



2013-6

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Recommended Citation

Shanahan, Dan (2013) "High Oral Communication Apprehensives: How Can Students be Helped to Reduce Their Fear of Public Speaking?," *Irish Journal of Academic Practice*: Vol. 2: Iss. 1, Article 9.

doi:10.21427/D72F09

Available at: <https://arrow.dit.ie/ijap/vol2/iss1/9>



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High Oral Communication Apprehensives – how can students be helped to reduce their fear of public speaking?

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Abstract

The literature has identified oral communication as a skill that employers desire of their workforce. Even though accounting and business education programmes place considerable emphasis on the advancement of communication competencies among students, not all students appear to benefit from communication skills development. This may arise from of a fear of communicating with others, commonly known as oral communication apprehension, a factor which inhibits an individual's willingness to communicate in one or a number of contexts - one to one conversations, communicating in groups, at meetings and making a presentation in public – and which may inhibit development of effective communication skills.

Prior studies have measured oral communication apprehension of students in different disciplines, and there has been some qualitative exploration of the phenomenon. This paper reports on study conducted in the School of Accounting and Finance, DIT. Levels of apprehension were measured for 368 students. The views of a number of students were received and analysed and compared to their oral communication apprehension scores. Some students who indicated that they found presenting extremely difficult were identified, and their views are reported. Their perspectives and fears demonstrate 'the pain' that many suffer when called on to present. The study

concludes with a recommendation on a possible oral communications approach which could be adopted to help students to overcome fear of presenting in public.

Keywords: Oral Communication Apprehension, PRCA-24, Communication Skills

Introduction

Irish employers, like those elsewhere in the world, demand that business and accounting graduates possess effective oral and written communication skills. It is now recognised that communication skills are among the most important competencies for graduates to possess upon their entry to careers in accounting (e.g. Albrecht & Sack, 2000; Borzi & Mills, 2001; and IFAC, 2003). It is clear that the business world demands effective oral and written communication, but many new business graduates (whether generalists or accounting or other specialists) entering the workplace are deficient in the communication skills deemed essential for business; this is the case despite having experienced business communication courses when in higher education. However, notwithstanding the considerable efforts made by higher education institutions over the past 20 years to prioritise the development of communication competence (Russ, 2009), many students do not develop the appropriate skills (Gradireland, 2012). There is increasing awareness that an individual may experience a range of fears concerning communication tasks or situations which may inhibit the development of the requisite communication skills. These fears or anxieties are commonly referred to as ‘oral communication apprehension’ (OCA). This study explores the phenomenon of OCA among business and accounting students within higher education in Ireland.

The aims of the study are twofold: to measure the levels of OCA among business and accounting students at a higher education institution in Ireland, and to qualitatively explore the views of a small group of students on the process of communicating. The quantitative component of the study focuses on all the students, both undergraduate and postgraduate, in the School of Accounting and Finance, Dublin Institute of Technology. The qualitative element concentrates on accounting students given the explicit emphasis

placed on communication competence by the accounting profession (more so than other business disciplines). It is hoped that this study will aid the understanding of the phenomenon of OCA among business and accounting educators in Ireland, and may direct attention to some essential interventions which can be designed to alleviate students' anxieties and fears and enable them to develop as effective communicators ready for the demands of the workplace.

Why OCA Exists

Suffering from high levels of OCA is not uncommon. In fact, up to 20% of the student population experience high levels of fear of oral communication (McCroskey, 1977a). McCroskey (1977b, p.82) describes OCA as 'an individual's level of fear or anxiety associated with either real or anticipated communication with another person or persons'. Each individual has a unique level of apprehension concerning real or anticipated communication which results in a number of individual differences such as effectiveness of, amount of, and desire for, communication (Richmond & McCroskey, 1998, p.26).

When confronted with communication activities, individuals who demonstrate high levels of anxiety towards oral communication report fear, tension, or physical symptoms (such as increased heart rate and sweating) (Beatty & Dobos, 1997, p.217). Many suffer like this in silence, and they are not aware 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'.

Researchers acknowledge that an individual's environment (nurture) will impact on OCA, but they consider that the genetic dimension (nature) is also significant. Beatty *et al.* (1998) consider that the relationship may be 80/20 in favour of genetics whereas some social learning theorists give more weight to the environment and would put the relationship at 40/60 or 50/50 (Carey & DiLalla, 1994; Condit, 2000; Condit, 2000a). Eysenck (1997, p.287) contends that nature and nurture are two sides of the same coin, they cannot be treated separately, and their effects and interactions must always be studied jointly. Carey & DiLalla (1994, p.32) echo this view and suggest that 'the question is no longer whether nature or nurture shapes human development but rather how these complex influences act together to form specific outcomes'.

How to Diminish OCA

There are two basic approaches to reducing OCA, namely, behavioural interventions and pedagogical interventions (Simons *et al.*, 1995). Behavioural approaches work on an individual's physiological and/or psychological state, that is, on his/her attitude to communicating and the underlying fear associated with the apprehension. Behavioural interventions include systematic desensitisation, cognitive modification and visualisation. Systematic desensitisation involves relaxation exercises and is associated with lower levels of both state and trait OCA. This form of treatment trains a person to perceive public speaking as 'non-threatening' rather than 'threatening' and should reduce the fear associated with public speaking (Ayres *et al.*, 2000, p.24). Cognitive modification focuses on the beliefs of the speaker. It attempts to alter the way a person views the communication task and decrease any perceptions of threat of punishment (Allen *et al.*, 1989). Visualisation allows the speaker to imagine a successful completion of a communication assignment.

Pedagogical approaches differ from the behavioural approach in that they focus more directly on the communication tasks and seek to reduce the apprehension felt by concentrating on the communication competence required to communicate effectively. The principal pedagogical interventions include skills training and actual public speaking. Thus, in the treatment of OCA it must be acknowledged that OCA and communication skills are two distinct dimensions of the communication process. There may be students who lack the skills and therefore avoid communication, or handle themselves poorly when they are communicating. There are others who undoubtedly have good skills, but certain situations generate anxiety for them. Others have both high OCA and poor skills (Baldwin *et al.*, 1983). Interestingly, in a survey of 307 departments in US universities, Robinson (1997) found that skills training is the most common intervention, and it would appear that it is the only form of intervention in a significant number of colleges in the US. However, a number of studies report that for high apprehensives, skills training including preparation and practice, actually increases the level of apprehension and the most effective approach is a combination of systematic desensitisation, cognitive modification and skills training (Allen *et al.*, 1989; Stanga & Ladd, 1990; Ruchala & Hill, 1994; Thomas *et al.*, 1994; Kelly & Keaten, 2000). Russ (2012, p.327) suggests that

it may prove worthwhile if business educators assess students' CA levels at critical turning points (e.g. on entry to business school, between each academic year, and on graduation)... which could aid in tailoring pedagogical initiatives to ensure students are more comfortable with and capable of demonstrating effective communication competencies necessary for success in the workplace.

In addition to behavioural and pedagogical interventions in the treatment of OCA, another important factor in higher education is the creation of a supportive and positive classroom environment. OCA in the classroom centres primarily on the apprehension

felt when one is being evaluated (Neer & Kircher, 1989) and it is mediated in part by the interpersonal atmosphere within the classroom. Booth-Butterfield (1988) suggests that anxiety in the classroom may be moderated by manipulating the context (interpersonal, group, classroom, public speaking), by motivating the student (varying the grade available for the communication activity), and making the setting more friendly (setting up a communication situation with a friend or stranger). Students' OCA should be regarded as normal, and teaching techniques should help students handle feelings of apprehension (Connell & Borden, 1987; Grace & Gilsdorf, 2004). The techniques must be applied sensitively and systematically, probably over a relatively long period of time, and by trained practitioners (Hassall *et al.*, 2000). Thus, the best treatment for OCA appears to be a combination of behavioural and pedagogical interventions delivered in a supportive and positive atmosphere.

Morreale *et al.* (2010, p.425) in a forty year longitudinal study of communication courses in US colleges and universities, report that it cannot be overlooked that even though the prevalence of communication apprehension has been known for decades. Given that it is frequently a debilitating trait, 'it is surprising how few programs report specialised assistance with this problem and that more programs do not offer specialised courses to help meet the unique communication needs of these students.

Many studies use an instrument, McCroskey's PRCA-24, to measure levels of OCA. This instrument 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). The instrument consists of 24 statements concerning the student's feelings about communicating orally across the four

contexts (six statements for each context). The range of scores on each sub-construct is from 6, which indicates very low OCA, to 30, which indicates a debilitating level of OCA in that construct. The scores for all four sub-constructs are then added together to indicate the overall OCA score for the respondent. The range of overall OCA scores on the instrument is 24 to 120.

Prior research has provided substantial evidence to support both the reliability and the construct validity of the PRCA-24 in the US and elsewhere (e.g., McCroskey *et al.*, 1985; Levine & McCroskey, 1990; and Gardner *et al.*, 2005). The instrument exhibits high inter-item correlations and the total score correlates with other trait and outcome variables in a manner consistent with its validity (Levine & McCroskey, 1990). There have been a small number of studies with business and accounting students that have confirmed the validity and the reliability of the instrument (Pitt *et al.*, 2000; Gardner *et al.*, 2005). The validity and reliability of the PRCA-24 was rigorously tested by Byrne *et al.* (2009) and found suitable for use in an Irish context.

Methodology

This study is the first part of a three year case study, commencing in the academic year 2012/13, into communication apprehension among business students in an Irish third level institution. The objectives of the three year study are to raise awareness of the existence of high levels of communication apprehension among at least one sixth of students and to develop a special communications module aimed specifically at high apprehensives who find presenting in public very difficult. The 2012/13 study is in two parts. The first part is quantitative where a survey instrument is used to measure the levels of communication apprehension among business and accounting students. The

second part is qualitative and involves offering them tutoring in the presenting context to a small number of students, mainly high apprehensives, who experience serious difficulties especially when doing presentations. Students are only accepted to take part in the study after they have given their written consent.

Findings of the Study

As already indicated, in the first part of the study the levels of OCA among business and accounting students in higher education in Ireland are measured. The PRCA-24 questionnaire was given to all students in all courses in the School of Accounting and Finance, Dublin Institute of Technology in the first semester of the 2012/2013 academic year. The courses included Higher Certificate in Business Studies Years 1 and 2; B Sc in Accounting and Finance Years 1, 2 and 3; B Sc in Management Year 4; and the B Sc in Economics and Finance Years 1 and 2; Postgraduate Diploma in Accounting; Masters in Accounting; and Masters in Finance. 368 students completed the questionnaire and the response rate at 69%, which is shown in Table 1 is very acceptable. Administrative difficulties resulted in a low response from two cohorts, but this was balanced by the high response rate in the other cohorts.

Table 1 Population and Sample Response Rate

Degree Programme	Population	Responses	% Response
Postgraduate Diploma in Ac	57	51	89%
Higher Cert in Bus St Yr 1	80	56	70%
Higher Cert in Bus St Yr 2	72	18	25%
M Ac	40	37	93%
B Sc in Acc and Fin Yr 1	57	38	67%
B Sc in Acc and Fin Yr 2	102	71	70%
B Sc in Acc and Fin Yr 3	64	50	70%
M Sc Fin	22	18	78%

B Sc Econ and Fin Yr 1	15	15	100%
B Sc in Econ and Fin Yr 2	31	14	45%
Total	540	368	68%

Each completed questionnaire was numbered and the responses were coded and analysed. The respondents' scores, as indicated on the PRCA-24, for each of the four oral contexts were calculated and totalled to give the overall OCA score. The scores are shown in the Table 2. Unsurprisingly, public speaking is the oral communication context with the highest score (mean 20.1), and students are typically most comfortable in the one to one context (mean 14.9).

Table 2 Mean OCA Levels Among Business and Accounting Students

Degree Programme		OCA Score					Number
		Dyad	Gp	Mt	PS	Tot	
Postgrad Dip in Ac	Mean	14.60	16.33	17.05	20.45	68.43	51
	Std Dev	5.48	5.34	5.97	6.29	20.36	
Higher Cert in Bus St Yr 1	Mean	15.24	16.50	17.67	21.22	70.63	56
	Std Dev	4.04	4.52	4.54	5.38	14.50	
Higher Cert in Bus St Yr 2	Mean	14.33	14.44	16.06	20.06	64.89	18
	Std Dev	5.82	5.50	6.38	7.44	22.97	
M Sc in Ac	Mean	15.22	16.08	18.32	21.27	70.89	37
	Std Dev	5.20	5.20	5.62	5.34	17.49	
B Sc in Acc and Fin Yr 1	Mean	16.55	16.42	17.74	20.76	71.47	38
	Std Dev	4.74	4.37	5.07	5.32	15.89	
B Sc in Acc and Fin Yr 2	Mean	14.11	15.56	16.65	19.25	65.58	71
	Std Dev	4.35	4.38	4.82	5.23	15.41	
B Sc in Acc and Fin Yr 3 & BSc in Mgt Yr 4	Mean	14.00	15.00	15.64	19.08	63.72	50
	Std Dev	4.81	5.24	5.45	6.33	19.35	
M Sc in Fin	Mean	16.00	15.44	17.00	18.94	67.39	18
	Std Dev	5.37	4.67	5.50	5.74	19.16	
B Sc in Ec and Fin Yr 1	Mean	14.73	16.20	17.80	20.67	69.40	15
	Std Dev	4.64	3.61	4.04	3.18	11.75	
B Sc in Ec and Fin Yr 2	Mean	13.14	15.00	15.93	18.50	62.57	14
	Std Dev	2.96	4.98	4.58	5.20	13.83	
Total Sample	Mean	14.78	15.77	17.01	20.10	67.67	368
	Std Dev	4.78	4.77	5.20	5.63	17.21	
	Mean +1SD	19.56	20.55	22.21	25.73	84.88	

The results of this study and a similar study completed in 2012, are consistent with the findings of a number of other studies, both Irish and international, and are shown in Table 3 below.

Table 3 Mean OCA Levels Among Business and Accounting Students

Study	Country	1-1	Group	Meeting	Public speaking	Total
Stanga & Ladd (1900)	US	14.2	15.0	16.0	18.8	64.1
Ruchala & Hill (1994)	US	14.1	14.7	16.3	17.8	63.0
Hutchinson <i>et al.</i> (1995)	US/Australia	14.2	14.8	15.4	18.0	62.4
Simons <i>et al.</i> (1995)	US	14.2	15.3	16.2	19.1	64.8
Warnock and Curtis (1997)	Ireland	14.6	18.1	18.9	21.0	72.6
Hassall <i>et al.</i> (2000)	UK	13.3	13.6	17.7	19.3	63.8
	Spain	13.0	15.1	20.1	19.9	68.1
Aly & Islam (2003)	Canada	15.5	16.4	17.8	19.5	69.2
Gardner <i>et al.</i> (2005)	New Zealand	15.0	15.8	19.9	18.5	69.2
Hassall <i>et al.</i> (2005)	UK	13.4	13.9	17.7	19.3	64.2
Warnock <i>et al.</i> (2005)	Ireland	13.7	18.9	20.5	22.7	75.8
Arquero <i>et al.</i> (2007)	UK	13.3	13.7	17.5	19.2	63.7
	Spain	12.1	14.6	18.6	18.7	64.0
Byrne <i>et al.</i> (2009)	Ireland	13.6	14.6	16.1	19.1	63.2
2012 study	Ireland	15.2	15.7	17.4	19.4	67.8
2013 study	Ireland	14.8	15.8	17.0	20.1	67.7
U.S. National Norm		14.5	15.4	16.4	19.3	65.6

Analysis of levels of apprehension of the degree programmes is shown in Table 4.

Table 4 Analysis of Levels of Apprehension

	No	Hi	Ave	Low	Hi	Ave	Low
		> 84	50 - 84	< 50	> 84	50 - 84	< 50
Postgraduate Diploma in Ac	51	11	30	10	22%	59%	20%
Higher Cert in Bus St Yr 1	56	8	44	4	14%	79%	7%
Higher Cert in Bus St Yr 2	18	4	10	4	22%	56%	22%
M Sc in Acc	37	8	25	4	22%	68%	11%
B Sc in Acc and Fin Yr 1	38	10	27	1	26%	71%	3%
B Sc in Acc and Fin Yr 2	71	10	53	8	14%	75%	11%
B Sc in Acc and Fin Yr 3 & B Sc in Mgt Yr 4	50	9	27	14	18%	54%	28%
M Sc in Ec & Fin	18	4	12	2	22%	67%	11%
B Sc in Ec & Fin Yr 1	15	1	13	1	7%	87%	7%
B Sc in Ec & Fin Yr 2	14	1	11	2	7%	79%	14%
Total Group	368	66	252	50	18%	68%	14%

Where the mean score for a cohort exceeds the mean for the entire group, it would be expected that there would be higher than average levels of apprehension in the cohort. It is noted that higher than average means are reported for first years, but also for postgraduate students. However, it is also noted that mean scores for the Postgraduate Diploma in Accounting and the Master in Accounting programmes are higher than the average mean. This would indicate that postgraduate students may not become less apprehensive as they progress through college.

A review of the overall and context OCA scores may not reveal either the number of students who are highly apprehensive, or the extreme fear and misery which may accompany this condition. Analysis of the data, as shown in Table 4, reveals that in the entire sample of 368 students, 18% or 66 four students had high levels of OCA, that is, scored 85 or higher. This is slightly higher than the 16/17% which would be the norm. 26% of first year Accounting and Finance students, and 22% of second year certificate and postgraduate students reported levels of apprehension which were significantly higher than the average levels of the total group.

The overall figure of the number of high apprehensives is of interest and relevance. Analysis of some of the very high individual scores provides further insight into how the students view communicating. As can be seen in the Table 5, seven students scored over 100, which is an exceptionally high score. It is noted that all seven students scored in excess of the mean in all contexts which would indicate that they would find communicating even on a one to one basis very difficult.

Table 5 Analysis of Scores Sorted by Total Score (7 highest scores)

Ranking	1-1	Group	Meeting	Public Speaking	Total
Maximum	30	30	30	30	120
Mean	15	16	17	20	68
Mean + 1 SD	20	21	22	26	85
1	29	30	30	27	116
2	30	22	30	30	112
3	25	30	26	30	111
4	23	29	27	30	109
5	24	25	27	30	106
6	24	28	27	27	106
7	28	24	26	27	105

16 students scored a maximum in the public speaking context and the scores of 10 of that group are shown in Table 6.

Table 6 Analysis of Scores of Students - Maximum Score in Public Speaking

Ranking	1-1	Group	Meeting	Public Speaking	Total
Maximum	30	30	30	30	120
Mean	15	16	17	20	68
Mean + 1 SD	20	21	22	26	85
1	24	25	27	30	106
2	30	22	30	30	112
3	23	23	23	30	99
4	25	30	26	30	111
5	20	21	24	30	95
6	15	23	19	30	87
7	21	13	30	30	94
8	17	24	27	30	98
9	26	18	24	30	98
10	19	19	25	30	93

Where a person scores a maximum in public speaking, it would indicate that for him/her making a presentation would either be extremely difficult or probably impossible, leaving no choice perhaps but to forgo the relevant marks. It is noted from the table that nine of the students also scored in excess of the mean in the meeting context, which would indicate that this context also poses difficulty. However, four of the group scored at or below the mean for the group context and three scored below the

mean for the one to one context. This would indicate that the members of this group who were high apprehensives in the public speaking context would probably find attending a meeting very difficult but may not have similar difficulties with communicating in a one-to-one setting or in a group context.

Qualitative Component of the Study

The quantitative data revealed that 66 students or 18% of the population had high oral apprehension scores. This statistic shows that in one in 5/6 may be highly apprehensive. As shown in the previous section the highest scores were reported in the public speaking context and this is the context which causes most difficult for students, particularly those who are highly apprehensive. Before putting forward possible methods to help students to cope with and possibly overcome fear of presenting, it is worthwhile to examine how apprehension affects the thinking and the emotions of some students.

I had therefore written down my speech. I stood up to read it but I could not. My vision became blurred and I trembled, though the sheet hardly covered a foolscap. I did not find myself equal to reading it, and ... had it read by someone else. This shyness I retained. Even when I paid a social call the presence of half a dozen or more people would strike me dumb. I was ashamed of myself and sad at heart at my incapacity.

It may be surprising to discover that these words are not from a student in this study but were recorded by Mohandas Gandhi, an Indian lawyer and activist who was a leader of the nation's non-violent, non-cooperative independence movement against the United Kingdom's rule of the country during the 20th century (Gandhi, 1982, p.70-71). This demonstrates that communication apprehension is an affliction which knows no boundaries, and for some it is debilitating.

Having analysed the quantitative data a number of students were selected for individual tuition and other students were given group coaching. The views of the students are interesting and give an insight into how some students feel about communicating with others especially when presenting in public. The names of the students interviewed in this study have been changed to protect anonymity. A number of themes were identified in the analysis of the qualitative data which reveal aspects of the phenomenon of CA common among the interviewees.

Physical and Mental Sensations

Most high apprehensives fear making a presentation. However, the extent and effect of this fear may not be appreciated by others. In a 2011/12 study carried out by this researcher, a student name Bernie, recorded the following exceptionally high OCA scores:

	1-1	Group	Meeting	Public Speaking	Total
Maximum	30	30	30	30	120
Mean	15	16	17	19	68
Bernie	25	30	26	30	111

She is not comfortable in any context and presentations raise serious difficulties for her.

She experiences inner turmoil, as her reflection at that time reveals:

The whole week before my first presentation, I kept telling myself it was ok. However as soon as I reached the college that morning, my stomach started to have butterflies; chest was getting tighter and tighter. My heart was racing on and off, palms sweating and felt weak all over like I was going to fall down. When I sat down to speak about presentations my hands and legs were shaking, a few times I thought I was going to be sick across the table. I got so upset and emotional and believe being terrified to stand up in front of strangers is who I am for whatever reason. I don't know if it can be fixed or whether anything is broke. I think it might be too deep and maybe too emotional to root out or sort the reason why it scares me so much to be the focus of attention in a room.

Bernie’s apprehension levels were again recorded in 2012/13. Her scores had not changed and she again reflected on her views at the end of her second year third level education.

My fear of presentations is much worse this year than last. I have had to keep telling myself it’s okay and that I don’t have to do them and if it comes to the crunch that I do, well it won’t be the end of the world if I have to leave college. I understand I have to forfeit the marks towards continuous assessments and am prepared to work hard to make up for that. The sheer mention of the word presentation in class gives me anxiety, my heart starts racing, I get hot and start shaking, particularly my hands. When you (this researcher) arrived in class with questionnaires at the beginning of the year, I found it difficult to even read or fill out the questionnaire because of the subject. In fact a student sitting beside me who was on my previous course and new about my fears helped me fill it out as he caught me filling in the wrong answers. Unfortunately this year, I could not even go to classes while presentations were going on as I was too nervous for the other students. The memory of losing control emotionally in front of people who don’t know me very well is both embarrassing and terrifying. I just can’t allow myself even to think about presentations or the worry starts and nothing else for college gets done, the anxiety takes over everything. I would still prefer to have a baby than give a presentation.

Amy, a postgraduate student, recorded a low score in the one-to-one context, but had high scores in the group meeting context and a maximum score in public speaking.

	1-1	Group	Meeting	Public Speaking	Total
Maximum	30	30	30	30	120
Mean	15	16	17	19	68
Amy	10	24	26	30	90

Her memories reflect her maximum score in the public speaking context. For her, the fear of presenting or talking in public was there since primary school and persisted into secondary school:

Every day, we dedicated time to reading a book as a class, i.e. the teacher chose at random different students to read a couple of pages while the rest of us listened. Even now, the memory makes my heart thump painfully loud in my chest. I sat and waited, praying my name wouldn’t be called. My

heart pounded, body shook, and palms sweated as I waited and waited, willing the ground to open up and swallow me whole. “Amy, take over please.”

I don’t remember much after that; it’s a blur. All I could see were the shocked, pitiful faces of my classmates, peering at me from every angle of the classroom. I was shaking, and I had broken out in a cold sweat. I looked down at my hands, and they were purple; it was as if the blood had been sucked from my body.

She relates how the affliction persisted and how some teachers were more considerate than others:

Over the years, I had to approach numerous teachers and plead with them to avoid asking me to read aloud – an embarrassing experience in itself. Some were understanding; others were not. The ones that were not, simply couldn’t understand or quite believe that I could be so fearful of such a simple task, and brushed it aside as nothing more than a silly phobia that I had to get over. “Practice makes perfect” they said. How little they knew.

The following vivid description, of what presenting means to Amy, reveals the trauma that a high apprehensive may experience and should be of interest to any lecturer, who has students who are required to make presentations:

I will admit that it is a very difficult thing to understand, and I truly believe that unless you have encountered the problem yourself, you will never fully understand it. Most people will say that the more you do it, the better and more confident you will become. But for me, it is the opposite. For the *more* I do it, the *worse* I become. This is because each time I have to face my fear I have a truly horrifying experience which in turn, causes me to be in a worse state for the next time. By ‘state’ I mean far more than a few casual butterflies. For instance, if I had to stand up right now and do a presentation in front of my college classmates, a number of things would happen: My body would shake, causing my voice to quiver uncontrollably when I try to speak. Pretty soon, I would barely be able to string a sentence together as my voice would be shaking so violently. I would not have a clue as to what I am saying, my words wouldn’t make sense, I would forget facts that I really know, and I wouldn’t be able to remember a single thing I have said afterwards. As I said earlier, it would be nothing more than a blur. Furthermore, I would break out in a cold sweat from head to toe, and my heart would beat so fast and hard that it would feel as if it is going to explode right out of my chest. All in all, a truly horrible experience, unforgettable for all the wrong reasons.

Unfamiliar Audience

Whereas the feelings and emotions expressed by Bernie and Amy may appear extreme, many students express strong negative feelings towards presenting and fear the attention of the audience. Joan and Mary, two first year students, state how they feel:

I found presentations very hard in front of a big class where everyone is staring at you! And listening to you. It is not for me at all. I do not like being the centre of attention. I'm a quiet and reserved person. I do not think it should be a must for students to present.

I have found presenting really hard this year. At the start of the year I was really scared of doing it but as the year went on, I found it easier, until I had my second last one. My group did the presentation but after it was finished we had to stand up there for an extra 15 minutes while he told us what we did wrong. I still have trouble with presenting now, but I'm trying to improve on it so I don't look as scared when I get up to present.

John, a postgraduate student scored close to the maximum in presenting and also had very high scores in the group and meeting contexts. He relates:

I'll start by saying I have suffered from social anxiety in the past. Luckily I've spent a lot of time over the past few years working on this and becoming more comfortable around people. Presentations are usually difficult for anyone, but I'd consider them much more difficult for myself. I would usually not be comfortable talking in groups, so to get up in front of 50 people and talk about something I'm not 100 percent familiar with is a very daunting task.

Where students score a maximum or close to the maximum in presentations, their fear interferes with their ability to perform or maybe prevents them from performing.

Whereas it is normal to fear having to make a presentation, students who record scores that are closer to the mean for the presentation context allow the fear, and let it work to their advantage. They can normally think on their feet, and the adrenalin helps them to focus, and this is reported by a number of postgraduate students. Monica relates her feelings:

Before presenting for that subject I had only ever presented once before in second year of my undergrad, so when I heard we had to present I was absolutely dreading it. The thought of getting up in front of the class and speak made me very nervous. My main anxiety was that I'd forget what I was going to say and there'd be a long awkward silence and I wouldn't be able to retain myself.

James experiences tension and fear before and during a presentation, and whereas he accepts this and is resilient and performs well, he still fears the evaluation of the audience, as he relates:

When I heard that there was going to be a presentation for that subject I felt very nervous and immediately imagined me stood on a podium, not knowing what to say and all the class looking on. I knew the people that were going to be in my group and I was afraid that I might because it was a group mark bring the whole group down which made me feel even more nervous. I had not done many presentations before in college for my undergraduate degree. I had a bad experience reading at mass having lost breath and being frozen for about 5 seconds, although I recovered and finished the reading it was a very bad experience and I had not spoken in public since. I was still very edgy about it and nervous that I would freeze and run out of breathe as I had done before.

Greg, another postgraduate student, records average scores in all contexts except presentations, where his score is above average but not very high. Similar to James, he does get nervous before and during a presentation, but is also able to perform, but yet fears he will embarrass himself in front of the audience:

My mouth was dry and I was a little red in the cheeks. I was afraid of being embarrassed, but when you see that everyone is in the same boat it makes it easier. Having to wait leads to a nerve wrecking uneasy day as you wait to present. Standing facing the audience was a little daunting at first but it seemed ok as I kept looking out at them while I was at the side waiting to present.

Negative Views of High Apprehensives

It is of interest to contrast the views of two postgraduate students, Gordan who had a total score of 54 and scored 14 in presentations, and Melisa who had a total score of 112

with a maximum score in all contexts except groups where she scored 22. Gordan has a relaxed and positive view towards presenting as he explains:

I did enjoy the presentation and I think that adding additional presentations could definitely be of benefit. I would have several recommendations if another presentation was being added. One recommendation is that everyone should complete an individual presentation.

In contrast, Melisa is very uncomfortable communicating in this context:

In relation to the recent presentation, I was very nervous about the thought of having to present even though I had a number of formal presentation, for my thesis in particular, during my under-grad and a lot of informal presentations. For this presentation I was quite nervous at the thought of it, as were the other people in my group so we rehearsed a few times and I felt better about it but still forgot a few key points while presenting,

Preparation

Preparation is a vital ingredient in the completion of a successful presentation. This view was confirmed by a number of students who took part in a mock presentation with this researcher. Their views reflect the positive effect of preparation. John explains how he prepared and the effect it had on him:

I would usually not be comfortable talking in groups, so to get up in front of 50 people and talk about something I'm not 100 per cent familiar with is a very daunting task. To make things easier for myself, I got to know the topic we had to talk about very well, at least this would increase my confidence before presenting, even if only marginally. I learned from practising the presentation, it doesn't matter how well you know it, it's very difficult to say it clearly when you're put in the spotlight. I took the advice and practised in the mirror a couple times, and also presented to my friend once! I definitely think that helped. I got used to thinking more clearly when I was talking out loud.

Joan reports having a similar positive experience:

I'm not sure whether I'm a person who can think very quickly on my feet so I thought it'd be best to write out a sort of script so that I'd know in my head exactly what I was going to say and how long it'd take me to say it, so that I didn't go over my allocated time. My group and I practised saying it aloud a couple of times and then the night before I practised on my own too. I said it 2 or 3 times and I actually knew it off my heart then. So this made me feel so much more confident. It allowed me to then start working on other things like looking

ahead at the audience and working on my body language, as I didn't want to come across awkward and nervous.

George reveals how completing the mock presentation change his approach and this helped to relax and perform better:

We met up a number of times and put the presentation together and I took on the part of giving the introduction and looking at Dells history and success years. I had a draft a script as to the outline of what I was going to say and hoped that maybe with basic points on the presentation slides I might be able to expand on them when speaking, possibly off the cuff. However following the mock presentation I took the advice and drafted a word for word script of what I was going to say which I fitted into an A4 page. I practised and practiced this saying it aloud over and over again in front of the mirror, the same thing all the time and it would be no exaggeration to say that I did it over 50 times. We practised it as the group in a lecture theatre surrounding as I did it more and more in front of people I could feel myself thinking that I know this stuff and now all that is needed is to articulate it in front of the class. I was still very edgy about it and nervous that I would freeze and run out of breathe as I had done before. I slept surprising well the night before the presentation and kept going over what I was going to say for about half an hour before I got to sleep. I awoke at 7 and practiced it again about five times. The group met up at 8 o'clock before the presentation and we ran through it again 3 times, I was very nervous as I had a slight pause and lapse of memory for one of the dry runs.

To summarise, the quantitative data revealed that 18% of the students who completed the OCA questionnaire recorded high OCA scores. The views of some students are reported, and not only do their views of the apprehension they experience reveal their fear and tension, but their views reflect their OCA scores. Where students have low scores, they express positive attitudes to presenting, and where they experience fear they may see it in a positive light. In contrast where students report high scores, they express negative attitudes and may be unable to present. Thus the questionnaire is a tool which can be used to identify students' levels of OCA at the commencement of a course and also at different stages during the course. Where a student reports high OCA, he/she could be selected for additional coaching and training to help them overcome the dreadful fear he/she may experience.

Communication Training for Business Students

As stated earlier, Morreale *et al.* (2010) reported that few communication programmes provide special assistance for students to cope with high OCA. There are a number of behavioural and pedagogical interventions available to treat OCA. A suggested method to address the issue would consist of four elements:

- Students' CA levels could be assessed at critical turning points such as entry to business school
- Specific areas in which students feel most uncomfortable communicating (probable presenting) could then be investigated.
- Students could receive instruction in strategies for managing CA in that specific context.
- Finally repeated and structured practice communicating in that specific context with expert feedback. This practice should be in a supportive and non-evaluative environment.

Conclusion

In summary, the quantitative data analysed in the study supports the findings of prior research. It reveals an insight into the levels of oral communication apprehension at a third level institution, and confirms that at least one in six students may be highly apprehensive. In general, levels of apprehension depend on the context, with the lowest score in the one-to-one context, increasing for groups and meetings with the highest scores reported in the public speaking context.

The qualitative findings of the study explore the views of a small group of students on the process of communicating. Their stories expose the trauma felt by some students who find presenting debilitating, and the level to which presenting impinges on their lives. They speak of heart pounding, body shaking, palms sweating, memory blurring, hands and legs shaking, feeling sick, worry of other students looking at them in a critical fashion. The views of the students reinforce the need for special training for high apprehensives who experience severe anxiety about presenting in public.

As stated earlier, this study is the first part of a three year case study, commencing in the academic year 2012/13, into communication apprehension among business students in an Irish third level institution. The objectives of the three year study are to raise awareness of the existence of high levels of communication apprehension among at least one sixth of students and to develop a special communications module aimed specifically at high apprehensives who find presenting in public very difficult. It is considered that the findings of the 2012/13 element of the study achieve these objectives and that the findings will be reinforced in the completion of the study over the next two years.

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