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A Qualitative Exploration of Oral Communication Apprehension

Marann Byrne, Barbara Flood & Dan Shanahan

Abstract

Prior research has identified communication apprehension, or fear of communicating, as a major factor which inhibits an individual's willingness to communicate and his/her capability to develop effective communication skills. While many prior studies have measured oral communication apprehension of students, there has been little qualitative exploration of the phenomenon. This study was conducted by interviewing first-year business and accounting students at a higher education institution in Ireland who were identified as encountering varying levels of oral communication apprehension. The experiences of the students in communicating in different contexts are analysed and the impact of factors such as fear of peer evaluation, prior communication experiences and preparation are considered.

Keywords

Communication apprehension, qualitative research approach, business and accounting students.

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Introduction

It is widely recognised that graduates entering the world of work require more than academic knowledge of their chosen discipline; they also need a diverse range of non-technical competencies and, in particular, they must be effective communicators (McDaniel and White, 1993; Cavanagh et al., 2006; Mitchell et al., 2010). The relationship between communication competence and job success has motivated many colleges and universities to introduce courses to enhance their students' skills (Du-Babcock, 2006; Ameen et al., 2010). In fact, many educators recognise that they must equip students with the communication skills desired by employers if their degree programmes are to be successful (Plutsky, 1996; Mitchell et al., 2010). However, despite these developments, the communication capability of graduates across a range of disciplines has continued to attract considerable adverse criticism (Graham et al., 2009). Indeed, many employers remain dissatisfied with the communication competence of new graduates (Cavanagh et al., 2006; Council for Industry and Higher Education, 2008; Gradireland, 2010 Hassall et al. 1999; Quible and Griffin, 2007;).

There is increasing recognition that students' failure to develop appropriate communication skills may not be due to the quality of relevant education and training programmes. Rather, an individual may experience a range of fears concerning oral and/or written communication tasks or situations (commonly referred to as 'communication apprehension' (CA)) which may inhibit the development of the requisite skills. Consequently, CA should be alleviated before focusing on the enhancement of communication skills. As a first step in this process, educators need to enhance their understanding of the concept and consequences of CA.

While there is quite a large body of research which has measured students' levels of CA, there has been little attention paid to exploring the phenomenon of CA using qualitative methods and through the lived experiences of students themselves. Thus, the aim of this paper is to address this research gap by qualitatively exploring the phenomenon of oral CA as experienced by business and accounting students. In so doing, the paper seeks to sensitise and enhance educators' awareness of the debilitating effects of high CA. This study focuses on oral CA, not because it is viewed as any more important than written CA, but simply because oral communication appears to prompt such fear among so many people and also because it crosses so many domains of an individual's life, from communicating on a one-to-one basis with friends or colleagues to communicating in a very public forum when making a presentation or a speech. It was considered most appropriate to focus on first-year students because it is important to understand the baseline of oral CA with which students commence their higher education study.

Oral Communication Apprehension (OCA)

The nature of OCA

The issue of student anxiety concerning communication was reported in the literature as far back as the early 1940s (see Gilkinson, 1942). McCroskey (1970, p.270) labelled this communication bound anxiety as "communication apprehension" and described it as "an individual's level of fear or anxiety associated with either real or anticipated communication with another person or persons" (McCroskey 1977, p.82). Each individual has a unique level of apprehension which results in a number of individual differences, such as the effectiveness

of, amount of, and desire for, communication (Richmond and McCroskey, 1998, p.26). While all aspects of the CA phenomenon are still not fully understood, there is now a considerable body of research on CA. Indeed, from 1977 to 1997, CA became the single most researched concept in the field of communication studies (Wrench et al., 2008). It is clear that a person may experience a different level of CA depending on whether he/she is communicating orally or in writing. OCA which is the focus of the current study, is concerned with a fear of speaking or talking to other people in different contexts, such as on a one-to-one basis, in groups, in meetings or public speaking.

Prior studies have shown that there are many negative consequences associated with high levels of OCA. When confronted with communication activities, individuals with high OCA report fear, tension and physical symptoms, such as increased heart rate and sweating (Beatty and Dobos, 1997, p.217). Many suffer in silence and are unaware that the complaint is so common. Indeed, Horwitz (2002, p.1) refers to this fear as “the hidden communication disorder because it is frequently not recognised, acknowledged or discussed”. In higher education, students suffering from high OCA often feel uncomfortable or unable to ask questions in class, they may skip classes or choose modules that exclude their feared type of communication, and they often achieve less than their aptitudes would justify (Bowers, 1986; O’Mara, et al. 1996).

Some students with high OCA may try to conceal their fear of communicating by over-communicating or talking all the time, but this is a rare and unusual response (Richmond and McCroskey, 1998, p.53). A much more common reaction is to remain quiet. Koulgl (1980) suggests that those with high OCA who remain quiet do so because of a feeling of inadequacy in handling communication situations. Some research has indicated that skills

training may not reduce the fear (Allen and Bourhis, 1996). Thus, educators, no matter how well meaning, need to be very careful when designing OCA interventions and should seek guidance from communication psychologists.

Measuring OCA

An individual's level of OCA is commonly measured by using self-reporting survey instruments. The most widely used instrument is the Personal Report of Communication Apprehension (PRCA-24) (McCroskey, 2006, p.40). The PRCA-24 measures the overall construct of OCA, as well as four sub-constructs, which relate to different communication contexts (speaking one-to-one, in small groups, in meetings, and in public) (McCroskey, 2006, p.42). McCroskey (1997a, p.90), using data drawn from over 100,000 subjects in the US, reports that the mean total score on the PRCA-24 was 65.60 with a standard deviation of 15.30. This mean and standard deviation are referred to by some researchers as a US national norm (Stanga and Ladd, 1990). McCroskey (1997b, p.209) classifies those who score more than 80, which is approximately one standard deviation above the mean or US national norm, as highly apprehensive. Those who score less than 50, which is approximately one standard deviation below the US national norm, are considered to have low apprehension levels.

Studies measuring the levels of OCA experienced by business and accounting students have been conducted in many countries (e.g. US - Stanga and Ladd, 1990, Smith and Nelson, 1994, Fordham and Gabbin, 1996; UK and Spain – Hassall et al., 2000, Arquero et al., 2007; Canada – Aly and Islam, 2003; New Zealand – Gardner et al., 2005; Ireland – Warnock and Curtis, 1997, Byrne et al., 2009). Some consistent evidence has emerged from these studies, for example, as with students in other disciplines, business and accounting students have least

anxiety concerning communicating orally on a one-to-one basis and most fear concerning public speaking. Several researchers have also explored variations in the levels of OCA experienced by students within different business specialisms (accounting, marketing, management, etc). In the US, Simons et al. (1995) found that accounting majors had higher OCA scores than other business majors and similar findings have been reported in the UK and Spain (Hassall et al., 2000; Arquero et al., 2007). In contrast, in a recent Irish study (Byrne et al., 2009) it was found that there were no significant differences between the OCA scores of accounting students and other business students and Borzi and Mills (2001) found that accounting majors at two US universities had significantly lower levels of OCA than non-accounting majors.

It is somewhat surprising that no prior research with business and accounting students has explored the phenomenon of OCA using qualitative methods. Indeed, there is an absence of qualitative research of the topic with students in all disciplines. It would seem that, as educators struggle to cope with students experiencing high OCA, there would be considerable merit in analysing students' descriptions of their anxieties. This would enable educators to develop a deeper more holistic understanding of the OCA phenomenon, which may encourage them to reflect on various dimensions of their teaching and assessment practices.

Research Approach and Data Collection

The objective of the study is to qualitatively explore the phenomenon of OCA experienced by business and accounting students. To achieve this objective, interviews were conducted to develop an understanding of “the world from the subjects’ points of view, to unfold the

meaning of peoples' experiences" (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009, p.1). Before the first interview took place, an interview guide was prepared which, drawing from the literature, indicated the topics to be covered in the interview (see Appendix A)¹. More specifically, the emphasis in the literature on variation in CA levels in different contexts or situations shaped the construction of the interview guide, such that it sought to explore interviewees' experiences in the context of communicating on a one-to-one basis, in groups, in meetings and when public speaking. One of the principal benefits of the semi-structured interview approach is that it offers flexibility and it is not necessary to stick rigidly to the guide. It has been found that this interview approach can yield rich and unexpected answers from participants (Kvale, 2007, p.57).

The interview participants were selected from a cohort of 285 first-year business and accounting students at a higher education institution in Ireland², who earlier in the academic year had completed the PRCA-24 (Byrne et al., 2009). Given the intention to gain rich insights and explore similarities and differences, the cohort was stratified by level of apprehension and students were selected for interview who had different levels of OCA. Thus, the interview sample includes students with high, average and low OCA. If a selected student was unable to attend, another student with a similar OCA score was substituted. Each interviewee was given a pseudonym to protect his/her anonymity. Seventeen students were selected to participate in the qualitative study. The details of the students interviewed and their OCA levels are outlined in Table 1³.

¹ Approval for the conduct of the study was granted by the appropriate body within the institution.

² The study was conducted in Ireland because it is where the researchers are based and where they can arrange data collection. While the study is exploratory in nature and is not seeking generalisable findings per se, the researchers contend that there is nothing particularly unique in terms of the setting of this study (type of degree programmes, institution or wider higher education context). In other words, it is plausible that the findings reported in this study may have resonance with students in other settings. For further information on the educational system in Ireland, see White (2001) and Byrne and Flood (2003).

³ In selecting the sample for this exploratory, qualitative study the principal concern was to seek the participation of students who experienced various levels of OCA. Thus, the sample was not chosen to be

Table 1. Interview participants grouped by OCA category

| Apprehension category | OCA score | Student |
|------------------------------|------------------|----------------|
| Low: OCA < 50 | 24 | Paul |
| | 29 | Eileen |
| | 35 | John |
| | 40 | Niall |
| | 42 | Ruth |
| | 43 | Tom |
| Average: OCA 50-80 | 51 | Kate |
| | 51 | Ken |
| | 60 | Lisa |
| | 63 | David |
| | 67 | Anna |
| | 70 | Emma |
| | 75 | Colin |
| 80 | Orla | |
| High: OCA > 80 | 87 | Cliona |
| | 100 | Mary |
| | 106 | Daniel |

The interviews took place during the second semester of the students' first-year of study. With the permission of the interviewees, each interview was recorded and all of the interviews were conducted by the same member of the research team. At the beginning of each interview the objective of the study was explained, the confidential nature of it was emphasised, and the anonymity of the interviewee was guaranteed. It was stressed that there was no compulsion to answer any question and that the interviewee could terminate the interview at any time if he/she so desired. The initial part of each interview was devoted to

representative of the population in the quantitative study: full details of the population in the quantitative study are provided in Byrne et al. (2009).

discussing the interviewee's family background, schooling, friends, and hobbies. When sufficient rapport had been built up and the interviewee appeared sufficiently relaxed, the conversation then turned to the interviewee's experience and perception of OCA. At the end of each interview, the interviewee was given an opportunity to review all that had been said and to comment if they so wished. Each interview took 45 minutes approximately and was subsequently transcribed. The data was then analysed to uncover common themes. The outcomes of the 17 interviews are 17 stories, with many commonalities but also with some unique aspects which provide rich and interesting narratives.

Findings

1. Communicating in different contexts

The approach adopted to the presentation of the findings in this section is to explore the views of the interviewees in each of the four sub-contexts by level of apprehension, beginning with those with low overall OCA and progressing to those with high OCA scores. Where relevant, the perceptions of the interviewees concerning the similarities or differences between communicating with a friend compared to a stranger are examined.

Communicating one-to-one. All the students interviewed, except one, feel comfortable when conversing in one-to-one situations with friends. They are relaxed and do not feel threatened or apprehensive. This was expected in the light of prior research which indicated that overall OCA scores may be poor predictors of anxiety in situations where participants

were likely to know one another (Parks, 1980). Nevertheless, one interviewee, Cliona, who has high OCA, reveals that she is very anxious even when communicating with friends:

I am afraid of people. I am afraid of communicating.

This was unexpected and it will be evident later in the analysis that Cliona is very nervous, apprehensive and fearful communicating in all four contexts. Her responses are extreme as she describes how her apprehension affects her:

Absolute butterflies. I can feel blushing, heat rising through my body and I am sweating. I find it very hard to express myself. Because I have millions of thoughts, there's so much going on that I can't get everything out at once.

In terms of communicating with a stranger, the majority of those with low or average apprehension are calm and assured. Ruth embodies this relaxed attitude, when she says:

I'll go up and I'll talk to anyone.

Emma displays the openness of some of those with average apprehension when she describes how she behaves with a new acquaintance:

If there was someone I had to get to know I would just sit down and tell them about my life and then ask them questions. I would have no problems.

All three students with high OCA are fearful of talking to a stranger. This fear may cause them to remain silent, as Daniel explains:

It depends on who you are talking to. If people are not friendly, I tend to be an awful lot quieter. If someone did not make it informal and comfortable I'd probably not be able to talk whatsoever. It probably would be a disaster

Their difficulty in talking to strangers is also well expressed by Mary, who finds it hard to open up to others:

I am not one for starting to talk to people straight away. I am very cautious of people.

Cliona feels anxious talking with strangers and, consequently, babbles, which has been described in the prior literature as "over-communication" (Richmond and McCroskey, 1998, p.53).

Communicating in groups. As in the one-to-one context, the majority of the interviewees experience little difficulty in taking part in group discussions with friends or when they have a friend in the group. Most feel comfortable with people they know and as a result express themselves freely, a view best expressed by Niall:

It would be different if there were guys in the group that you did not know well. You would be wary of what you were saying. If I knew everyone I'd just say it anyway.

Even some of the students with high OCA have little difficulty communicating among a group of friends, as Daniel explains:

If I'm in a group that I am familiar with, I'll tell them exactly what I think.

However, a small number of interviewees are not always comfortable in a group of friends.

Paul (low OCA) holds the opposite view to Niall, as he explains:

I'd be a lot more careful in a group where I knew everybody, because I wouldn't want to offend anyone or rub them up the wrong way.

Emma (average OCA) prefers to work in a group with strangers rather than friends, as she explains:

If they don't know me, they don't know my background, they don't know anything about me.

When communicating in a group with strangers most students with low OCA are relaxed and are unaffected by the attitude of others in the group. Negative reactions from others in a group do not overly affect those with low OCA, as Tom outlines,

I think you are conscious of what the others are thinking when you are going to say something at first. But then as you slowly get your word in or start talking and go through the group I think that people start to relax more with each other.

In examining the perspectives of the students with average OCA, many reflect much of the same confidence as those with low OCA in communicating with strangers. Anna enjoys it, as she reflects:

I like going into group discussions. You get to hear what other people think.

In contrast, students with high OCA are uncomfortable participating in groups with strangers. They do not enjoy it, have a negative attitude towards it and sometimes cannot complete the communication task. They describe their fears in varying ways. Mary confesses:

You don't really know how to react around people that you don't know or what you can say without insulting them.

Both Cliona and Daniel are so intimidated when working with strangers that they find it very difficult to take part in group discussions and consequently may remain silent. Cliona says:

[...] you wouldn't have me opening my mouth

and Daniel reports:

[...] if I didn't know them at all, I probably wouldn't speak to them unless I was spoken to.

Often those with high OCA feel isolated, uncomfortable, and are fearful of how others will respond to them. Mary explains:

If it's a lot of people in the group and you don't know anybody you feel intimidated and you don't really want to say anything.

Daniel expresses a more extreme view when he describes how he would react if a member in a group laughed at him:

Cry! Well I'd probably not cry, I'd probably just shrink up into the back of the chair and that would be it. That would be me finished in that group and I wouldn't be in any group the next time. There wouldn't be any group that would want me.

Communicating at meetings. Twelve of the 17 interviewees had experience of attending meetings in a work setting or in connection with group projects in school. However, the others had not attended any formal meetings and the feelings they express arise from the thought of attending meetings rather than actual attendance.

The majority of those with low OCA feel comfortable at the prospect of taking part in meetings. The students with average levels of OCA are or think they would be comfortable attending meetings. A number, including Kate, Lisa and Anna, feel they would suffer a degree of initial anxiety before a meeting, as Kate states:

If it was something a bit formal, I'd probably be a bit nervous going into it, but once you get started you just keep going and it's grand.

Both Colin and Orla express higher levels of concern, particularly about speaking in front of people they don't know, as Orla explains:

If I had to talk in front of everyone, like formally talk in front of everyone, I would get very nervous.

As might be anticipated, the students with high OCA feel uncomfortable taking part in meetings. Mary had no previous experience of attending meetings but is fearful of the prospect. Both Cliona and Daniel have attended meetings in a job setting and they both get extremely nervous in this context. Cliona feels a sense of panic, which she describes:

I am dreading my turn to speak, dreading it. When it comes to my area I say 'nothing to report' even if I have something to report.

Daniel also reflects this extreme tension and even though he is proficient at his work, he still feels very anxious, as he explains:

I'd always feel very nervous. I'd be sitting back trying to look somewhat confident but inside I'd be shaking really. I was doing a brilliant job and everyone was constantly saying that I was doing a brilliant job. So confidence was not an issue whatsoever in my job but in meetings that just all disappeared. I'd know exactly what everybody was talking about. But when somebody would ask me a question, I would know the answer in my

head, I'd have a brilliant answer, but I would not be able to say it. I'd just make a mess of it. I'd just come out with jumbled words. I wouldn't be able to express myself especially if I had to stand up in front of everyone; it just doesn't work.

Public speaking. All of the interviewees share the experience of increased anxiety regarding public speaking compared to other communication contexts. For those with low overall OCA, the anxiety is manifested by nervousness beforehand and with some physical symptoms such as butterflies in the stomach. However, they expect to be able to complete the task and so any nervousness subsides when they commence the speech or presentation and they quickly begin to relax, as Paul describes:

I get a little bit nervous. I move my hands and my body a lot. Once I'm up there and once I've said the first line, it's grand.

These sentiments are echoed by Eileen when she explains:

A few minutes beforehand my palms would get sweaty and all, but nothing like where I couldn't go up. I've no problem doing it. It's obviously just the butterflies a few minutes before.

Their views are supported by prior research which indicates that the increased apprehension in this context may be evidenced by a greater physiological arousal (perspiration, body and limb movement) in most people (Beatty and Dobos, 1997). However, where they feel they can meet the audience's expectations, the apprehension decreases (Heuett et al., 2003).

Four of the six students with low OCA, (Paul, Eileen, Ruth and Tom) consider themselves good at public speaking. The other two, John and Niall, consider that they are weak at it but they don't dwell on poor experiences. For example, Niall is not upset if he has done a bad presentation, as he explains:

I'd just regret it and say I should have done it better. I should have got my facts together if I didn't do it well. If it went well you'd just feel very good about yourself afterwards. If it went badly there is nothing you can do. You have to live with it.

Some (David, Anna and Lisa) of the students with average levels of OCA express similar feelings to the low OCA group; they get nervous at the start but then relax after they start the presentation, as David admits:

You'd be nervous starting off, but as you get into it you flow.

However, four students (Ken, Colin, Orla, Emma) with average OCA report much higher levels of anxiety with regard to the public speaking context. Orla is "terrified" every time she thinks about standing up in front of a group. She finds that she is extremely nervous in advance of giving a speech and finds it difficult to concentrate during the speech. And finally, Emma finds presenting in front of people she knows debilitating, and she outlines the torment she experiences when doing a presentation:

I would be very nervous beforehand and my hands would be sweaty. But when I'm up I don't feel anything. It's just like I am not doing it, I don't feel I am actually doing it. My knees are shaking and I would have butterflies. I wouldn't be in my body. It's just my body would be doing it itself but it's like I would not be in my body.

Emma's anxiety reflects the responses of two of the students with high OCA who both disclose how severely speaking in public affects them. Cliona feels that she talks

absolute gibberish. I'd forget what I am saying and I might not be able to tell you one thing I said as soon as I sit down. It will be completely blanked out.

Daniel painfully describes a recent experience of giving a presentation:

I'd have just liked the ground to open and swallow me up. Pressure all over ... every point of my body is just shaking and it feels horrible, especially in my stomach to the point of almost feeling like I am going to get sick. I get really cold and even afterwards my hands would be shaking and I am just going crazy. Even though I prepared well with slides and additional notes I would not be able to elaborate on them at all. Once you get up there it all disappears, you just can't talk and it's just all jumbled up and it's a disaster.

It is clear that all the interviewees report greater apprehension concerning public speaking than in relation to the other three oral communication contexts. Nearly all of the students feel

nervous before making a speech or presentation. However, those with low OCA and some with average OCA cope with the pressure and feel they perform effectively. In contrast, the remaining students find making a presentation very difficult and are not able to relax or perform effectively. They do not enjoy it, they find the experience very stressful and would avoid it if possible. Their physiological and emotional upset is much greater than experienced by the other students.

2. Themes

Having presented the experiences of students across the four communication settings, the analysis in this sub-section seeks to identify themes which either suggest potential sources of students' apprehension and/or activities that aid or impede the reduction of OCA levels. The identified themes are: *fear of peer evaluation, prior communication experiences and preparation.*

Fear of peer evaluation. An overarching theme emerging from the data is the extent to which fear of peer evaluation drives OCA. Prior studies indicate that this fear can lead to increased anxiety and apprehension, especially for those with high OCA. Many individuals fear that they will be perceived as unsatisfactory and will be rejected by their peers (Richmond and McCroskey, 1998; Gardner et al., 2005). In this study, peer evaluation is a factor for the majority of the interviewees, particularly as they move into the more public aspects of communicating in groups, at meetings and when engaged in public speaking activities. Not surprisingly, students who can acknowledge and deal with peer evaluation arising from communication situations, typically report low or average OCA. In contrast, when students have intense fear of peer evaluation, higher OCA scores are reported.

Ultimately, the fear that they will be negatively perceived or judged by others dominates the thinking of the highly apprehensive students to such an extent that their ability to complete communication tasks satisfactorily is inhibited.

It seems that the reason why a small number of students have little apprehension concerning others' perceptions is because they consider that those perceptions are somewhat beyond their control or influence. For example, peers may just not like them due to personality issues, as Ruth comments:

I know I'm not everyone's cup of tea but you learn to deal with these things.

Alternatively, as illustrated by Lisa, the student can perceive the communication task as being about the conveyance of an objective message and so if he/she receives a negative reaction, they attribute it to the message rather than taking it personally:

If somebody doesn't like what I have to say, that's their problem.

However, many students feel they have some influence over other people's perceptions by virtue of what they say during the communication activity and/or how they say it. For example, Tom (low OCA), copes with fear of peer evaluation by

[...] not thinking as much about what others are thinking of you, but instead thinking about the point you are making.

Tom seems to be positive in his attitude; he perceives that if he concentrates on the message and gets that right, there is little scope for others to have negative perceptions of him. However, the comments of many of those who report average OCA seem more negative in orientation:

You are always afraid you'll be wrong. I'd probably be worried that people thought that I got it wrong and that I made a fool out of myself.
(Kate)

It's the reaction that you get afraid of. People are waiting for you to do things wrong. They notice when you do things wrong. (Orla)

Interestingly, both of the above quotes also indicate that the fear is not only that peers might hold negative perceptions of the student but that those negative perceptions might be made public and visible in some way (making a 'fool' of oneself and a fear of the 'reaction'). Thus, the fear of peer evaluation is closely followed by a fear of humiliation.

Not surprisingly, fear of peer evaluation is particularly prevalent among the students with high OCA. They feel they are unable to leave a good impression on others and so they can only envisage negative responses. What is particularly noticeable among the narratives of these students is their sense of inevitability and powerlessness regarding communication activities and the perceptions that their peers might hold, as Mary outlines:

It is your work. People are going to start to criticise you and you have to sit there and take it. You really can't get up and leave.

She is also highly fearful that their negative perceptions will be shared with others, as she discloses:

if they think badly of you they are going to tell other people even if you haven't met the other people.

Cliona has similar fears about public exposure:

Everyone is afraid when speaking in public that people are going to laugh at them and that people will judge them.

Daniel, who finds it extremely difficult to converse with people he does not know, outlines that fear of peer evaluation is one of the main sources of his OCA: he hates being the focus of attention and is terrified that he will look "completely stupid" and that people will laugh at him. When asked to provide examples of when this occurred, Daniel indicates that he is so

scared of that scenario that he doesn't allow it to happen. Instead, he just "shrinks up" and doesn't communicate. The invasiveness and intensity of the fear of peer evaluation for some students indicates that the issue may be intertwined with identity construction issues. However, this broader issue of identity was not pursued in the interviews, though it clearly provides opportunities for future research.

The qualitative analysis suggests that the higher a person's total OCA score the more negative s/he views peer evaluation. When positive feedback is expected, or at a minimum when negative feedback is not anticipated, the level of apprehension is relatively low. However, where a negative expectation of peer evaluation arises, the intensity of the apprehension is much greater. What the analysis has further demonstrated is that individuals with higher levels of OCA, not only fear that peers will have negative perceptions following a communication situation, but are afraid that that their peers will display and share their negative perceptions in some public forum which will lead to a feeling of humiliation.

Prior experiences of communicating with new friends. The analysis of interviewees' narratives reveals that communicating with strangers compared to interacting with friends, in any of the four contexts, leads to heightened anxiety. The 'stranger' effect is short-lived for some and so apprehension levels reduce quickly, with such students reporting low levels of OCA. Ultimately, those with low OCA have a very positive attitude and appear to see strangers as potential new friends. In contrast, for other students, strangers are any individuals with whom they do not have strong personal relationships. For example, those with high OCA view many classmates as strangers and have real fears of communicating in groups with those classmates.

Interviewees' past experiences of being in unfamiliar groups and making new friends seems to influence their comfort in communicating with 'strangers'. A number of them referred to prior experiences relating to school life which had a significant effect, in different ways, on their sense of self and their levels of CA. For example, the transfer from primary to secondary school had a negative effect on Tom (low OCA) as he outlines:

I went to a very small primary school and I think the big environment in secondary school scared me a little bit. Up to third year I would just do my work and would not really talk to people as much.

However, Tom's participation in transition year (explained below) transformed him. In contrast, Daniel (high OCA) remembers feeling good about communicating until he was separated from his primary school friends and progressed to secondary school among a new peer group. He admits:

That was a bit of a disaster. I was very upset with being put in with a lot of people I didn't really know.

When reflecting on prior occasions of meeting strangers/making new friends, many interviewees refer to their transition year (year between junior and senior cycle in the Irish second level system; typically students are age 15 or 16 years). Indeed, ten of the interviewees completed transition year. Typically, in transition year, students are involved in different activities and so get to know more students than their traditional class group. Most found this a very worthwhile experience which gave them extra confidence in meeting and conversing with others and in making speeches and doing presentations. Many of those now reporting low or average OCA found it a very positive experience. The positive results of transition year which allowed the students more time to communicate with their peers and to develop new friendships reinforces the findings of prior literature regarding the importance of friendships in developing an understanding of communication (Evangelou et al., 2009). Only

one student with high OCA completed transition year (Mary) and she claims that it was no help to her in reducing her communication fears. Daniel and Cliona (both high OCA) cannot think of any prior occasion where they had a positive experience of settling into a new group, which helps to explain their high levels of apprehension in dealing with strangers in any communication context.

Preparation. Another theme emerging from the OCA analysis is the effect of preparation on a student's level of apprehension when attending meetings or when facing a public speaking situation. Preparation captures students' sentiment about the need to feel comfortable with regard to the subject matter. This comfort can entail confidence regarding understanding of a topic in an educational setting or a having a full grasp of facts or events in a workplace situation. There seems to be recognition among the interviewees that gaining comfort with subject matter requires time and effort but that the benefit of the preparation is reduced apprehension regarding the meeting or presentation. Niall's view is echoed by a number of students:

I have to know about what I am doing, I wouldn't be able to just get up there and talk on a topic, like. If you were confident you knew everything [...] you'd be grand.

Even Mary who has high OCA feels that preparation can enable her to perform better as she comments:

Put me on the spot and put me in front of a crowd of people and give me a random topic and tell me to talk about it, I wouldn't be able to do it. But if I have prepared what I am going to talk about I wouldn't have as much bother doing it then.

The students who acknowledge a role for preparation often see it as a way of reducing the possibility of 'looking stupid' (John).

A number of students associate preparation with practice or gaining experience of communicating in more public fora (meetings, public speaking/presentations). Some have had exposure to some communication skills training (at school or via clubs and societies, etc) but often they consider that such sessions occurred in an artificial environment and did not replicate the reality of meetings or public speaking. This is an interesting insight, as communication skills training which emphasises preparation and practice is often, perhaps naively, proposed as a remedy to OCA. Indeed, as mentioned in the literature review, it is often the only remedy offered by higher education institutions. However, prior studies have found that skills training may not provide any aid to those suffering with high OCA (Allen and Bourhis, 1996) and indeed it may exacerbate their apprehension levels. Two of the students with high OCA report that preparation and practice are of no benefit to them, as their anxiety persists regardless of their preparations.

Limitations of the Study and Directions for Future Research

This study was limited to an exploration of the experiences of 17 students at one higher education institution in Ireland. Thus, the findings are grounded in that particular setting. It is possible that a larger sample of students across different institutions may have provided additional and different insights into the phenomenon of OCA. In addition, the study focused on first-year students at a point in time; it did not attempt to examine changes in OCA experience or to examine the impact of any particular communication activities or courses. It is very possible that as the students mature they will naturally experience changes in their levels of OCA, and that particular activities may also influence their levels of anxiety (these changes may be positive or negative). It must also be acknowledged that the study did not delve deeply into the origins of OCA for individual students. Furthermore, it did not examine

the relationship of OCA with their actual communication skills. Thus, it was not possible to determine whether students' OCA levels would be classified as either 'rational' or 'non-rational' as described by McCroskey (1984).

In terms of perspective, this study has only examined OCA from the viewpoint of the student. There are other perspectives which may provide further insights into the phenomenon. For example, it is plausible that examining the way lecturers and peers view those struggling with high OCA may provide useful feedback to such students and it may influence the collaborative design of appropriate interventions.

There are many potential avenues for future research; some are aimed at addressing the limitations of the current study whereas others seek to enhance further our understanding of OCA which may influence educators' teaching practice in the future.

1. Research could be conducted with business and accounting students from other higher education institutions in Ireland and beyond to assess the robustness and generalisability of the current findings.
2. Engaging in comparative research with students from outside Ireland could help identify issues of shared concern and possible interventions.
3. There is an obvious need to examine the relationship between OCA and performance in communication tasks, and with overall academic achievement.
4. Research which explores the link between OCA and other background variables (e.g., culture, personality, socio economic status) could reveal further insights into the antecedents of OCA. Given the lack of qualitative research into OCA there is considerable scope to utilise this approach to examine issues such as the causes and consequences of OCA from the student's perspective.

5. Finally, the findings of this study indicate that research is needed to determine which pedagogical strategies are best suited to reducing high levels of OCA.

Conclusions

In summary, this paper qualitatively explored first-year, business and accounting students' experiences of OCA. The findings clearly demonstrated that while there is considerable variation in the apprehension experienced by different students, apprehension levels typically increase for all students in the more public communication settings. The analysis also illustrated that OCA is influenced by perceptions of peer evaluation, prior experiences of communicating with new people and preparation activities.

In terms of assessing the contribution of this study, the value in documenting and communicating the range of student's experiences of OCA cannot be underestimated. So many prior studies on OCA have been solely quantitative in orientation and the lived experiences of CA have been absent. It is only by reading students' own words that the reality of the apprehension is effectively conveyed. In particular, the study contributes to sensitising educators to the very dramatic, emotional and ultimately debilitating effect of high OCA. Given the range of student experiences and the depth of fear of those with high OCA, it is clear that a great deal of care and reflection is required if educators are to appropriately adapt their teaching practice and design effective interventions. Indeed, whether accounting and business educators can design such interventions without the direct support and assistance of specialist communication psychologists is questionable. Inappropriate interventions could exacerbate students' level of anxiety.

The study illustrates that highly apprehensive students are willing to discuss their communication fears, but may only do so when in a one-to-one confidential, supportive environment. This indicates that support for those with high OCA may need to happen at the individual level. Clearly, such a proposal will demand significant resources which will be difficult to access in the current stringent financial environment being experienced in higher education. In the short term, and at a minimum, business and accounting educators could measure the levels of OCA of their students so they are aware of the variation in OCA levels among their class group. Further, we suggest that educators might reflect on their pedagogy, the way in which they interact with students and how they encourage students to engage with each other. Creating a non-threatening, supportive classroom environment may prevent classroom activities heightening OCA.

Notes

¹Approval for the conduct of the study was granted by the appropriate body within the institution.

²The study was conducted in Ireland because it is where the researchers are based and where they can arrange data collection. While the study is exploratory in nature and is not seeking generalisable findings per se, the researchers contend that there is nothing particularly unique in terms of the setting of this study (i.e. type of degree programme, institution, or wider higher education context). In other words, it is plausible that the findings reported in this study may have resonance with students in other settings. For further information on the educational system in Ireland, see White (2000) and Byrne and Flood (2003).

³In selecting the sample for this exploratory, qualitative study, the principal concern was to seek the participation of students who experienced various levels of OCA. Thus, the sample was not chosen to be representative of the population in the quantitative study. Full details of the population in the quantitative study are provided in Byrne, Flood and Shanahan (2009).

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Appendix A: Interview guide

Introduction.

Introduction of the interviewer; explanation of the purpose of the interview; reiteration of the voluntary nature of student's participation – he/she may refuse to discuss any item raised and may conclude the interview at any stage; reassurance of confidentiality etc.

Outline of topics:

1. Background (to relax the interviewee and to build rapport with the interviewer):

- Where were you born and where did you grow up?
- Tell me a little about your family, siblings etc?
- Where did you go to school? Did you enjoy your school experience? Had you many friends at school? Do you still keep in touch with school friends etc?
- How did you feel about the transition from primary school to secondary school?
- What has the transition from school to higher education been like? Course of study, making friends, social and extracurricular activities, living away from home etc
- What sort of hobbies and interests do you have?

The interview then explores interviewee's attitudes to communicating in each of the four oral contexts.

2. One-to-one communication

- Tell me how comfortable you feel talking to a friend on a one-to-one basis?
- How does this compare with talking to a stranger?
- Have you ever found it difficult to talk to a stranger? Can you give an example? How did you overcome any such difficulties?
- If communication is difficult, what kinds of feelings are evoked? Can you describe a troublesome situation?
- Have you always felt comfortable/uncomfortable in such a situation?
- What might cause any apprehension?

3. Communicating in Groups

- Tell me how you feel talking with a group of friends?
- How does this compare with talking within a group, some or all of who you haven't met previously?
- Have you ever found it difficult to talk in groups? Can you describe a particular example? How did you overcome any such difficulties?
- If you find communication difficult in a group, what kinds of feelings are evoked?
- Have you always felt comfortable/uncomfortable in such a situation?
- What might cause any apprehension?

4. Communicating at Meetings

- Have you any experience of attending meetings – formal or informal? Can you give some examples?
- Have you participated or contributed at a meeting?
- Was your participation voluntary, self-initiated or required?
- How do you feel if you have to participate?

- Can you give an example of a meeting at which you felt you participated effectively?
- Can you describe a meeting at which you felt your participation/contribution was poor?
- What influences your comfort/confidence to participate when at a meeting?
- What contributes to your apprehension regarding meetings?

5. Public speaking

- Can you describe some examples of when you have had to speak in public?
- Was your involvement voluntary or required?
- How did you feel in advance?
- Did you prepare or think about the activity in advance?
- During your speech/presentation, were you conscious of the audience, what role did the audience play? What were you thinking and feeling?
- Describe how effective you think you communicated? How did you feel afterwards?
- What contributes/causes your apprehension regarding public speaking?

6. Communication skills

- Have you ever attended a course or class focused on developing communication skills?
- Can you describe the course/class?
- Did you enjoy your involvement in the course/class?
- Did you benefit from your involvement?
- Did the course/class affect your thinking or feelings regarding various communication activities?

7. Conclusion

The interview concludes with an offer to the interviewee to contribute any further relevant details which may contribute to the study. Often interesting issues and discussions emerge at this point.

Finally, the interviewer thanks the interviewee and concludes the interview.