

COMMUNICATION APPREHENSION AND HISPANICS:
AN EXPLORATION OF COMMUNICATION APPREHENSION AMONG MEXICAN AMERICANS
HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS

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ABSTRACT

The study was designed to measure the Communication Apprehension(CA) of Mexican American high school students and compare that data with the results of previous research. The results indicated that (1) Mexican American students have a significantly higher percentage of high CAs than Anglo high school students,(2) the high CA levels occur when either Spanish or English is spoken, and (3) perceived speech proficiency was positively, significantly related to CA measures.

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The U.S. Bureau of the Census classifies Hispanics as persons of Spanish origin or descent who designate themselves as Mexican American, Chicano, Puerto Rican, Cuban and Other/Spanish/Hispanic. Although tied together by common cultural background, language and religion, these groups present distinct social cultural and economic profiles (Ford Foundation, 1984, p.6). Sixty percent of the 14.6 million Hispanics in the United States, excluding Puerto Rico, are of Mexican origin (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1981; Passel and Warren, 1983), with the majority of these individuals residing in the Southwestern United States.

There is a significant educational attainment gap between Hispanics and other ethnic and/or racial groups within the United States. The high school dropout rate for Hispanics is twice that of the national average (Ford Foundation, 1984). One out of every four teenage students of Mexican origin lag at least two or more years behind others in their age group (Olivas, Brown, Rosen, and Hill, 1980). The proportion of Hispanic high school graduates is significantly lower than that of the general population.

It is believed that one of the most significant factors impacting upon the educational attainment of Hispanics is their English language background and proficiency (Fligstein and Fernandez, 1982; Duran, 1983). Language is a vital component of personal identity, cultural continuity and group cohesion, and most Mexican Americans maintain strong patterns of use of both Spanish and English languages (Macias, 1979)

It is also generally recognized that possession and use of English language skills is a pre-requisite to full and effective participation in public school

education in the United States (Astin, 1982). Erickson and Schutz (1982) noted a lack of research on young Hispanic's communicative competence in high school. It has been suggested that communicative competence research may point to factors other than surface proficiency in the English language as having the dominant effect on success in classroom communication (Duran, 1983). While only limited research has explored the possible relationship between oral communication and educational attainment among Hispanics, it is known that the quantitative character of communicative participation is distinctly less for Mexican American students and that factors other than language proficiency in English among Mexican American students might be responsible for the quantity of communication in classrooms (Laosa, 1977); Ramirez, 1981; U. S. Commission on Civil Rights, 1973).

Students using these two languages may either experience communication apprehension, or, alternatively, may use their bilingualism to avoid situations in which they feel apprehensive (Krashen, 1981). In the case of bilinguals, apprehensiveness in the primary language will usually lead to apprehension in the second language (Fayer, McGrosky and Richmond, 1983).

Communication Apprehension (CA) is an individual's fear or anxiety associated with either real or anticipated communication with another person or persons. CA is said to affect the behavior of more students than all learning disabilities combined (Hurt, Scott, McCrosky, 1978). It has been estimated that twenty percent of all students in public schools experience high levels of CA (McCrosky, 1970, 1977a, 1982a). CA is highly associated with ineffective oral communication and has a negative effect on academic success. CA may act as a general learning inhibitor for the bilingual and/or Mexican American student.

Communication Apprehension and The Classroom

In the United States' educational system, effective oral communication is

highly valued and rewarded. Hurt, Preiss and Davis (1976) identify the impact of oral communication on the learning environment:

There is little doubt that the North American educational system places great reward on verbal behavior in the classroom. Pedagogical devices such as testing, group discussions, story-telling, experimental learning, and the like, all demand frequent verbal output on the part of students. Out-of-class activities such as counseling sessions, and even recess, also demand verbal interaction.

Carroll, (1964) noted that most learning occurring in the school environment is verbal learning; not only the acquisition of new words for new concepts, but also the ability to verbally express the nature of those concepts.

CA is highly associated with ineffective oral communication and, thus, it can have a negative impact on academic success. At the elementary level, teachers have been found to evaluate students' academic potential differently on the basis of communication apprehension (McCrosky and Daly, 1976). Teachers often expect the highly apprehensive student to do less well in most areas of academic achievement, have less satisfactory peer relationships and a lower probability of academic success than less apprehensive students. The apprehensive student develops a dislike for school early and drops out readily (Klopf, 1978; McCrosky, 1976). No significant relationships have been observed between CA measures and intelligence measures (McCrosky, 1977). Hurt and Preiss (1978) suggest that as the students' CA increases, their attitudes toward school become more negative, motivation to learn decreases and final grades are detrimentally affected.

For the high CA, the normal educational situation would be perceived as threatening. Students are required to participate in class meetings, group discussions, oral reports to classmates and conferences with counselors and teachers. Students learn to feel anxious in situations in which they have little control

(McCrosky and Richmond, 1980). Communication in these contexts may result in lowered affective thresholds leading to heightened anxiety, withdrawal, less persistence in a second language and negative academic consequences (Krashen, 1981).

The school environment is a factor in the development of communication apprehension. And, CA may influence the development of the student's personality and social development within the school environment. Daly and Friedrich (1981) state that "school can and does have an effect on apprehension. The responses and environmental norms established by the school serve to increase or reduce anxiety (p.252)." In turn, the student's behavior affects the way in which those in the school environment, for example, a teacher, reacts to the student. The school environment can create, maintain or decrease the level of communication apprehension. CA becomes a stable individual characteristic by the time the student has reached high school.

Bilingualism

Bilingualism, that is, the use of two languages, specifically in the education setting, is a serious educational concern throughout the United States, and particularly among members of the Hispanic community. Krashen (1981) suggests that a lowered affective filter is essential for developing competence in a second language. When a student uses two languages, he/she may avoid situations in which they must function in a language with which they feel apprehensive. In a study of non-native English speakers, Allen, O'Mara and Andriate (1984a) found that individuals who were apprehensive in English would avoid situations in which they would be called upon to function in English.

Apprehensiveness in the primary language is usually related to apprehension in the second language (Fayer, McCrosky and Richmond, 1984; McCrosky, Fayer and

Richmond, 1983). Thus, students who are highly apprehensive when speaking in their native language may have difficulty learning a second language. The "language" problem of the student may not reflect either the student's lack of language competence or skill, but their CA, furthermore, would not be significantly affected by more sophisticated language or skill training, since CA is an affective response of the individual.

Phillips and Butt (1966) found that a disproportionately high percentage of students identified as experiencing high levels of CA were from first and second generation ethnic families. They suggest two possible causes for the high CA levels: (1) students may have more difficulty acquiring English language skills, because of the mixture of languages used at home and (2) the students' parents may have lower English language and English oral communication skills and, consequently, be more hesitant to provide reinforcement or mixed reinforcement patterns to the child who is learning to communicate in a society which is linguistically foreign to the parent.

Purpose of the Study

Previous cross-cultural research on communication apprehension has indicated that significant differences exist among nationalities and cultural groups (Klopf and Cambra, 1979); Allen, O'Mara and Andriate, 1984 and 1984a; Fayer, McCrosky and Richmond, 1984; McCrosky, Fayer and Richmond, 1983; Applbaum and Trotter, 1986) Prior to this study, no data had been reported on communication apprehension among Mexican American high school students. Only one previous study had examined the Mexican American college student's levels of communication apprehension (Applbaum and Trotter, 1986). The present research was undertaken to generate data on Mexican American students at the high school level. This information could be compared with previous research drawn from other high school students across the

United States. The following research questions were examined:

1. Are the CA scores for Mexican American high school students speaking English similar to those of other U.S. students speaking English?
2. Are the CA scores of Mexican American High school students speaking Spanish different than their CA scores when speaking English?

The study sought to determine the extent to which the subjects' self perceived competence in a language was related to communication apprehension in that language. Two research questions were examined:

3. Is self-perceived competence in English related to CA in English?
4. Is self-perceived competence in Spanish related to CA in Spanish?

The study explored the relationship between the CA levels of subjects across the two languages. The research question explored was:

5. Is CA in English related to CA in Spanish?

It has been suggested that within the Mexican American culture attitudinal differences exist between genders (Cuellar, Harris and Jasso, 1980). Applbaum and Trotter (1986) found significant differences in CA between Mexican American men and women. The following questions were examined:

6. Are there differences between CA levels among Mexican Americans by gender speaking either English or Spanish?

Finally, the study explored the level of CA among Mexican American students. The study sought to discover whether the frequency of subjects with high CA was within the previous normal range. The following question was examined:

7. Is the percentage of Mexican American students in the high CA category similar to that found in the Anglo high school student population?

PROCEDURES

Measures

The Communication Apprehension (CA) of subjects was measured by the Personal Report of Communication Apprehension (PRCA-10) instrument which focuses on apprehension about oral communication (McCrosky, 1970, 1982). McCrosky (1978) found that the PRCA is (1) capable of predicting behavior that is consistent with the CA construct; (2) correlated with personality variables consistent with the CA construct; and (3) provides a measure of a stable characteristic of the individual that can be altered through intervention.

Two versions of the 10 item PRCA were administered to all subjects. The first version was associated with speaking in English. The second version was targeted to assess feelings of apprehension associated with speaking in Spanish. Both versions of the PRCA-10 were administered in English.

The most frequently used CA measure is the PRCA-24 (long form) developed by McCrosky (1984). The PRCA-24 instrument has high reliability and predictive validity (McCrosky and Beatty, 1984); it has demonstrated alpha reliability coefficients ranging between .82 and .86 in Spanish and .83 and .90 in English using the English and Spanish versions of the measure administered in English (Allen and Andriate, 1984; Allen, O'Mara and Andriate, 1984a). Correlations between the PRCA-10 (short form) and PRCA-24 (long form) have ranged between .88 and .92. Internal reliability estimates for the PRCA-10 have ranged between .87 and .90 for student samples. Test-retest reliability has been estimated at .74 over a five-week time period. Data from over 9,500 previously tested subjects indicates a mean of 30 with a standard deviation of 7. Scores above 34 are considered a "high" and those below 21 are considered "low" and are analogous to the CA category ranges on the long form. The short form of the PRCA was used in this study, because time

constraints did not permit employing the longer form and the researchers sought to reduce potential subject fatigue (Hurt and Preiss, 1978; McCrosky, 1978).

Language proficiency measures of subjects in both Spanish and English were attained by asking subjects to rate their proficiency in each language on a scale from 1 to 5 (5 = excellent and 1 = poor). This method has been used in recent studies of CA and language proficiency (Fayer, McCrosky, and Richmond, 1984; McCrosky, Fayer and Richmond, 1983). Data was also collected on subjects relative to ethnicity, ethnic generation and gender.

Subjects

The study sample was composed of 284 secondary level students drawn from a large South Texas public high school which incorporates grades 9 through 12. The students were drawn from 10th and 11th grade regular English classes. Eighty-eight percent (252) of the subjects were of Mexican ancestry with 70.2 percent being first or second generation. In contrast, of the 31 Anglos sampled in these classes, ninety percent of these students were fourth or fifth generation U.S. citizens. Among the Mexican American students, 136 (53.9%) were female and 116 (46.1% were male. Among the anglo students, 13 female and 18 male. While the native language for all subjects was either English or Spanish, the dominant societal language was English. Only 37 subjects did not speak Spanish. Participation in the study was voluntary, and students received no course credit or reward for their participation in the research project. Subjects were debriefed following administration of the PRCA-10 measures. All subjects were tested within the same school week in the Spring of 1985 in their regular English classes.

Results

Table 1 shows the CAs scores on the PRCA-10 for Mexican American male and

female subjects speaking English and Spanish. The data indicates that the mean CA scores for both male and female subjects when speaking either English or Spanish are higher than those found in other studies of comparable age groups in individuals tested on the PRCA-10. The Spanish CAs scores were higher than the English CA scores for both sexes. The Anglo subjects in this study showed CA scores similar to those found in previous studies using this CA measure. Anglo male and female CA scores in English were 30.77 and 32.22, respectively, and in Spanish, 35.6 and 36.0.

One-way analysis of variance procedures were used to examine differences in CA levels among Mexican American subjects by gender speaking either English or Spanish. The data indicates no significant differences between male and female subjects.

Table 2 presents the percentage of subjects with high CA by sex and language. The data analyses of Table 2 indicates that Mexican American males and females have a high percentage of high CAs when speaking either in English or Spanish. Anglo subjects scores also indicated a high percentage of high CA scores only when speaking Spanish.

The subjects' proficiency measures in a particular language, English or Spanish, were significantly correlated with their CA measures when speaking that specific language. All correlations are positive and significant at the .001 level. Mexican American subjects scores showed a .32 correlation between proficiency in Spanish and CA in Spanish and a .33 correlation between proficiency in English and CA in English.

The subjects' mean language proficiency ratings were 3.57 for English and 2.89 in Spanish. Only 14 subjects rated their proficiency in English as below average or poor. Sixty-two (62) subjects indicated a preference for speaking only English and only two (2) had a preference for speaking only Spanish. A majority (154) of

the Mexican American subjects classified themselves as bilingual and only 10 Mexican American subjects spoke only English. The correlation between the subjects' ratings of language proficiency in English and Spanish was non-significant (-.45). The correlation of overall CA measures in English and Spanish was significant at .364 (p.001)

DISCUSSION

The Mexican American subjects in this study demonstrated an overall mean CA of 34.13 on the PRCA 10 when speaking English and 35.66 when speaking Spanish with standard deviations of 6.65 and 6.87 respectively. When compared with the normative mean PRCA 10 score, the mean overall CA of the Mexican Americans was higher in both English and Spanish.

Research has repeatedly shown that bilingual, non-native students in the United States experience less CA in their native language than in English, and the native language was the dominant language for those subjects. Since English is the Mexican American students' dominant language, one would expect that the CA level in English would be lower than the CA level in Spanish. For the Mexican American subjects in this study, although not necessarily the native language, English was the dominant language and the relative CA levels were similar for both languages which is not consistent with previously studied bilingual populations.

Previous research had indicated that 20 percent of the United States population experiences high levels of CA (McCrosky and Richmond, 1982). The Mexican American males and females showed high CA frequencies significantly above the overall CA norm in English and Spanish. The Anglos indicated a normal range of high CAs in English, but an exceedingly high percent of CAs in Spanish, as one might normally expect. The communication apprehension levels of the Mexican American students in this study were exceedingly high and consistent with the high levels of CA found among other studies using Hispanic subjects, adults and college

students.

Although CA values differ significantly across cultures in a variety of contexts, the communication norms of a specific culture may dictate whether the CA level is a problem. If an individual were to have a CA level exceeding the norm, it might hinder the individual's ability to interact with others of the same culture. For example, if a Mexican American student experiences high CA in classroom situations, it might create a barrier to normal classroom interaction and the individual's failure to behave as expected might be perceived negatively by other communicators, including teachers and school administrators.

In an examination of Hispanics (Puerto Rican), Fayer, McCrosky and Richmond (1984) found a stronger positive relationship between proficiency in a second language and reduced CA in that language than between proficiency and CA in the native language. In an earlier study (1983), they had concluded that perceived proficiency in an individual's native language was not "meaningfully related to CA in that language. . ." (p.7). This study found a significant positive correlation between the students' CA in a language and their perceived proficiency in that language. An examination of subject preferences also indicates that the Mexican American students in this sample preferred to speak in English, rather than Spanish.

While it has been suggested that CA is an affective response and, thus, may be related to the performance skills (proficiency) of an individual, it also is possible that one factor underlying an individual's proficiency evaluation is their perception of their oral performance in specific contexts, and, this perception may be shaped in part by the CA level of the student. Since behavior change can lead to affective change under certain circumstances, it may be possible in those cases to reduce CA by improving the student's performance skills and, thus, modifying the individual's perception of his/her performance skills.

This study, as have previous studies of bilingual subjects, found significant positive correlations between one's CA in the two languages. Previous research suggested that CA is a trait which can be generalized across both languages for bilinguals. CA in a second language is best predicted by CA in the dominant or native language. If we assume that CA in a second language is related to CA in the dominant language, the findings may suggest that reducing CA in the dominant language may reduce CA in the second language.

It has been suggested that as the CA level in the dominant or native language increases, students will experience greater difficulty in learning a second language. Furthermore, individuals with high CA levels in certain learning situations may avoid those contexts. Thus, if CA is manifest in the learning situation required for increasing the student's second linguistic competence, they will experience difficulty learning the second language. While the underlying assumptions for this conclusion are supported by this study, neither this study nor any of those reported here actually tested or established any relationship between CA and language learning.

With the exception of the research by Applbaum and Trotter (1986), previous research has not indicated significant differences in CA levels as a result of subject gender. However, a number of studies have noted consistent differences between men and women on CA measures (Allen, Andriate and Cusick, 1982; Allen, O'Mara and Judd, 1985; Fayer, McCrosky and Richmond, 1984). They noted that female CA scores were generally lower than male CA scores. The CA measures among the Mexican American students in this study were not significantly different. Furthermore, the CA levels of Anglos in this study were consistent with previous United States studies, showing no significant differences by gender. The Applbaum and Trotter (1986) study examined college students. The college population of Mexican Americans may not correspond to the high school population. A normal selection

process, that is, less than 45% of all Mexican Americans graduate from high school and less than 50% of graduates attend college, occurs which eliminates a significant percentage of the high school population from the college population pool. The results in the earlier study may reflect a restricted student population and not the Mexican American population as a whole. Any gender differences may be the result of cultural bias relative to sex roles.

The normal high school classroom requires students to communicate orally, frequently in a question and answer or dialogue mode. We would expect that students who are not proficient orally would not receive as much reinforcement and support from their teachers or participate in as many classroom activities as students who are proficient orally. Students with high CA in the classroom context would likely restrict their oral communication. Since silence is rewarded by certain teachers and demanded in certain learning activities, the high CA would perceive silence as rewarding and the behavior would be reinforced. Rather than coping with the problem, students would avoid confronting their fear of communicating in the situation.

Some students may lack the skills necessary to be highly proficient in the classroom, while others may possess the appropriate behaviors but be unable to perform adequately due to high CA. This research project dealt with the identification of the latter. Based on our results, one could conclude that a significant number of Mexican American students in high school may be unable to perform adequately due to their excessively high levels of CA. Furthermore, such avoidance in the learning environment could involve a complex interaction with other factors. For instance, a lack of proficiency or understanding of the course content by the student, e.g., solving quadratic equations in algebra, could interact with an aversion to ask questions created by the high CA and the student would be unwilling to or unable to acquire the clarification or skills needed for

learning the course concept. The failure to acquire clarification might ultimately be reflected in the student's inability to respond correctly on an examination. And, finally, improper examination responses would lead to lower achievement measures and a lower course grade.

TABLE 1
CA IN ENGLISH AND SPANISH

SEX	LANGUAGE					
	SPANISH			ENGLISH		
	mean	mdn.	s.d.	mean	mdn.	s.d.
FEMALE	35.64	36.15	7.15	34.16	43.04	6.35
MALE	35.68	35.71	6.35	34.10	34.36	6.59

TABLE 2
HIGH CA BY SEX AND LANGUAGE

	ENGLISH		SPANISH	
	MALE	FEMALE	MALE	FEMALE
MEXICAN AMERICAN	49.1	45.6	59.5	59.6
ANGLO	22.2	28.8	100.0	92.3

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