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4 Oral communication apprehension: an exploration in addressing fear of public speaking

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Abstract

Several research studies have identified oral communication as a skill employers desire of their workforce, and so, accounting and business education programmes place considerable emphasis on the development of communication competencies among students. However, not all students appear to benefit as desired from communication skills development. Prior research indicates this may arise from a fear of communicating, commonly known as oral communication apprehension, a factor which inhibits an individual's willingness to communicate in a number of contexts – one-to-one, groups, meetings and public speaking – and may inhibit his/her capability to develop effective communication skills.

Many 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 a study conducted in the School of Accounting and Finance, DIT. Levels of apprehension were measured for 291 students. A small group of students who indicated that they found presenting extremely difficult were identified and two approaches to assisting them were adopted – individual tutoring over a number of months, and group work on a specially designed communications module. The views and fears of students are reported and demonstrate the pain that many suffer when called on to present.

Keywords: *communication skills, oral communication apprehension, PRCA-24*

Introduction

Irish employers, like those elsewhere in the world, demand that business and accounting graduates possess effective oral and written communication skills and it is now recognised that communication skills are among the most important competencies for graduates to possess upon their entry to careers in accounting. However, despite the considerable efforts made by higher education institutions over the past 20 years to prioritise the development of communication competence, many students do not develop the appropriate skills. 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).

When a person suffers from high OCA a number of mainly negative consequences may ensue. It can have a negative effect on how an individual learns to communicate, on learning or knowing appropriate communication behaviours, on developing the necessary communication skills to communicate effectively when required, and on developing a positive attitude towards communication (McCroskey 1997: 101). The consequences for many students suffering from high OCA are that they do not ask questions in class, make themselves inconspicuous, skip class, drop needed programmes, experience depression, achieve less than their aptitudes would justify, and, as a consequence, fail to learn needed information and thus, receive lower evaluation by instructors (Bowers 1986; O'Mara et al. 1996).

The aims of the study are twofold. Firstly, it seeks to measure the levels of OCA among business and accounting students in the School of Accounting and Finance in Dublin Institute of Technology (DIT), Aungier St. Secondly, it aims to qualitatively explore appropriate interventions with a small group of highly apprehensive students, both undergraduate and post-graduate, and concentrates on accounting students given the explicit emphasis placed on communication competence by the accounting profession (more so than other business disciplines); also a substantial number of prior studies exist which have focused on accounting students.

Outline

The project involved two phases. The quantitative work involved distributing an instrument, which was developed in the USA to measure a person's level of oral communication in a number of contexts. Many studies use McCroskey's PRCA-24, to measure levels of OCA. The instrument consists of 24 statements concerning the student's feelings about communicating orally across the four contexts (six statements for each context). The students are asked to indicate their initial impressions by replying to each statement using a score of 1 up to 5, 1 indicating "strongly agree" and 5 indicating "strongly disagree". 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 and from 6 to 30 in each of the four contexts. Prior research has provided substantial evidence to support both the reliability and the construct validity of the PRCA-24 in the USA and elsewhere (McCroskey et al. 1985; Levine and McCroskey 1990; Gardner et al. 2005). The validity and reliability of the PRCA-24 was rigorously tested by this researcher in a prior study (Byrne, Flood and

Shanahan 2009) and found suitable for use in an Irish context.

The instrument was distributed to 291 students in all courses in the School of Accounting and Finance in the DIT in Ireland in Semester 1, 2011. Each completed questionnaire was numbered and the responses were scored. Unsurprisingly, public speaking is the oral communication context with the highest score, and students are typically most comfortable in the one-to-one context. Analysis of the data showed a high level of consistency across degree programmes and within degree programmes. This pattern is consistent with the findings of most other studies (Stanga and Ladd 1990; Simons, Higgins and Lowe 1995; Gardner et al. 2005; Arquero et al. 2007; Byrne, Flood and Shanahan 2009).

Analysis of the data, as shown below, also reveals that in the entire sample of 291 students, 22% or 63 students had high levels of OCA, that is, scored 85 or higher. This is much higher than the 16/17% which would be the norm. It is not within the scope of this study to explain why the figure is so high and perhaps a longitudinal study could reveal whether this is a trend which is explained by factors such as changes in society or in the economy.

Level of apprehension	High	Average	Low
Score	= or >85	85< >51	= or < 50
Number of students	63	173	55
Percentage	22%	59%	19%

Table 4.1 Analysis of levels of apprehension

Whereas the overall figure of the number of high apprehensives is of interest and relevance, analysis of some of the very high individual scores provides a clue to identifying students who may find communication debilitating. Ten students scored 98 or over, which is a very high score, and it is noted that all ten students scored well in excess of the mean in all contexts. Eleven students scored a maximum in the public speaking context, which would indicate that for them making a presentation would either be extremely difficult or probably impossible, leaving them no option but to forgo the relevant marks.

Qualitative Data Collection and Analysis

In the second phase of this study, five students, who were identified as highly apprehensive in the public speaking context – they scored 29 or 30 and also this researcher was aware from meeting them that they found making a presentation very difficult – agreed to undertake a training programme. Two students were assisted on an individual basis and the other three agreed to undergo a six-week course on a group basis. To protect the anonymity of the students, they are given pseudonyms in the study.

Some of the anxieties expressed by the students show the utter fear that some students have if called on to present in class.

While waiting my turn to read aloud in sixth class, 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.

(Amy)

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.

(Amy)

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.

(Bernie)

The type of communication I have a huge amount of anxiety towards is presenting. Although I may know what I am going to say and have extra topics to cover if all else fails but just before and during the presentation is a completely different situation. Beforehand I genuinely feel very weak and the sound of my heart throbbing is so overwhelming that I cannot think properly. When I am up presenting it is just as bad as I anticipate. Looking up and seeing everyone and the thoughts of their judgement terrifies me. My voice shakes and my legs and hands become very agitated which I am very aware of throughout. I end up not saying half of the presentation, just so it can be done and finished. I am more than willing to give the marks away to avoid doing any more presentations and putting myself through such horrible experiences.

(Cora)

The five students took part in communication training. Two of the students had one-to-one sessions with a counsellor, a speech therapist and practical presentations with this researcher. At all times a positive, supportive approach was used. The other three students took part in a six-week course as part of a group. The course consisted of three one-hour individual sessions with a counsellor who tried to relax the students in a supportive way. The group had one session with a speech therapist/drama teacher who did some relaxation and breathing exercises with the group. They then had two sessions doing informal presentations with this researcher.

Evaluation of the Project

The students had a mixed response to the training. Of the two students who had individual tuition, one succeeded in completing a class presentation by doing a group video which was acceptable to the lecturers. However, the post-hoc oral apprehension score for the student actually increased; the student's final reflection expresses satisfaction tinged with a little hope:

Overall, I was extremely grateful for having been given the chance to finally take part in the presentation process without having to actually go through the trauma of having to present in front of the entire class. On reflection of this year, I believe I have achieved the skills of presenting as much as anyone else. The only difference is confidence; that is, the confidence to replicate what I did on camera in front of a group of people. Hopefully that will come in time...

The second student felt defeated and unable to overcome this obstacle, as the reflection points out:

At this point my plan is to forfeit all marks for presentations and work hard on other subjects to make up for that. If I cannot do this then I will not be attending college but will find some other way of getting further education. While typing this, my chest feels tight. I have knots in my stomach and sweaty and shaking hands.

For the three students who completed the group training, presenting was not as daunting a task. Their scores remained the same for one and showed a decrease for two. However, their reflections reveal that they are now less nervous but their scores still remain high.

Conclusion

The quantitative study reveals that one in four, five or maybe six students in a class may be highly apprehensive which means that for them, doing a presentation may be extremely difficult. In addition, up to 3% of a class may have a maximum oral apprehension score in this context and those students may be unable to complete a presentation, and putting them through that ordeal may be extremely stressful. Very apprehensive students may be helped by individual and group training, by assistance from a counsellor and a speech therapist and by doing short presentations in a very supportive atmosphere where positive feedback is stressed. Other methods available to help students include giving students the choice to do presentations by video, an option which may be availed of by only one or at most two groups.

The overall conclusion is that each class will contain a number of high oral apprehensive students who need a supportive atmosphere to help them to learn and to communicate with others.

Recommendations

The mission statement of the Dublin Institute of Technology states that "the DIT provides an innovative, responsive and caring learning environment for a diverse range and level of programmes to students of all ages and backgrounds". The findings of this study may be useful for shaping institutional policy in creating a "responsive and caring learning environment" by addressing the issue of high oral communication apprehension which affects more than one in six of each third level cohort. Therefore the following recommendations are made:

1. All students entering the School of Accounting and Finance each year should be offered the opportunity to complete the oral communication apprehension questionnaire and asked to agree to take part in research in this area.
2. Lecturers should be informed of the number of high apprehensives in their classes and be aware of the difficulties that students have when called on to communicate, especially making a presentation.
3. Selected highly apprehensive students should be interviewed and offered individual or group communication training to assist them reduce their levels of apprehension.

Proposed Future Research

This study has focused on identifying levels of oral communication apprehension in the School of Accounting and Finance in DIT Aungier St. However, the study relates only to the students in 2011. Also, the group training consisted of just six weeks, which is a very short period. The proposed future work is to carry out a longitudinal quantitative study over three years and also to develop the communication training offered to the high apprehensives.

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