

Anxiety Level in Students of Public Speaking: Causes and Remedies

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Abstract

Despite being competent in their field of work, professional's worldwide struggle due to lack of good public speaking skills. Their assessments and appraisals are often not depictive of their professional competitiveness; therefore, it is important for students to overcome public speaking anxiety before they transit from academic life to professional life. The purpose of this study is to analyze the reasons behind the anxiety level in undergraduate students of a public speaking class and recommend strategies to overcome this fear. This study was entailed quantitative research paradigm on a sample of 50 students using convenience sampling technique from a reputable private sector business school in Karachi. The findings showed that students who fear public speaking can perform well if they use certain strategies to fight their fears. 75% participants admitted their fear of public speaking and 95% participants agreed that if proper counseling, instruction and coaching is provided, this fear can be overcome. Research revealed that exposure to virtual environment can facilitate student confidence and enables them to face audience irrespective of the size.

Keywords: anxiety, confidence, fear, public speaking

Introduction

Most people are not born public speakers; they are trained to become one. When they find themselves in situations where they become the focus of attention as they have to address an audience, they experience emotions like fear and anxiety, leading to nausea and excessive sweating. Most of them try to avoid situations where they have to perform or speak in public, but when unavoidable, such situations are endured by distress. According to Lucas (2011), “Many people who converse easily in all kinds of everyday situations become frightened at the idea of standing up before a group to make a speech”(p.9). Such people need to realize that they are not the only ones who may be going through these emotions; in fact, almost every speaker feels the same. It is important that people consciously realize the fact that there are more nervous speakers in the world than those who are not.

Professionals are expected to regularly keep on improving their communication skills. Verderber, Sellnow and Verderber (2011) state, “Public speaking, a sustained formal presentation by a speaker to an audience, is simply one form of human communication. So learning to be an effective public speaker will help you to be more effective in other communication settings as well” (p.2). A change in their confidence, speaking style, intonation pattern and the rest can result in a positive change in their professionalism and personality. As per the viewpoint of health care professionals, Tacheva (2013) asserts that “The verbal register, intonation, articulation, pronunciation, tone, rhythm, dialect define the character of the communicative impact as positive or negative depending on whether they facilitate or hinder the achievement of communicative

purposes”(p. 605). People can overcome this problem by practicing in small groups of peers and then moving on to larger audiences. Many people are shy or afraid of speaking in front of their peers or familiar people and this can be overcome by practicing in front of unfamiliar audiences. This will increase their confidence and help them reduce their anxiety level.

Anxiety is defined as a state of uneasiness and apprehension of fear caused by the anticipation of something threatening. According to Kirkwood and Melton (2002), anxiety disorders are among the most common mental disorders encountered by public speakers. People who feel anxiety while speaking in public generally tend to avoid situations where they have to perform, but when they encounter such situations, they suffer intense distress and anxiety. According to Kant (2000), people in general negatively assess and appraise those who demonstrate their fears towards public speaking and fail to make a strong impression through confident gestures. These problems can act as hurdles in achieving ones goals that could be both personal and professional; hence speakers need to develop strong public speaking skills to enable them to become more confident.

The purpose of this study is to identify and investigate the causes behind the anxiety level of students of public speaking in undergraduate programs and recommend steps that could be adopted to overcome their anxiety level. This study presents the reasons behind the fear of public speaking in students and problems caused by their fear. It includes the detailed description of the results and findings of the research. Thus, the following research questions will be looked into.

Research questions

1. To what extent does there exist a fear of public speaking among the undergraduate students of a private sector business school?
2. What factors are responsible for the fear of public speaking among the undergraduate students of a private sector business school?

Literature review

In today's time and age, good communication skills are needed the most at all levels. According to Raja (2013), "Communication has become one of the markers of social solidarity, social ranking and professional capabilities and most of the components of the language are learnt through this medium" (p. 154). According to Pertaub, Slater and Baker (2001), professionals are expected to present numerous talks to both small and large groups of audience at different intervals of their professional lives and if they become victims of public speaking anxiety, they face a backlash and this anxiety can have a severe influence on their career. Their research also describes the results, which illustrate that social anxiety induced in people is directly proportional to the variety of feedback received from the audience. They explain that this creates a strong impact on the confidence of the individuals and it translates significantly into their public addresses. Spijck (2011) amplified that according to his research, almost eighty out of every hundred people experienced public speaking anxiety at a small or large scale. Every four out of ten people rank public speaking fear as one of their apex three fears,

often a fear more dreadful than death. Most psychologists refer to it as an irrational fear which could be easily overcome.

With this, the need of public speaking skills is on the rise as well because as individuals excel in their career, they are more likely to present and speak in meetings, seminars and conferences and give their opinion regarding the issues in hand. However, due to public speaking anxiety, some people become restless and face sleeping disorders when they have to speak in front of an audience. Many authors have researched on the causes and reasons behind public speaking anxiety and have come up with numerous tips and strategies to deal with such situations and to overcome this fear. Whatever the methodology may be to overcome public speaking anxiety, this skill should be a part of curriculum right from school to university level.

Akin and Kunzman (1974) in their study outlined a program that was premeditated to behaviorally condensed symptoms of public speaking anxiety among students. The evaluation showed that mixed behavioral format emphasizing practice situations results similar to the desensitization approach, which teaches participants to control their anxiety by enabling them to gradually face it through exposing them again and again to the anxious situation. Hence, those who practice well before they speak in public, are more likely to be confident and deliver good presentations. Similarly, Riegel (2013) proposes that public speaking anxiety is not directly proportionate to the number of audience present in one's talk. A small group of audience may terrify you as badly as a large group. She suggests that when this fear hits presenters, they need to deploy strategies which might enable them to stand on the stage with confidence and vigor.

The presentation procedure should be transactional with a constant exchange of floor between the presenter and the audience. The presenters must ask questions at intervals to engage the audience more actively which requires more dialogue than monologue. Strategies as basic as these can create a visible difference and can assist individuals surmount the fright of public speaking and facilitate them in building poise while speaking in front of an audience.

Morgan (2008) lists few things that hold great importance during a speech or presentation: (a) intent to be open with your audience, (b) intent to connect with the audience, (c) intent to be passionate about your topic, and (d) intent to listen to your audience. These are few tips that help speakers connect with the audience, to become motivating speakers. The audience too, in turn will be interested in the speech and will help speakers to be comfortable while speaking. Weissman (2012) explains the reasons why some speakers speak faster when they face the audience. He writes that when a presenter comes in front of an audience, the pressure of the situation prompts adrenaline rush which produces time warp that causes the presenter to speak fast. He further says that this can be overcome by using pauses and lubricants, which allow more time to the audience to process the information and also gives the speaker enough time to phrase another sentence.

Kushner, (2010) talks about simple yet very effective strategies to overcome the fear of public speaking as well as delivering good presentations. He starts off by describing effective styles for starting and ending a speech. Rhetorical questions, a quotation for the opening or conclusion can be used to involve the audience and grab their attention. He elaborates that the speaker

should also analyze the requirements of the topic and examine the motivation for speaking and the audience's motivation for listening. He emphasizes on goal setting and puts forward that one should also set some specific goals that need to be achieved at the end of the presentation. If the speaker is not certain about his/her stance, it will not leave a good impression on the audience and the audience may get demotivated.

Many authors and researchers stress upon the significance of virtual environment. They suggest that exposure to virtual environments and simulations can result in fighting public speaking fear in people. Sandra, Robert and Max (2002) undertook a study to examine the efficacy of Virtual Reality Therapy (VRT) in overcoming public speaking anxiety of university students. Their sample comprised fourteen students divided into two groups. Students in group one underwent VRT individual treatment and post-testing, whereas the other students in the control group completed the post-test only. Results indicated that VRT sessions successfully helped the students reduce their public speaking anxiety.

Methodology

This was a small scale exploratory research conducted to analyze the needs of students of public speaking class at undergraduate level for formulating strategies that would overcome public speaking anxiety. The study was conducted using the quantitative descriptive research method. Creswell (1994) defines quantitative research as an explanation of phenomena by collecting numerical data that are analyzed using mathematically based methods. The methodology that was used to carry out the study included questionnaires as primary data collection tool.

Instrument

The data were collected using the self-administered questionnaires that were distributed to fifty undergraduate students of a reputable private sector business school. The questionnaire was constructed using relevant literature review and observations of the researcher that he had accumulated during the five years of teaching this course. The researcher; therefore, first bracketed his observations, which helped him to construct a very simple questionnaire, which consisted of five polar questions. The first question was regarding the fear of public speaking; the second question inquired if lack of confidence was the reason of fear, the third question looked into the impact of the number of audience on students' public speaking performance; question four inquired about how participating in public speaking activities help students deliver better presentations; and the last question asked whether they thought that their fear of public speaking can be overcome by using some strategies and seeking professional help.

Sample

The study was conducted with 50 Computer Sciences undergraduate students of a reputable private sector business school in Karachi. Convenience sampling method was used as "In convenience sampling, the sample is restricted to a part of the population that is readily accessible" (Singh & Mangat, 1996, p.7).

Data analysis

The data was analyzed using sample testing for mean, standard deviation and variance, through data analysis tool pack of MS Excel.

Results and Discussion

Instructor's observations

The instructor bracketed his observations that helped him go through the relevant literature review to understand the study at hand in depth. Following are some of the observations:

Lack of confidence was the most common reason of fear of public speaking because many students have a meek nature and they tend to feel uncomfortable while speaking in front of others. Burgess (2013, October 30) reports that according to a survey on common phobias, fear of public speaking was found to be a more pressing concern than death. Another reason discovered in the research was that students who had a good command over debates and speeches performed better in presentations. Even if a student fears public speaking, he can perform well by practicing and rehearsing quite rigorously. Public speaking if treated as a skill can be tremendously improved upon. The instructors play a vital role in giving support and confidence to the students and can help them overcome public speaking anxiety.

Questionnaire results

This section of the study presents the results and analysis

of the data collected. The results of these questionnaires were interpreted and conclusions were drawn. Table 1 shows the percentage responses given by the students.

Table 1

Percentage responses given by the undergraduate students

Questions	N	%age response 'yes'	%age response 'No'
Do you have fear of public speaking?	50	75	25
Do you think that this fear is due to lack of confidence?	50	50	50
Does the audience size play a role in your public speaking performance?	50	82	18
Do you think participating in public speaking activities more will help you perform better in presentations?	50	75	25
Do you think that your fear of public speaking can be overcome by using some strategies and seeking some professional help?	50	95	5

The answer to the first question whether the students feared

public speaking or not was that more than 75% of them surveyed feared speaking in front of an audience. Thus, the majority of them were found to be afraid of speaking in front of others, which is consistent with McCains' (2012) results that showed that, "Nearly 90% of people reported feeling shy or uncomfortable speaking in front of others at some time in their lives" (p.1). However, this observation differs from person to person, as different people have different beliefs and confidence level for familiar and unfamiliar audiences.

The second question inquired whether the students thought this fear was due to lack of confidence. The data analysis of second question showed that for more than 50% of the respondents lack of confidence was an important variable. Sjoberg (2006) suggests that learners, who lack confidence, need encouragement in the initial phase of learning so that they could be encouraged to participate in the class. Kelly and Watson (1986) also argue that confidence is one of the key contributors in the learning of speaking skills. The above studies give us a reason for the 50% of the students who felt that lack of confidence was the reason for them to be anxious during public speaking.

The third question explored whether the number of audience played a major role on students' performance during presentations. 82% respondents confessed that audience size has a strong impact on their performance and level of nervousness. The reason for this impact is given by Gamston and Wellman (1992) and they conclude that, "Large audience often seems more intimidating than smaller ones" (p. 35).The fourth question inquired whether more participation in public speaking activities help students perform

better in presentations. 75% of the respondents reported that taking an active part in public speaking activities will help them perform better in presentations. Those presenters, who appear confident and do not show any symptoms of nervousness, have only learnt the art of hiding their level of nervousness or have mastered the desensitization approach (Akin & Kunzman ,1974); therefore, constant exposure to a variety of audience will transform them into confident speakers.

The fifth question asked whether the students thought that their fear of public speaking can be overcome by using some strategies and seeking professional help. 95% of the students thought that the fear of public speaking can be reduced by using different strategies or by seeking assistance from some professionals. Songsiri (2007) suggests that if students are encouraged and are facilitated with various strategies for the accomplishment of their goals at their own pace, not only develop, regain and repose confidence, but also become autonomous and lifelong learners.

Lucas (2011) reiterates that,“Many people who converse easily in all kinds of everyday situations can also become frightened at the idea of standing up before a group to make a speech” (p.9). Thus, it is essential that activities are organized for their confidence building. As larger audience can affect the level of confidence negatively, they need to be exposed to smaller audience in the initial phase. Later, as the level of confidence increases, the size of the audience should be increased.

Conclusion and recommendations

This study was carried out to investigate the anxiety level in the students of public speaking and to provide sufficient results which prove that this fear is very common among individuals, especially among university students. Literature was reviewed to shed light on researches that have been conducted earlier in the same area to validate the study and to build upon what has already been done. To summarize, the research proves that fear of public speaking is a learned skill and can be overcome by practicing and rehearsing before presentations or speeches and people who experience public speaking anxiety can perform as well as those who have a good command over public speaking. The following techniques can help students overcome public speaking anxiety.

1. The instructor needs to help students realize that being stressful is natural.
2. Better preparation and understanding of the topic eliminates the chance of making a mistake or getting off track during a public speaking activity.
3. A moment of silence is nothing to be afraid of. If speakers lose track of what they are saying or begin to feel nervous, it is likely that the audience will not mind a pause to consider what the speakers have been saying.
4. Practicing complete speech several times would certainly give the speakers an edge. They can practice it with a small number of people they are at ease with.

5. Speakers should seek feedback of the audience during practice sessions or can ask someone to record the talk. Watching it several times for self-criticism also helps facilitate the learning and improvement process.
6. Better preparation also helps speakers recover quickly if they go off track or get confused.
7. The speakers should anticipate audience responses and queries that may be generated during practice so that they could have confident answers.
8. It is essential to focus on the material, not on the audience as people are primarily paying attention to the information being presented.
9. The speakers should recognize and acknowledge their success. It may not have been perfect, but chances are that the speakers are far more critical of themselves than the audience is.
10. Joining an active public speaking forum would also benefit the students. Once they get into the habit of considering themselves comfortable in an unknown environment while speaking in public, the anxiety would automatically go down and make the speakers feel at ease.

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