items related to the manipulation of each variable. These items were completed after students completed the anxiety measure. Short definitions of clarity and immediacy preceded the items. Immediacy was defined as "The degree of perceived physical or psychological closeness between people. We are closer to some people, or more immediate with them, than we are with others" The manipulation checks for immediacy were "immediate/

non-immediate" and "unapproachable/approachable." Clarity of instruction was defined as "Clear teachers are able to get their information across so students can easily comprehend it." The items for clarity were "unclear/clear" and "understandable/not understandable." Items checking the manipulation of importance were "important to me/not important to me" and "not meaningful to me/meaningful to me."

INSTRUMENTS

State Receiver Apprehension

State receiver apprehension during the learning process was measured using the A-State anxiety measure (Spielberger, Gorsuch, & Lushene, 1968). This five-item Likert type instrument, which is sensitive to anxiety produced by a specific stimulus was used to assess the extent to which students tend to feel anxiety when learning from a specific teacher. In this study, subjects read a scenario and reported the extent to which they would feel anxiety in that situation. This scale has demonstrated reliability (.92 in this study) and has been used in previous research on state receiver apprehension (Ayres et al., 1995).

RESULTS

Analyses of variance for the manipulation checks indicated the manipulations generally were effective. The highly immediate teacher was perceived as being significantly more immediate ($F\{1, 357\} = 374.67$, $p < .001$, r-squared = .51) than the less immediate teacher ($m = 11.4$ and $m = 5.4$ respectively). The high-clarity teacher was perceived as being more clear ($F\{1, 358\} = 313.89$, $p < .001$, r-squared = .46) than the low-clarity teacher ($m = 10.8$ and $m = 5.3$ respectively). The important learning situation was perceived as being more important ($F\{1, 358\} = 13.46$, $p < .001$, r-squared = .04) than the less important learning situation ($m = 10.4$ and $m = 9.1$ respectively). The importance manipulations were less successful than might have been preferred, but they did produce significantly different perceptions.

The 2 x 2 x 2 ANOVA used to analyze the data was significant ($F\{1, 358\} = 29.67$, $p < .001$, r-squared = .37). Analyses of variance revealed main effects for immediacy ($F\{1, 358\} = 45.54$, $p < .001$, r-squared = .08), clarity ($F\{1, 358\} = 128.78$, $p < .001$, r-squared = .23), and importance of the material ($F\{1, 358\} = 21.57$, $p < .001$, r-squared = .04). Those with clear teachers and those with immediate teachers reported significantly lower receiver apprehension scores (See Table 1). Those whose material was more important reported higher receiver apprehension scores than did those with less important material.

TABLE 1
Means and Standard Deviations for Main Effects on Receiver Apprehension

Condition	N	Mean	Standard Deviation
High Immediacy	180	11.67	5.1
Low Immediacy	179	14.75	5.3
High Clarity	180	10.62	4.7
Low Clarity	179	15.81	4.8
High Importance	180	14.23	5.5
Low Importance	179	12.17	5.2

These analyses provide support for each of the three main-effect hypotheses in this tudy. However, one significant two-way interaction was observed. That one was etween immediacy and clarity ($F\{1, 358\} = 7.25$, $p < .01$, r-squared = .01). This nteraction accounted for only one percent of the variance in receiver apprehension cores and it did not conflict with the observation of significance on either of the main ffects. Rather, analyses of the mean differences among the four conditions involved See Table 2) indicated that the interaction effect was one of magnitude. Students vhose teachers were both clear and immediate reported receiver apprehension scores ower than would be expected on the basis of the main effect results.

TABLE 2
Means and Standard Deviations for Conditions Involved in Interaction Effect

		Immediacy Effect	
		High	Low
Clarity Effect	High	8.48 (3.4)*	12.78 (4.9)
	Low	14.89 (4.42)	16.74 (5.0)

Number in parentheses are standard deviations. All means are significantly different from each other at $p < .001$.

DISCUSSION

The results of this study indicate that clear or immediate teaching can help reduce tudent state receiver apprehension and that both clear and immediate teaching ogether can reduce state receiver apprehension to an even greater extent. Given the egative impact of receiver apprehension on learning (Scott & Wheeless, 1977), these indings are quite important. They offer two ways in which teachers can help facilitate heir students' learning by making it less anxiety provoking. Clear teaching is likely to acilitate the processing of messages by enabling students to effectively assimilate nessages into their schemata with relatively little struggle. Immediacy can help gain tudents' attention, focus it on the material, foster good teacher-student relationships, nd in doing so, create a classroom environment which is more likely to evoke comfort nd engagement than frustration and anxiety. Together clarity and immediacy mprove instruction in different ways and therefore compliment each other quite well. n particular, clarity meaningfully was related to reduced levels of receiver pprehension. This suggests that in addition to the strength of immediate teaching that has been demonstrated in the past decade of research, teacher clarity is an important variable in instructional communication. Teachers should realize the importance of being more than just immediate when they teach. They must present their messages in a way that maximizes student understanding. In addition to the benefit of clear teaching itself, it should be noted that the presence of both clarity and immediacy in the classroom is greater than the presence of either individually. The findings regarding clarity and immediacy support a solid body of existing research which has demonstrated the benefits of clear and immediate teaching. Although both individually are linked to desirable instructional outcomes, a combination of both is even more desirable. This information is useful to teachers in terms of improving their instruction. It is useful to researchers who in the future may wish to examine the relationships of other variables with receiver apprehension and other instructional

outcomes. Research in this area would support the efforts of the present study in demonstrating teaching behaviors which characterize effective teaching.

There were a number of limitations to this study that could be overcome in future research on clarity and immediacy. First, the use of hypothetical scenarios is not a substitute for an actual experiment in which the clarity and immediacy of an actual teacher are manipulated. An experiment would enable a stronger case to be made for the benefits of clear and immediate teaching. Along these lines, future research could examine the nature of teacher clarity with greater detail. For example, research could manipulate different aspects of clear teaching and identify which are most and least important in terms of student learning. Also, the measurement of anxiety in reference to a learning experience is not a direct measure of state receiver apprehension. Future research also should examine actual learning outcomes in addition to anxiety. Attention to the limitations in this study will enable future research to explore teacher clarity and immediacy with even greater precision. Furthermore, the outcomes of this research will be of great benefit both to teachers and researchers.

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