

# OVERCOMING COMMUNICATION APPREHENSION AMONG STUDENTS

Esther U. Orji. & Alicebenard O. Odom

---

## ABSTRACT

*This study seeks to examine the concept of communication apprehension, and certain impediments to successful and free communication among undergraduate students. The study was carried out in Akanu Ibiam Federal Polytechnic Unwana, using one hundred and six (106) ND1 students to ascertain the extent of communication apprehension encountered by these students. The researchers adopted Personal Report of Communication Apprehension (PRCA-24) developed by James C. McCroskey, (1978) and adapts ten items mainly based on the types of activities that cause apprehensions to these students. The study revealed that the newly admitted students suffer great apprehensions in most of the classroom activities. The study also reviewed the causes and negative effects of communication apprehension on these students. This paper also describes the need for assertiveness training skills – a behaviour modification technique, as a measure to overcome communication apprehension encountered in public speaking, classroom based seminar presentation, and interactions with persons and/or groups. The training procedures were discussed vividly. Assertiveness is relatively incompatible with communication apprehension. It may be encouraged through educational methods using role – play as central focus. If assertive behavior is strengthened, communication apprehension would be*

*weakened, and apprehension would be high in communication where assertive behavior is relatively low.*

**Keywords:** Communication Apprehension, Assertive Behaviour

## **INTRODUCTION**

Many students experience difficulties in responding or asking questions in the classroom setting, public and group interactions. Most of them avoid communicating due to fear, tension and anxiety associated in public speech. Unfortunately, researchers in the field of communication studies found that public speaking is not avoidable in higher institution; hence, most of the courses require seminar presentations and public speech presentation (Morreale, Hugenberg, & Worley, 2006), and these are among the activities that few students admire, while most of them dislike it due to stage fright, fear and tension. Research suggests that 80% of students involved in speech presentation or seminar presentation experience some levels of communication apprehension; while 20% of them encountered high degree of tension may be as a result of lack of proficiency in English language skills (McCroskey & Richmond, 1982). As English is a second or foreign language to these students, it creates a big challenge to them. It may also be because English language has become the first in order of importance; the only communicative medium to these students. They are being taught in the classroom in English language, of which, they have minimum access to it outside the classroom situation (Dawit Amogne, & Abiy Yigzaw 2013). Thus, individuals with high level of communication apprehension will

always avoid, or looking for means to escape seminar presentation, asking or responding to question in group, and as well run from public speech presentation.

The effect of communication apprehension among student is becoming a prolonged issue; this calls the attentions of not only researchers in communication but as well researchers in other field of studies. There is a need for psychological interventions. Communication apprehension requires a study to help investigate and predict the biological situation and historical endowments associated to it. Detecting the possible causes of students' communication apprehension in school situation, should help researchers and educators in designing strategies for early discovering and limiting the degree of apprehensions in communication (Nadene, Judy, Jeffrey & Julie 2010).

## **COMMUNICATION APPREHENSION**

The term communication apprehension (CA) is defined by McCroskey, J. C (1977) as a consistence personality trait that makes someone more likely to be tensed, anxious and physiologically aroused in oral communication situation. CA can be said to be a subjective feeling of anxiousness and worry, fear, and flight activated by the automatic nervous system as a result of speech presentation (Spielberg 1983). In McCroskey (1977a, 1978), communication apprehension was said to be "an individual's level of fear or anxiety association with real or anticipated communication with another person or persons".

Communication apprehension to some extent differs from individual to another and also varies from one situation to another. To some people, the fear they encountered in oral communication in group surpasses the fear of death. Identifying measures which can mitigate the prevalence of oral communication apprehension prompted the researchers to adopt one of the psychological approaches – assertive behavior training skills.

### **1. Causes of Communication Apprehension among Undergraduate Students**

Four theories that explain the causes of communication apprehension have been identified to include (McCroskey, J.C, 1982);

- a. **Trait-like CA:** This means a relatively enduring personality type orientation toward a given mode of communication across a wide variety of contexts such as; oral communication apprehension, writing apprehension and singing apprehension. It includes heredity and environment, we can be born with it or learn it.
- b. **Generalized – context CA:** This means a relatively enduring personality type orientation toward communication in a given type of context such as the type of communication settings (McCroskey J.C & Richmond, V.P, 1982). This type of CA appears in four varieties – Public speaking CA, classroom/meeting speaking CA, group discussion CA, and dyadic interactions CA.

- c. **Person – Group CA:** This type of CA is viewed as the reactions of an individual to communication with a given individual or group of individuals across time. This explains why some individuals or group of individuals can induce apprehension in a person during communication, while other group can cause reverse action.
- d. **Situational CA:** This is a transitory orientation toward communication with a given person or group of people. It can be said to represent the reactions of an individual to communication with a given group of individual in a given environment. Buss (1980) cited in McCroskey (1988) suggests that situational CA can be caused by novelty, formality, subordinate status, conspicuousness, unfamiliarity, dissimilarity, and degree of attention from others.

## **2. Effect of Communication Apprehension on Undergraduate Student**

Several studies conducted and published (20 studies from 1972 – 1978) on CA, indicated that individual with high CA are helpless by such condition, while those with low CA are benefitted by such. McCroskey and Anderson (1976) found that high CAs who is undergraduate student prefers attending large lecture classes over small classes which encourage interaction. The effect of this behaviour is that students who avoid interaction in classrooms often attract lower grades because they avoid participation in full class activities, and hence learn less from such courses. Scott, M.D, Yates, M.P, & Wheelless, L.K

(1975) found that high CA students, significantly, are less likely to seek the assistance of available tutors than students with lower CA. The effect here is that high CAs do less well compared to other students in these classes. McCroskey C.J & McVetta, R.W (1978) found that students who are high CAs prefer classes where they may sit on the sides or back of the room, while low CA prefer seats in the center and front of the class. The effect is that teachers asking high CA students to sit in the center or front of the class found that they learn less. McCroskey, J.C & Sheahan, M.E (1978) found that high CA college students as compared to those with lower CA are less likely to accept a blind date, interact with peer strangers, and to engage in exclusively (steady) dating. The effect here is that students with weak social connections are more likely to drop out of college. McCroskey, J.C & Kretzschmar (1977) found that college graduates with high CA are more likely to marry immediately upon graduation than are those with lower CA. The effect here is that early marriage has been found to be a good predictor of divorce. Quiggins, J.G, (1972) found that high CAs are perceived as both less credible and less interpersonally attractive than are low and moderate CAs. The effect is that negative attractiveness and low credibility lead to dislike and rejection in social and work environments. Hurt, H. T. & Joseph, K. (1976) found that high CAs are less likely to be turned to as opinion leaders or to be selected as friends than other people. The effect here is that people who are not opinion leaders have less influence in their work environment, and people who are not selected as friends can be lonely and accepted less in their social lives. Richmond, V.P (1977) found that high CA has less

likelihood of being successful in the job applicant screening process. The effect here is that high CAs have less chance of being hired compared to others (McCroskey, J.C, 1982).

Recent studies by Wan Zumusni (2010) found that the level of CAs among the final year Bachelor of Business Administration students was very high. This study discovered that 45% of the students obtained scores above 80. This study revealed that many students do not like to participate in public speaking and reported feeling tensed and nervous when engaging with unfamiliar students in group discussions. Pappamihel, N.E (2002) discovered that students who came in with fewer language skills tend to be more nervous and apprehensive about learning and speaking English language. This present paper seeks to proffer assertive behaviour skill as a measure for dislodging this canker from students and instill in them, the right behavioural attributes towards achieving a well balanced communication.

The data from the table below shows the responses regarding the types of communication activities that predisposed these students to communication apprehensions. Each of the four point scales (Strongly Disagree, Disagree, Agree, and Strongly Agree) contains in its column the total response to each item and the percentage of the population that responded to it. The result significantly, states the extent to which these students suffer from this phenomenon thereby calling for a behaviour modification techniques to alleviate such distress.

**Table 1: The findings of the study**

The above result prompted the researchers to prescribe a measure that can mitigate the prevalence of communication apprehension found among these students, and to help them to adapt well in various school activities. Hence, Assertiveness skill is being recommended as a remedy to such condition.

S/N	Items	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree	Total respondents
1	I dislike participating in group discussions	36 (34%)	21 (20%)	0(0%)	49(46%)	106
2	Generally, I am comfortable while participating in group discussions.	52(49%)	3(3%)	24(23%)	27(25%)	106
3	Engaging in a group discussion with new people makes me tense and nervous.	24(23%)	12(11%)	67(63%)	3(3%)	106
4	Generally, I am not nervous when I have to participate in an English speaking activity.	26(25%)	32(30%)	27(25%)	21(20%)	106
5	I am afraid to express myself in English at any English speaking activity.	26(25%)	28(26%)	24(23%)	28(26%)	106
6	Communicating during an English speaking activity usually makes me feel uncomfortable.	30(28%)	21(20%)	22(21%)	33(31%)	106
7	I am relaxed when answering questions in English.	30(28%)	16(15%)	35(33%)	25(24%)	106
8	While participating in a conversation with a new acquaintance, I feel very nervous.	20(19%)	24(23%)	41(39%)	21(20%)	106
9	I'm afraid to speak up in conversations.	28(26%)	30(28%)	26(25%)	22(21%)	106
10	I have no fear of giving a speech.	11(10%)	33(31%)	31(29%)	31(29%)	106



## **ASSERTIVE BEHAVIOUR**

Assertiveness is one of the psychological construct which clearly denotes the ability of one to express his/her thoughts and feelings in a manner that clearly states his/her needs and as well keeps the lines of communication open to others (Arigbabu Oladipo, and Owolabi – Gabriel 2010). The basis of assertiveness according to Joseph Wolpe (cited in Eze, 2009) is that assertion and communication apprehension are relatively incompatible; if assertive behavior is strengthened, communication apprehension is weakened; and anxiety would be high in interpersonal response where assertive behavior is relatively low. Low assertiveness affect students in interpersonal and group communication situations Althen, (1991). Being assertive offers the potential to acquire feelings of control, increased confidence and improve self – esteem. One who is assertive is always ready to give and also receive complement, accept shortcoming, initiate and carry on conversation, make request and directly express objection to unacceptable requests or issues, express affection, anger, need, and other personal feelings and thoughts in socially appropriate and self-satisfying ways (Onyeizugbo, E.U, 2003). Riley (2004) identifies three essential criteria for success when deciding to use an assertive response; timing, content and receptivity. Dickson (cited in Wolverson, 2006) states that assertive behavior attacks apprehension not another person, ensuring that the reasonable rights of all involved are respected.

## **Benefits of Assertive Behaviour to Undergraduate Students**

Being assertive offers numerous benefits; it enhances the feeling of self confidence; it maintains one's respect and of other; it depicts an honest manner in interpersonal relationships, and most importantly, increases the chances for getting what one really wants from life, Arigbabu, et al., (2010). According to Gilmartin, J 2000) cited in Catherine Mc. Cabe and Fiona Timmins (2002) students who lack assertiveness are predisposed to communication apprehension, and they display the following negative attitudes; lacked self confidence; prefer theoretical discussion rather than practice related discussions; resistance to interpersonal skills and are mainly driven by anxiety or fear related to childhood traumas.

## **ASSERTIVE TRAINING**

Assertive training requires creativity and teacher commitment. "The ability to communicate effectively does not arise automatically, it results from many hard hours of learning, practicing and internalizing" (Audean Duesphol 1984, cited in Catherine et. al., 2003). The table 2 below shows the assertive behavior training skills.

**Table 2: Teaching Plan**

Time allocated	Activity	Description
5 minutes	Session guidelines	Seating arrangement arranged to promote discussion and group cohesion. The guideline explained.
10 minutes	Ice breaker – history of names (Bondn1988b),	Each student introduces their name and how it was chosen

	Slater (10990)	for them. This aids relaxation and creates fun atmosphere
15 minutes	Assertiveness – 'brainstorm' (Slater, 1990)	Students are asked to provide words that they associate with assertiveness. Slater (1990) discovered that students mentioned power, strength, and control. Emphasis was to describe assertion as behavior rather than attitude.
15 minutes	Assertiveness – definition (Bond 1988b)	Assertiveness defined; submissive, aggressive, indirect and assertive are differentiated. Reasons for not behaving assertively are outlined; stress, response, repressed emotion, devaluating oneself, choice, and lack of role models explained.
30 minutes	Practicing and noticing 'crumple buttons' (Bond, 1988b).	The class is asked to think back to recent time when it was difficult to behave assertively. This aids class discussion and common crumple buttons emerged and treated. Catherine et. al., (2003) identified the following crumple among them; feelings of fatigue, lack of confidence or knowledge, and the effect of autocratic senior personnel.
30 minutes	'Sculpting' aggressive/indirect/sub missive/assertive (Bond, 1988b).	Here, a role-play exercise where a facilitator asks the class to vocally guide or 'sculpt' the body positions, actions, and verbal behaviour when acting out each of the

		four behaviours are practiced.
30 minutes	Consider your rights	The class chooses the actual request situation to be adopted. Assertive right adopted from Dickson(1986) and Slater (1990): right to express ones feeling and opinion, state ones needs and set priorities as a person, independent of any roles; treated with respect as an intelligent, capable and equal human being; to say 'no' or 'yes'; make mistake and be responsible for them; change mind; say I don't understand and ask question; decline responsibility for other people's problems, deal with people without being dependent on them for approval.
30 minutes	Scenarios	The group acts a scenario role play. A part acting as the person making the request, the facilitator acting as the recipient of the request. Here the students observe the four behaviours and examine which appear to be the most effective.
20 minutes	Summary	The students are asked to discuss the four behaviours and the effect of each of them on them personally.

The above table 2 depicts assertive training program organized by Catherine Mc Cabe, (2003) to the first year nursing student.

The study showed that the scenario was both positive and enlightening, and that after the training, the nursing students reported low assertiveness in their interpersonal communication with patients.

## CONCLUSION

Assertive behavior training skill is a behavior modification approach adopted for effective communication in every aspect of life within and outside the school environment. It is a crucial ingredient required by these students who enter the institution with poor or minimal communication skills. Organizing assertive behavior training before or during orientation program for these newly admitted students will surely be apt in infusing and strengthening effective communication amongst them and, as well reduce communication apprehension throughout their years in school.

This study offers an insight for language educators, seminar course tutors, and orientation programmers in the causes and effects of communication apprehension among undergraduate students. As most of the basic courses offered in the school had a seminar presentation focus, most students involved tend to experience some degree of communication apprehension. This paper suggests that assertive behavior is a measure to eliminate such negative behavior as both phenomena were found to be incompatible.

## REFERENCES

- Audean Duesphol, T, (1984). Teaching Interpersonal Communications, Nurse Educator Spring: 25-28
- Bond M, (1988b) Assertiveness Training: When and Why Nonassertive? *Part2. Nursing Times* 84(10):69-72
- Catherine, M. Cabe & Fiona Timmins, (2003), teaching assertiveness to undergraduate nursing students; *Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved. doi:10.1016/S1471-5953(02)00079-3*
- Dickson, A. (1986). A Woman in your own Right: Assertiveness and You, 2nd edition *Quartet, London.*
- Eze, J.E, (2009). Lecture Note on assertive: Retrieved 05-07-15.
- Gilmartin J (2000). Psychodynamic sources of resistance among student nurses: some observations in a human relations context. *Journal of Advanced Nursing* 32(6):1533-1541.
- Hurt, H. T., & Joseph, K. (1975). *The Impact of Communication Apprehension in the Process of Social Change*. Paper presented at the Eastern Communication Association, New York City.
- Nadene, N.Veveya, Judy C. Pearson, Jeffrey T. Child, & Julie L. Semlak (2010). The only thing to fear is Public Speaking? Exploring predictors of communication in the Public speaking classroom. *Journal of the communication, speech, & Theatre Association of North Dakota* Volume 22.

- McCroskey, J. C. (1977). Oral communication apprehension: A summary of recent theory and research. *Human Communication & Research*, 4, 78-96.
- McCroskey, J. C. & Kretzschmar, M. M. (1977). Communication Apprehension and Marital Relationships of College Graduates: An Exploratory Investigation. *Paper presented at the Eastern Communication Association, New York City.*
- McCroskey, J. C., & Andersen, J. F. (1976). The relationship between communication apprehension and academic achievement among college students. *Human Communication Research*, 3, 73-81.
- McCroskey, J. C. & McVetta, R. W. (1978). Classroom seating arrangements: Instructional communication theory versus student preferences. *Communication Education*, 27, 99-111.
- McCroskey, J. C., & Richmond, V. P. (1982). Communication apprehension and shyness: Conceptual and operational distinctions. *Central States Speech Journal*, 33, 458-468.
- McCroskey, J. C., & Sheahan, M. E. (1978). Communication apprehension, social preference, and social behavior in a college environment. *Communication Quarterly*, 26, 41-45.
- McCroskey, J. C. (1982a). *An Introduction to Rhetorical Communication*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, p. 25.

- McCroskey, J. C. (1978). Validity of the PRCA as an index of oral communication apprehension. *Communication Monographs*, 45, 192-203.
- McCroskey, J. C. (1982b). Communication competence and performance: A research and pedagogical perspective. *Communication Education*, 31, 1-7.
- Pappamihel, N. E. (2002). English As A Second Language Students And English Language Anxiety. *Issues In The Mainstream Classroom. Proquest Education Journal*, 36(3), 327-355.
- Pearson, J. (1983). Interpersonal communication. Glenview, IL: Scott- Foresman.
- Quiggins, J. G. (1972). The Effects of High and Low Communication Apprehension on Small Group Member Credibility, Interpersonal Attraction, and interaction. *Paper presented at the Speech Communication Association, Chicago.*
- Richmond, V. P. (1977). *Communication Apprehension and Success in the Job Applicant Screening Process*. Paper presented at the International Communication Association. Berlin, West Germany.
- Scott, M. D., Yates, M. P., & Wheelless, L. R. (1975). *An Exploratory Investigation of the Effect of Communication Apprehension in Alternate Systems of Instruction*. Paper presented at the International Communication Association, Chicago, IL.
- Slater, J. (1990). Effecting personal effectiveness: assertiveness training for nurses. *Journal of Advanced Nursing* 15:337-356



Spielberg, C. D. (1983). Manual for the State-Trait Anxiety Inventory (STAI). Consulting Psychologists Press, Palo Alto, CA.

Wolverson C. (2006): Assertiveness in the workplace: 16 march.  
<http://www.mentalhelp.net/psychelf/chap13/chap13f.ht>