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# Language Anxiety

## From Theory and Research to Classroom Implications

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# Chapter Eight

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## Oral Communication Apprehension and Hispanics: An Exploration of Oral Communication Apprehension Among Mexican American Students in Texas

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### INTRODUCTION

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 nationalities. Although tied together by a common cultural background-language and religion, these groups present distinct social-cultural and economic profiles (Ford Foundation, 1984, p. 6). The largest Hispanic group in the United States traces its origins to Mexico. Sixty percent of the 14.6 million Hispanics in the United States, excluding Puerto Ricans, are of Mexican origin (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1981; Passel & Warren, 1983), with the majority of these individuals residing in the Southwestern United States.

In the United States, Hispanic enrollment and graduation from educational institutions is significantly lower than that of the general population and of other major ethnic and racial groups (U.S. Department of Education, 1982). One of the most significant factors affecting the educational attainment of Hispanics is their sometimes limited English-language background and proficiency (Fligstein & Fernández, 1982; Durán, 1983). This is not surprising since the proper use of English-language skills is a prerequisite to full and effective participation in public-school education in the United States (Astin, 1982). Such a requirement no doubt explains in part why studies have found that the communicative participation of Mexi-

can American students is distinctly less than that of other students (Laosa, 1977; Ramirez, 1981).

Since most Mexican American students use two languages—English and Spanish—with varying levels of proficiency and competence in educational situations, they may experience communication apprehension or use their bilingualism to avoid educational situations in which they feel apprehensive (Krashen, 1981). The term *communication apprehension* (CA) refers to an individual's level of fear or anxiety associated with either real or anticipated communication with another person or persons. More than all other learning disabilities combined, CA is said to affect the behavior of students, with over 20% of all students experiencing high levels of CA (Hurt, Scott, & McCroskey, 1978; McCroskey, 1970, 1977a, 1982a). In light of these facts, it is reasonable to assume that CA may act as a general learning inhibitor for the bilingual and/or Mexican American student.

In discussing how important the use of language skills is in the schools, Hurt, Preiss, and Davis (1976) identify specifically 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.

For the high CA student, normal educational situations such as those described by Hurt, Preiss, and Davis will be perceived as threatening. Such students are apt to feel anxious in social situations in which they have little control (McCroskey & Richmond, 1980) because their participation is not voluntary but rather is required by someone in authority. Typically, students are required to participate in class meetings, group discussions, oral reports to classmates, and conferences with counselor and teachers. Because students have little control over communication in these contexts, their required participation may result in heightened anxiety, withdrawal, less persistence in a second language, and negative academic consequences (Krashen, 1981).

The level of communication apprehension manifested by the student is potentially critical in the learning process because students who experience a high degree of CA are unlikely to participate fully in the learning situation. If a student is apprehensive about communicating in a particular language—whether English or Spanish—he or she will have negative affective feelings toward oral communication and will likely avoid it. In light of the fact that even native English-language speakers who are highly apprehensive are more passive in the classroom, the student who is not highly proficient in English would be expected to exhibit high CA levels and passive classroom behavior.

When students use two languages, they may avoid situations in which they must function in a language with which they feel apprehensive. Non-native English speakers who are apprehensive in English, then, tend to avoid situations in which they are called upon to function in English (Allen, O'Mara, & Andriate, 1984a). This apprehension in the second language, moreover, is usually somehow related to apprehensiveness in the primary language (Fayer, McCroskey, & Richmond, 1984; McCroskey, Fayer, & Richmond, 1983).

## PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

Until now, no data have been reported on CA among Mexican Americans. This study was therefore undertaken to generate normative data on the CA of Mexican Americans at both the high school and college levels. Data collected by the study were then compared with previous research data drawn from high school and college-level students, primarily from the United States, Puerto Rico, and other non-native bilingual populations. In making this comparison, the following research questions were examined:

1. Are CA norms for Mexican American high school and college students speaking English similar to those of other Hispanics speaking English?
2. Are CA norms for Mexican American college students speaking either English or Spanish similar to those of other Hispanics speaking English or Spanish?
3. Are the CA scores of Mexican American high school students speaking Spanish different from their CA scores when speaking English?

Because it has been suggested that within the Mexican American culture, attitudinal differences exist between genders (Cuéllar, Harris, & Jasso, 1980), the following additional questions were also examined:

4. Are there gender-related differences between CA levels of male and female Mexican Americans speaking English in various contexts?
5. Are there gender-related differences between CA levels of male and female Mexican Americans speaking Spanish in various contexts?

In order to answer these questions, two separate studies were conducted. The first of these involved the testing of college students at Pan American University, and the second involved the testing of high school students in south Texas.

## Measures

**College.** The CA of college students was measured by the Personal Report of Communication Apprehension (PRCA-24) instrument, which focuses on apprehension concerning oral communication (McCroskey, 1970, 1982a). This instrument was chosen largely because of its high reliability and predictive validity.

Two versions of the 24-item PRCA developed by McCroskey and Beatty (1984) were administered to all subjects (see Figure 1). The first version was directed toward measurement of CA associated with speaking in English, while the second version was intended to assess feelings of apprehension associated with speaking in Spanish. Both versions of the PRCA-24 were administered in English.

**High school.** The CA of high school students was measured by the Personal Report of Communication Apprehension (PRCA-10) displayed in Figure 2 (McCroskey, 1970, 1982a). The short form of the PRCA was used with high school students because time constraints did not permit employing the longer form and because the researchers sought to reduce potential student fatigue (Hurt & Preiss, 1978; McCroskey, 1978). Two versions of the

*Directions:* This instrument is composed of 24 statements concerning your feelings about communication with other people. Please indicate in the space provided the degree to which each statement applies to you by marking whether you (1) Strongly Agree, (2) Agree, (3) Are Undecided, (4) Disagree, or (5) Strongly Disagree with each statement. There are no right or wrong answers. Many of the statements are similar to other statements. Do not be concerned about this. Work quickly, and just record your first impression.

- . 1. I dislike participating in group discussions.
- . 2. Generally, I am comfortable while participating in group discussions.
- . 3. I am tense and nervous while participating in group discussions.
- . 4. I like to get involved in group discussions.
- . 5. Engaging in a group discussion with new people makes me tense and nervous.
- . 6. I am calm and relaxed while participating in group discussions.
- . 7. Generally, I am nervous when I have to participate in a meeting.
- . 8. Usually I am calm and relaxed while participating in meetings.
- . 9. I am very calm and relaxed when I am called upon to express an opinion at a meeting.
- . 10. I am afraid to express myself at meetings.
- . 11. Communicating at meetings usually makes me uncomfortable.
- . 12. I am very relaxed when answering questions at a meeting.
- . 13. While participating in a conversation with a new acquaintance, I feel very nervous.
- . 14. I have no fear of speaking up in conversations.
- . 15. Ordinarily I am very tense and nervous in conversations.
- . 16. Ordinarily I am very calm and relaxed in conversations.
- . 17. While conversing with a new acquaintance, I feel very relaxed.
- . 18. I'm afraid to speak up in conversations.
- . 19. I have no fear of giving a speech.
- . 20. Certain parts of my body feel very tense and rigid while giving a speech.
- . 21. I feel relaxed while giving a speech.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 22. My thoughts become confused and jumbled when I am giving a speech.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 23. I face the prospect of giving a speech with confidence.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 24. While giving a speech I get so nervous, I forget facts I really know.

*Scoring:*

Group	= 18 - (1) + (2) - (3) + (4) - (5) + (6)
Meeting	= 18 - (7) + (8) + (9) - (10) - (11) + (12)
Dyadic	= 18 - (13) + (14) - (15) + (16) + (17) - (18)
Public	= 18 + (19) - (20) + (21) - (22) + (23) - (24)
Overall CA	= Group + Meeting + Dyadic + Public.

**FIGURE 1** PRCA-24. (Personal Report of Communication Apprehension)

*Directions:* This instrument is composed of 10 statements concerning your communication with other people. Please indicate the degree to which each statement applies to you by marking whether you (1) Strongly Agree, (2) Agree, (3) Are Undecided, (4) Disagree, or (5) Strongly Disagree with each statement. There are no right or wrong answers. Work quickly, and just record your first impression.

1. I look forward to expressing myself at meetings.
2. I am afraid to express myself in a group.
3. I look forward to an opportunity to speak in public.
4. Although I talk fluently with friends, I am at a loss for words on the platform.
5. I always avoid speaking in public if possible.
6. I feel that I am more fluent when talking to people than most other people are.
7. I like to get involved in group discussion.
8. I dislike to use my body and voice expressively.
9. I'm afraid to speak up in conversations.
10. I would enjoy presenting a speech on a local television show.

To compute the PRCA score, follow these 3 steps:

1. Add the scores for items 2, 4, 5, 8, 9.
2. Add the scores for items 1, 3, 6, 7, 10.
3. Complete the following formula:  

$$\text{PRCA} = 3 - (\text{total from step 1}) + (\text{total from step 2}).$$

**FIGURE 2** PRCA-10. (Personal Report of Communication Apprehension—short form)

10-item PRCA were administered to all students (see Figure 2). The first version was intended to measure CA associated with speaking in English. The second version was directed toward assessing feelings of apprehension associated with speaking in Spanish. Both versions of the PRCA-10 were administered in English.

## Subjects

**College.** The study sample was composed of 429 undergraduate students enrolled in basic psychology and basic studies courses at Pan American University, Edinburg, Texas. Ninety percent (388) of the subjects were of Mexican American ancestry. Among the Mexican American students, 254 (65.5%) were female and 134 (34.5%) were male.

Participation in the study was voluntary, although the psychology students did receive course credit for participating in the research project. All subjects were debriefed immediately following administration of the PRCA-24 measures.

**High school.** The second study sample was composed of 284 secondary-level students drawn from a large south Texas public high school, which incorporates grades 9

**Table 1**  
**MEAN CA IN ENGLISH-SPEAKING AND SPANISH-SPEAKING COLLEGE STUDENTS**

Context	English			Spanish		
	M	F	M/F	M	F	M/F
	14.836			16.142		
	15.224			16.507		
	16.410			17.582		
	18.388			19.007		
	64.858			69.239		
	15.011			16.878		

**Table 2**  
**HIGH CA BY SEX/CONTEXT/LANGUAGE COLLEGE STUDENTS**

Context	Language/Sex			
	English		Spanish	
	M	F	M	F
Dyad	3.0	9.4	9.7	11.4
Group	4.5	8.7	9.0	13.4
Meeting	7.5	13.0	14.2	18.1
Public	15.7	30.3	19.4	28.0
Overall	16.4	28.0	23.1	33.1

through 12. The students were drawn from 10th and 11th grade regular English classes. Eighty-eight percent (252) of the students were of Mexican ancestry. Among the Mexican American students, 136 (53.9%) were female and 116 (46.1%) were male. 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.

## RESULTS

Table 1 shows the overall CA and context CA subscore means for college students speaking English and Spanish. The data presented show an increase in the means of context subscores as we move from *dyad* to *group* to *meeting* to *public* contexts. The data indicate that the mean CA scores in Spanish are higher than mean English CA scores on both the overall CA measures and the subscore measures. Moreover, female students show higher mean CA scores than do male students on overall CA and subscore measures across both languages.

Table 2 presents the percentage of college students with high CA by sex and language on all CA measures. The data indicate that (1) female students have a greater percentage of high CAs than do male students on overall CA; (2) female students have a greater percentage of high CAs than do male students when speaking either English or Spanish; and (3) female

**Table 3**  
**LEVEL OF COMMUNICATION APPREHENSION BY SEX: COLLEGE STUDENTS**

Context	Spoken Language	Female Mean	Male Mean	S.D.	F. Ratio	(p)
Dyad	English	15.7795	14.8358	4.4251	4.021	
	Spanish	16.9488	16.1418	4.7847	2.505	
Group	English	16.0287	15.2239	4.6523	3.961	
	Spanish	17.2677	16.5075	4.7162	2.287	
Meeting	English	17.9961	16.4104	4.660	10.403	
	Spanish	18.6024	17.5821	4.7584	4.065	
Public	English	20.3583	18.3841	4.8557	14.963	
	Spanish	20.1732	19.0075	4.7104	5.435	
Overall	English	70.3425	64.8582	15.5985	11.128	
	Spanish	72.9921	69.2388	16.6224	4.513	

\* Significant differences between male and female measures.

**Table 4**  
**CA IN ENGLISH-SPEAKING AND SPANISH-SPEAKING HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS**

Sex	Language					
	Spanish			English		
	Mean	Mdn.	S.D.	Mean	Mdn.	S.D.
FEMALE						
MALE						

students have a higher percentage of high CAs than do male students in all four communication contexts. Table 2 also shows that as the number of participants in the communicative context increases, the percentage of high CAs in all but two group contexts also increases.

Table 3 shows an analysis of the level of CA by sex and communicative context for college students. One-way analysis of variance procedures was used to examine differences between male and female students on the overall CA and subscore context measures. Female students produced CA measures that were significantly different from those of male student CA measures on overall CA, meeting CA, and public CA measures when speaking Spanish.

Table 4 shows the CA scores of Mexican American high school students speaking English and Spanish. The data indicate that the mean CA scores for both male and female Mexican American students when speaking either English or Spanish are higher than those found in other studies of comparable age groups. In addition, the Spanish CA scores were higher than the English CA scores for both sexes. The Anglo students in this study, however, showed CA scores similar to those found in previous studies. Anglo male and female CA scores in English were 30.77 and 32.22, respectively, and in Spanish, 35.6 and 36.0, respectively. These data indicate no significant differences between the CA of Anglo male and female students.

Table 5 presents the percentage of high school students with high CA by gender and language. The data analyses of Table 5 indicate that Mexican American students have a

**Table 5**  
**HIGH CA BY SEX AND LANGUAGE: HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS**

	<i>English</i>		<i>Spanish</i>	
	<i>Male</i>	<i>Female</i>	<i>Male</i>	<i>Female</i>
Mexican-American				
Anglo				

higher than normal percentage of high CAs when speaking either English or Spanish. Anglo students' scores, on the other hand, indicated that these students experienced a high level of CA only when speaking Spanish.

## DISCUSSION

The Mexican American CA results in this study are different from those reported by researchers examining other Hispanic groups. The CA studies of Puerto Rican university students by Allen, O'Mara, and Andriate (1984a, 1984b) and by McCroskey, Fayer, and Richmond (1983) found much lower levels of CA in Spanish and higher CA levels in English than were found for the Mexican American population in this study. These differences, however, can be explained by the fact that the two populations had different *native* languages, even though in both cases Spanish was the dominant language. Since Spanish is the Puerto Rican students' dominant as well as native language, one would expect these students' CA level in Spanish to be lower than their CA level in English. Research has repeatedly shown that bilingual, non-native students in the United States similarly experience less CA in their native language than in English when the native languages were the dominant language for those subjects. For the Mexican American subjects in our study, however, English was the dominant, although not necessarily the native, language; thus, relative CA levels found in this study were in fact consistent with data from previously studied bilingual populations.

It should also be noted that the CA levels for the Mexican American students in this study were not as extreme as those previously found for Puerto Rican students. Puerto Rican students showed less CA in their native language and more CA in their second language than did the Mexican American students in our study. A comparison of the Mexican American sample with the Latin American sample examined by Allen, O'Mara, and Andriate (1984a) shows similar patterns. One significant difference between these two populations, however, is that the Latin American women's CA scores were significantly lower across all contexts than were those of the Mexican American women.

Our study, then, appears to support previous studies' findings that the level of communication apprehension is a function either of the individual's native language or of his or her dominant language. Bilinguals experience less CA in their native or dominant language than in their second language, and this occurs across communication contexts. Additionally, the CA scores increase as we move from the more informal, personal contexts to the more formal, less personal contexts.

Previous research has indicated that approximately 20 percent of the United States mainland population experiences high levels of CA (McCroskey & Richmond, 1980). In keeping with this finding, the Mexican American college women in our study showed high

CA frequencies in Spanish as well as an extremely high percentage of CA in the public communication context. The Mexican American college males, however, were in the high CA range on overall CA only in Spanish. Moreover, relatively few Mexican American college students revealed a high CA in dyad, group, and meeting situations in both English and Spanish.

Although CA values differ significantly across cultures and in a variety of contexts, the communication norms of a specific culture will 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 experiences high CA in dyadic classroom situations, CA 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.

While it has been suggested that CA is an affective response and, thus, may be unrelated to the performance skills (proficiency) of an individual, it is possible also that one factor underlying students' proficiency evaluations is their perception of their oral performance in specific contexts. This perception, moreover, may be shaped in part by the students' CA levels. Since behavior change can lead to affective change under certain circumstances, it may be possible in such cases to reduce CA by improving the students' performance skills and, thus, modifying the students' perception of their performance skills.

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

It has been suggested in this study that as the CA level in the dominant or native language increases, students will experience greater difficulty in learning a second language. Furthermore, it is known that individuals with high CA levels in certain learning situations may avoid those contexts. Accordingly, if CA is manifest in the learning situation required for increasing the students' second linguistic competence, students will very likely 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 has actually tested or established any relationship between CA and language learning at either the college or high school level.

An area of significant difference between our study and other research on CA among bilingual speakers is that of gender-related CA. While previous research has not indicated any consistent CA patterns between male and female college students, Allen (1984) reported that Latin American women are less apprehensive than Latin American men. Fayer, McCroskey, and Richmond, on the other hand (1984), examining Hispanic college students in Puerto Rico, concluded that CA was not a function of gender. These authors did note, however, that Hispanic males reported higher overall CA and higher CA measures in each context, except group, than did females. The findings of both studies conflict with our own. In our study the CA measures of Mexican American male and female college students were significantly different from those of Anglos and Hispanics examined in previous studies. Mexican American females in our study consistently produced higher CA scores than did Mexican American males both overall and across all communication contexts when speaking either English or Spanish. The gender differences revealed, by our study, however, may in fact be the result of cultural bias relative to sex roles.

Yet another finding of this research is that CA increases with the increasing formality and social complexity of communicative situations. In our study, both male and female Mexican American college students showed a pattern of increasing CA scores across communicative contexts, moving from dyad to group to meeting to public context. Although this CA pattern had not been reported in most previous research, it does appear in the data reported by Fayer, McCroskey, and Richmond (1984) on United States Hispanic pharmacy students. In addition, the CA scores of Latin American subjects in the Allen, O'Mara, and Andriate (1984b) study exhibited this pattern when the subjects were speaking English. Such a pattern seems to conform to general teacher observations and student comments that CA is experienced more intensely in more formal situations involving greater numbers of participants, such as in classroom interactions or when speaking before an audience; accordingly, less CA is experienced in more personal communication situations, such as in dyadic interactions and small-group encounters.

In a number of ways our study of high school students produced results similar to those of our college student study. The Mexican American high school males and females both showed high CA scores significantly above the overall CA norm in both English and Spanish, whereas the Anglos indicated a normal range of high CAs in English, but an exceedingly high percent of high CAs in Spanish. Moreover, CA levels of the Mexican American high school students in this study were exceedingly high and consistent with the high levels of CA found among other studies using Hispanic adults and college students. In contrast with the results of our study of college students, however, no significant differences in CA emerged between genders in the sample of high school students.

Finally, our study has implications for classroom instruction. The normal high school classroom requires students to communicate orally, frequently in a question-and-answer or dialogue mode. We would therefore expect that students who are not proficient orally would not receive as much reinforcement and support from their teachers and would not participate in as many classroom activities as students who are proficient orally. More specifically, students with high CA in the classroom context are likely to restrict their oral communication. Such a response may be detrimental to academic performance in a particularly subtle way. Since silence is rewarded by certain teachers and actually demanded in certain learning activities, the student with high CA is apt to perceive silence as a desirable response to classroom activities, and in this way the behavior is reinforced. As a result, rather than coping with the problem of communication apprehension, students would avoid confronting their fear of communicating in the classroom situation.

Some students may actually lack the skills necessary to be highly proficient in the classroom, while others may possess the appropriate behaviors but may be unable to perform adequately due to high CA. This research project dealt with the identification of the latter problem. Based on the results of our study, one may conclude that a significant number of Mexican American students in high school may be unable to perform adequately because of their excessively high levels of CA. Such avoidance in the learning environment could of course 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, resulting from high CA. Such a student might be unwilling or unable to request the necessary clarification of content or to acquire the skills needed for learning the course concept. The failure to attain clarification might ultimately be reflected in the student's inability to respond correctly on an examination. And, in turn, improper examination responses are likely to lead to lower achievement measures and a

lower course grade. In this sense the CA of Mexican American students may be a critical factor in determining classroom success and retention at both the high school and college levels.

## **APPLICATION**

Because of the negative impact CA may have on students' educational performance, treatment of this complex oral communication dysfunction is critical. Three general treatment methods are recommended: (1) systematic desensitization, (2) cognitive modification, and (3) skills training.

Systematic desensitization (SD) focuses on reducing the CA associated with the act of oral communication. The student is taught how to relax in the presence of the anxiety stimuli and, thus, the anxiety is reduced in subsequent oral communication situations. SD treatment appears to be situation-specific, that is, treatment may reduce anxiety in public communication contexts, but not dyadic contexts. Reduction of the apprehension or anxiety does not appear to generalize across contexts.

Cognitive modification (CM) focuses on changing the student's own cognitive appraisals. CA is viewed as resulting from a negative self-evaluation of one's performance in an oral communication situation and the expectation of adverse consequences. Students are taught to manage their self-evaluation and to develop more facilitating self-talk. Students learn to evaluate more realistically the consequences of their behavior (Kanter & Goldfried, 1979). Like SD, this treatment has found to be effective when dealing with anxiety in public contexts, but it does not generalize to interpersonal situations (Fremouw & Zitter, 1978). SD appears to be more effective than CM with individuals showing only high anxiety in public contexts, whereas CM appears to be more effective for individuals reporting a more generalized, cross-situational CA. One element of this treatment appears to be particularly effective in reducing anxiety and that is to provide individuals with insight into the unproductive thinking that induces their anxiety (Thorpe, Amatu, Blakey, & Burns, 1976).

Skills training (ST) focuses on developing the communicator's behavioral repertoire in oral communication situations. It is assumed that students perform poorly in communication situations because they lack the requisite skills, and successful performance will lead to a decrease in anxiety. The student is taught the behavioral skills required for success in the particular oral communication context. Like some CM treatments, it would appear that skills training learning in one communication situation may not transfer to other contexts.

Glaser (1981, p. 337) has recommended the following:

These programs which seek to reduce anxiety toward communication most effectively would emphasize SD or CM. On the other hand, to reduce avoidance of communication situations and to produce actual behavior change, ST is the treatment of choice. A reduction in anxiety does not imply a decrease in avoidance behavior nor the learning of more effective response.