

**Public Speaking Apprehension in the College Classroom: How to Reduce These Fears and
Promote Successful Communication Practices**

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Abstract

Public Speaking is a core communication skill that, when executed successfully, affects the overall impact of a speaker and how their message is perceived by their intended audience. Despite its importance, this social skill often instills feelings of fear, anxiety, and doubt. This research sought to find information regarding Public Speaking Anxiety (PSA)-specifically amongst students in a classroom setting. These conclusions were achieved by examining a series of different studies involving high levels of PSA amongst students. Along with data that revealed how the prominence of PSA, these studies also examined different tools, techniques, and exercises known to reduce PSA in students specifically. Research found that using the Personal Report of Public Speaking Anxiety (PRPSA) assessment (McCroskey, 1970) could assist educators by revealing PSA levels amongst their students. These studies also encouraged instructors of oral communication courses--specifically introductory-level courses--to change their curriculum to be more engaging and easier for students to comprehend. This extended research also revealed three components that were positively correlated with lower PSA levels when incorporated into the oral communication curriculum: systematic desensitization, cognitive modification, and skills training. By incorporating these three factors into course lesson plans, students ultimately showed lower levels of PSA and were more successful in these courses.

Communication is a fluid process that weaves throughout every aspect of our lives. Everyday we are sending and receiving messages to help us better perceive the world around us. Having the ability to successfully and effectively speak in front of others--specifically a crowd of people--will ultimately benefit you as a communicator throughout all that you do. It's this skill that also causes a large majority of anxiety amongst americans--specifically in a classroom setting. Implementing proper techniques and tools that could assist educators in relieving Public Speaking Anxiety (PSA) is both necessary and beneficial in order to give students the chance to find comfort in their own voice and communicating with others. "Speech curriculum needs to be rethought in order to move students from simply giving and deploying information, to understanding how they use information in order to learn." (Leek, D. R., & Brown, C. J. 2019, p.9)

"Competence in public speaking is paramount to student success in and out of the classroom" (Bodie, 2010, p.71) Many colleges and universities are becoming increasingly aware of the importance of oral communication courses and are choosing to put a higher emphasis on the need for these courses. Educators are even finding ways to incorporate oral communication practices into the curriculum of other disciplines (Ex. presentations, speeches, and participation that garners attention) (Docan-Morgan, T, Nelson, L 2015). Intro to Public Speaking is a course that is not only necessary but beneficial to students regardless of their area of study. By instilling practical public speaking skills and giving students a sense of their overall stage presence it gives them the opportunity to further excel. Basic public speaking skills are essential and are something that everyone should have the ability to apply in the classroom, in the workplace, and in life. Despite its importance, the sad reality is that many students suffer from Public Speaking

Anxiety and tend to struggle both mentally and emotionally in a course that is solely meant to aid them (Bolin, 2018). Public Speaking Anxiety (PSA) is defined as “a situation specific social anxiety that arises from the real or anticipated enactment of an oral presentation” (Bodie, 2010, p. 72). Bodie believed, like many other educators, that the intended purpose of public speaking courses was to reduce feelings of PSA and make communication a more comforting process for students. For this study, research was conducted regarding students PSA in a classroom setting. Using this research, improvements could be made to the current teaching curriculum involving public speaking in order to make it a more enjoyable experience which would foster better results amongst students. To best analyze this phenomenon, the Personal Report of Public Speaking Anxiety (PRPSA)(McCroskey, 1970) was analyzed and proven to be a valuable tool regarding the assessment of PSA. The PRPSA is a self-assessment given to applicants in order to measure your personal level of public speaking anxiety. The applicant is given 34 statements and is asked to rate how strongly each statement applies to them (McCroskey, 1970). From these results, educators are able to analyze students’ level of public speaking anxiety and from there develop certain techniques and tools that could assist in limiting these fears. This can be a useful tool for educators to use during the early stages of an Intro to Public Speaking course. These results can ultimately give teachers a better understanding of the level of PSA amongst their students and act accordingly.

In one study, students who were currently enrolled in a standardized public speaking course at a mid-size midwestern university were asked to complete the PRSA (Hunter, K. M., Westwick, J. N., & Haleta, L. L. 2014). Using these results, the instructors made adjustments to the curriculum in order to incorporate three components known to aid in decreasing PSA:

systematic desensitization, cognitive modification, and skills training (Bodie, 2010, p.86).

Systematic desensitization was incorporated through exposure therapy. The course would start with simple public speaking tasks and slowly move into bigger and more advanced projects (Hunter, K. M., Westwick, J. N., & Haleta, L. L. 2014). This gradual shift allowed students to “reduce reactivity by graduated exposure to speaking situations of greater potential stimulation” (Bodie, 2010, p. 87). Students were also encouraged to talk about their speech, ideas, and sources with both the teacher and their classmates which promoted repeated exposure therapy (Hunter, K. M., Westwick, J. N., & Haleta, L. L. 2014). Cognitive modification was incorporated through training students to “recognize negative attitudes about public speaking and replace them with positive speaking experiences and strengths-focused feedback (Hunter, K. M., Westwick, J. N., & Haleta, L. L. 2014).” So instead of focusing on negative self-statements such as “They are going to think I’m stupid”, they were encouraged to replace them with non-anxiety provoking coping statements such as “I’ve done my homework on my topic” (Fremouw, W. J., & Scott, M. D. 1979). Finally, students were exposed to skills training in order to expand their knowledge of different tools and skills involved with public speaking (Hunter, K. M., Westwick, J. N., & Haleta, L. L. 2014).

While skills training and repeated exposure are excellent methods which should be incorporated in standardized public speaking curriculums, extensive research has shown that having the right mindset is crucial to a student’s success in terms of communication and public speaking practices. This concept can be better understood by examining mindset theory. “Mindset theory posits the distinction between growth and fixed mindset changes how an individual reacts to events, particularly those related to achievement. (Nordin, K., &

Broeckelman-Post, M. A. 2019). Mindset theory can be broken down into two theories, entity and incremental (Dweck, C. S., Chiu, C., & Hong, Y. 1995). Entity theory focuses on the belief that things like morality and intelligence are fixed traits that cannot be changed while incremental theory believes that these things are not permanent and can be changed/developed (Dweck, C. S., Chiu, C., & Hong, Y. 1995). In order to determine the correlation between mindset and success in the classroom a study was conducted involving students from a diverse, large university who were enrolled in an introductory level public speaking course (Nordin, K., & Broeckelman-Post, M. A. 2019). The students who had taken this introductory course were asked to complete a post-course survey at the end of the semester (Nordin, K., & Broeckelman-Post, M. A. 2019). This survey measured: public speaking performance using the scores from three speeches they had given during the course, communication mindset using the Communication Mindset Scale (Dweck, C. S. 2000), public speaking anxiety (PSA) using the scores from the Personal Report of Public Speaking Anxiety (McCroskey, 1970), Interpersonal communication competence using the Interpersonal Communication Competence Scale (Rubin, R. B., & Martin, M. M. 1994), and student engagement using the student engagement scale (Reeve, 2013) (Nordin, K., & Broeckelman-Post, M. A. 2019). Researchers found that the “results indicated growth mindset was negatively correlated with public speaking anxiety, and positively correlated with public speaking performance, interpersonal communication competence, and student engagement (Nordin, K., & Broeckelman-Post, M. A. 2019)”. Therefore, students who identified having a growth mindset ultimately performed better in this course. By encouraging students to develop a growth mindset instead of a fixed mindset can not only increase their performance in the class but their overall enjoyment as well.

Understanding the process of public speaking and being able to implement the tools and techniques needed to communicate your message allows people to be more effective and successful communicators. It's important that students are made aware of their level of public speaking anxiety (PSA) and are given the proper tools and curriculum in order to diminish this fear. Using assessments such as the Personal Report of Public Speaking Anxiety (PRPSA)(McCroskey, 1970), students and educators are able to bring awareness to PSA and can then form a comforting learning environment by using these scores to craft a curriculum that is engaging and beneficial. By adjusting the current introductory public speaking curriculum to include components such as systematic desensitization, cognitive modification, and skills training give students a well-rounded foundation in order to build upon. Using these components, as well as incorporating activities and exercises that promote an open and positive mindset are the keys to eliminating PSA and ultimately promoting students' success.

With all of this being said, aside from adding the necessary changes to an introductory oral communication curriculum, I believe that it would benefit students to have a "database" containing a plethora of sources-mostly videos- that students and educators could use as education material. These videos would focus mostly on public speaking skills training that students could access in order to better understand certain components of oral communication. Some examples of these videos could be: the purpose of certain speeches, how to cite a source in your speech, how to prepare for a speech, etc. These videos could be accessed for free on the internet as an added tool for students to learn outside of the classroom. These added educational resources could be a valuable tool that could build students' knowledge and confidence relating to oral communication-specifically public speaking.

Resources

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