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## Communication Apprehension: Understanding Communication Skills and Cultural Identity in the Basic Communication Course

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*Research Article*

# **Communication Apprehension: Understanding Communication Skills and Cultural Identity in the Basic Communication Course**

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## **Abstract**

*Students enrolled in a basic communication course are required to self-examine their communication apprehension by means of the PRPSA (McCroskey 1970). The present study qualitatively examined pretest and posttest responses from 793 students enrolled in a basic communication course to assess their understanding of their communication apprehension. Our findings reveal that students articulate their communication apprehension in relationship to their public speaking skills (e.g., writing/outlining, audience analysis, and argumentation skills) and cultural identity (e.g., ESL, peer relationship, and religious identity). Our findings contribute to previous understanding of communication apprehension and are discussed in great detail alongside implications and future directions.*

*Keywords: communication apprehension, basic communication course, communication skills, cultural identity*

## **Introduction**

Since its inception by McCroskey (1970), communication apprehension (CA) and the related constructs of willingness to communicate, reticence, shyness, humor, and attitude have received extensive research attention. In the basic communication course, encouraging students to self-examine their CA is now common practice and often even encouraged at the start of class. Instructors will administer the Personal Report of Public Speaking Anxiety measure (PRPSA) and accompany the survey with classroom discussion about student experiences. Given that a primary goal in a basic communication course is for students to reduce their CA, it makes sense that a significant portion of the course would be dedicated to understanding and examining this construct.

Scholars have noted the importance of considering CA in the classroom for both students and instructors. For example, research has focused on assessing levels of apprehension (e.g., Hunter, Westwick, & Haleta, 2014; Kernbach, Eppler, & Bresciani, 2015; Shi, Brinthaupt, & McCree, 2015), treating or reducing apprehension (Bodie, 2010; Brundage & Hancock, 2015; Byrne, Flood, & Shanahan, 2012), and instructor teaching apprehension (Baiochi-Wagner, 2011; Roby, 2009). Ultimately, CA is worthy of consideration as it is both important for students' learning success and future speaking experiences (Hunter et al., 2014; Vevea, Pearson, Child, & Sendlak, 2009).

However, research has largely failed to examine how students self-describe and understand their CA or how personal and social factors influence identity in the classroom context (Hendrix, Jackson, & Warren, 2003; Hosek & Soliz, 2016; Sprague, 1992). As students from diverse backgrounds and experiences continue to matriculate into higher education, the qualitative gap in the literature regarding student identity and CA is evident (for exceptions on culture and CA see Croucher, Sommier, Rahmani, & Appenrodt, 2015; Docan-Morgan & Schmidt, 2012; McCroskey, Fayer, & Richmond, 1985). One example of the issues diverse student identities could bring to CA issues include differences in how people perceive themselves (more U.S. and Western European) versus how others perceive them (more East Asian) (Kim & Cohen, 2010). Seo, Kim, Tam, and Rozin (2016) found that students from East Asian countries define themselves as how they are collectively seen by others and the larger the audience the more negatively students evaluated their own speeches. Yet another way cultural differences could impact CA might be recognition that the cultural ideal of public speaking normalizes the Anglo-

American speech community (Boromisza-Habashi, Hughes, & Malkowski, 2016; Colvin & Tobler, 2011). Having students from diverse backgrounds in public speaking classes could change not only how speeches are developed and organized but also how students perceive and manage CA.

The present study presents a nuanced understanding of how students self-describe their CA in the public speaking classroom. In what follows, we articulate the importance of understanding students' communication skills and identities as both of these constructs relate to CA.

### **Communication Apprehension**

Thousands of students each year enroll, either by choice or because it is a degree requirement, in a basic communication course and are faced with the realization of understanding and managing their CA. McCroskey's (1977) foundational research laid forth the claim: "Communication apprehension refers to an anxiety syndrome associated with either real or anticipated communication with another person or persons" (p. 27-28), which four decades later continues to inspire research. Eventually research led to typifying CA into either "state" or "trait" based apprehension. Whereas state-based CA is considered a normal apprehensive response (or natural nervousness) to speaking in front of others, trait-based CA is accepted as high CA that is categorized as an atypical experience (see McCroskey, 1977). Ultimately, research has forwarded the importance of understanding and treating CA, as students with high levels of CA, who are more likely to drop classes with speaking, face challenges developing interpersonal relationships and avoid interactions in the classroom (see Butler, Pryor, & Marti, 2004; McCroskey, Booth-Butterfield, & Payne, 1989). Taken together, research has revealed how CA affects all facets of an individual's life.

Common approaches to CA research have measured a student's apprehension levels in relation to oral performance and style of presentation (Hancock, Stone, Brundage, & Zeigler, 2010) and the skill of speech construction and writing processes (Bruss, 2012; Housley Gaffney & Kerckmar, 2016). In addition to measuring a student's apprehension, research has explored ways to treat/or reduce CA (see Bodie, 2010; Brundage & Hancock, 2015; Byrne et al., 2012; Hunter et al., 2014). Accordingly, the aim of studies related to CA have focused on addressing students' public speaking apprehension by measuring variables related not only to oral delivery and face to face performance among peer groups, but also in assessing

correlating skills related to writing apprehension. Much research has also focused attention to developing training for skills development or activities to reduce students' CA.

### **Communication Apprehension and Skills**

Traditionally, CA research has focused on a student's level of CA related to delivering a speech or participating in class discussions. However, before a speech is delivered a student will be required to select a topic, research, outline, and ultimately write the speech. And in a basic communication course, these technical skills and many others are part of the curriculum. If a student has CA related to delivering a speech, then it is plausible the student will experience CA through the course of the entire speech learning process. In a study examining students levels of writing competency and apprehension, Daly (1978) found that students with high apprehension "not only write differently and with lower quality than low apprehensives," but also fail to demonstrate the same writing skills as low apprehensives (p. 13). Researchers Badrasawi, Zubairi, and Idrus (2016) found that students' writing apprehension negatively influenced students' writing performance. For students in a basic communication course, this may mean earning a lower grade and/or experiencing elevated levels of apprehension throughout the speech development process, which may require instructors to adapt classroom experiences. Further, Badrasawi et al. (2016) call to attention the importance of time constraints, previous experience with the writing styles, and opportunities to receive instructor feedback on writing as factors that contribute to students' apprehension. Because writing is arguably one of the most important skills for students' overall success in college, this calls to attention the importance for public speaking instructors to recognize and address writing apprehension in the basic communication course.

Another facet of the writing process that students perceive as a daunting task is finding and integrating high quality primary sources into their speeches. During this process, students in a basic communication course are often exposed to tasks that they may perceive are beyond their capabilities, including in-text and oral citations, as well as building a reference list. Supporting the importance of considering students' apprehension, McCroskey (1977) forwarded that writing assignments could be powerful enough to lead students to miss class and ultimately interfere with the completion of the assignment. Learning to cite sources correctly requires students to access newly gained knowledge as well as implement it in practice for their speech.

Beatty, Balfantz, & Kuwabara (1989) forward the finding that as students gain experience with new tasks (i.e. citing sources) the task does become less novel, but the anxiety remains present. This means that the student remains anxious and may even interpret audience reactions as more negative than non-anxious speakers.

Often instructors in a basic communication course will include peer workshops or group work opportunities (e.g., think-pair-share, experiential activities) in order to encourage participation from students. These opportunities also contribute to shaping the classroom climate, which in the basic communication course is important for all students, but in particular for students who consider public speaking a top fear (Dwyer & Davidson, 2012). Scholars have positioned opportunities for students to work and learn from peers as integral to student learning in the classroom (see Kolb, 1984; Weimer, 2003). Research suggests that students with a higher willingness to communicate will often associate communication interactions with a reward system and are more likely to approach the communication interaction with low CA (Vevea et al., 2009). In this way, the students may gain more meaningful connections to their peers and feel a sense of understanding, comradery, and support (Thalluri, O'Flaherty, & Shepherd, 2014). While students may benefit from peer learning experiences in the classroom, there remain questions about how peer experiences affect students CA when they are developing and delivering their speech. After all, students in most basic communication courses will be required to present (at least one speech) in front of their peers so understanding how peer experiences interact with CA could be beneficial.

Another experience related to the speech development process is audience analysis. Audience analysis is a process that requires an understanding of the relationship between a speaker's audience (demographics, attitudes, beliefs, and values, and environment) and topic. This process is typically quite challenging for students, who must consider how, or if, their topic relates to their audience. In developing the audience analysis skill, students are also in the process of attaching meaning to a delivered message when it is presented to an audience (Seiter & Gass, 2007). While previous work has primarily focused on examining students' reactions of audience feedback while delivering a speech to understand their level of CA, this body of literature provides insight into the importance of audience analysis for students. Simply put, previous literature suggests that positive nonverbal cues (e.g., head nods, smiles, or eye gazes) from an audience helps reduce a speaker's anxiety, whereas negative feedback cues (e.g., few or no smiles or limited eye gaze) may

increase anxiety (see MacIntyre & Thivierge, 1995; McCroskey et al., 1989). If students experience fluctuating levels of CA as a result of audience feedback, perhaps, by better understanding students fears or anxiety about the process of audience analysis and topic selection. we can better understand CA. While researchers do speak favorably of the positive potential outcomes of individualized learning opportunities; less is known about how a student's identity relates to CA.

### **Communication Apprehension and Student Identity**

One justification for addressing the relationship between student identity and CA is the importance of understanding culturally specific communication behaviors (styles, patterns, strategies etc.).

Cultural patterns refer to common themes through which different cultures can be understood. They consist of beliefs, values and norms shared among members of a group and which remain stable over time. They make most members of a culture respond or behave in more or less similar ways in similar situations. (Dhanesh, 2011, p. 5)

Hall (2000) conceptualizes culture as being situated on a continuum with respect to how much of the context is contributing to communication. He notes, "a high context communication or message is one in which most of the information is either in the physical context or is internalized in the person whereas very little is in the coded, explicit, transmitted part of the message" (Hall, 1981, p. 91). In such high context cultures (Hall includes most developing nations), speakers often use indirect or vague language because the majority of the meaning is coming from the speaker themselves. In low context cultures (most Western nations) meaning is carried in the message itself.

Across basic communication courses, awareness for diversity and cultural influences are widely included as learning outcomes; however, far too often the instructor and curriculum favors a Euro-American perspective and a White male standard of speaking that disempowers minority students belonging to minority group(s) (Hanson, 1999). Hanson argues that it is important for basic communication courses to consider gender and diversity in order to promote both sensitivity and inclusivity for students. Further, because a student's level of CA may

affect her/his success in a basic communication course, it is important for instructors to understand a student's cultural background and inclusively empower the culture with which the student identifies.

While culture can play a role in creation, delivery, and understanding of public speaking, co-cultures, a minority group of individuals who exist within another more dominant culture, also play a role. Co-cultures can include such identity markers as gender, social class, socioeconomic level, religion, abilities and age. Wood (2014) encourages inclusion of co-cultures into public speaking practice. She stipulates that this goes beyond awareness to engaging in a person-centered communication where each person is respected and one's own ethnocentric biases are resisted.

Previous research beyond cultural identity markers has established nuanced approaches and orientations to teaching public speaking across cultures, primarily, examining how public speaking is supported in the educational system (see Croucher et al., 2015). Research has also highlighted the differences in expectations among (national) cultures, including Korea, Japan, China, Middle Eastern, East Asian, Australian, and Western European, with the expectations of public speaking in a U.S. American classroom (see Ayres, Nagami, & Hopf, 1999; Hsu, 2004; Kondo, 1994; McCroskey, Fayer, et al., 1985; Zarrinabadi, 2012). Differences have also been identified in how students perceive themselves and their audience as they deliver speeches (Boromisza-Habashi et al., 2016; Kim, 2002; Kim & Cohen, 2010). Despite the rich body of cross-cultural CA research, there remains an opportunity to better understand how students explain their CA in relationship to their cultural identity. Such information could potentially reveal how to better adapt the PRPSA for cross-cultural implementation.

There may be cultural issues concerning the PRPSA instrument itself. Addressing CA and cross-cultural adaptation, Croucher et al. (2015) forward concerns and challenges of successfully translating the PRPSA because of idiomatic phrases that may not successfully translate into a target language. While Croucher and colleagues found significant differences in the PRPSA among the participants from England, Germany, and Finland, the researchers still forward a call for a need for future exploration of culturally specific communication patterns.

Further addressing the need for better understanding the relationship between culture and CA, Kim (2002) notes that when students are asked to present a speech about personal values or beliefs, the instructor may inadvertently reward individualist values and minimize the experiences of those student who come from a culture with a more group-derived or more collectivistic cultures. For example, such a speech for

students belonging to a less individualistic culture than the United States may violate the expectations of appropriate self-disclosure, professionalism, modesty, or politeness. Taken together, students from culturally *different* backgrounds may experience CA as a consequence of the incommensurability of assignments with the communicative expectations of their culture.

One additional cultural difference worthy of consideration is that of an “English as a Second Language” (ESL) student’s experience in a basic communication course. As ESL students enter into a basic communication course classroom, they may experience a great deal of apprehension and shyness simply from language barriers. Perceptions of fear of public speaking in ESL students leads to communication impairments and low self-esteem, which then leads to lack of practice, emotional connection with others in the classroom, and even negative self-talk and imagery of personal success (Marinho, De Medeiros, Gama, & Teixeira, 2017). In their study of Japanese student speaking experiences, McCroskey, Gudykunst & Nishida (1985) concluded the following: (1) Japanese students had higher CA than any other group of students, and (2) there was no significant difference in the Japanese students’ CA score when speaking in Japanese or English. These findings may suggest that the native language CA score for non-native English speakers serves as the baseline for their CA score (McCroskey, Gudykunst, et al., 1985). In other words, in order for a non-native English speaker’s CA to be lowered, their native language CA score must be lowered. However, such thinking fails to recognize how public speaking is culturally understood and situated as a communicative behavior. It is important to consider how public speaking is viewed culturally in order to better understand ESL students’ CA in the basic communication course.

Based on the above research, it is clear that there is breadth and depth concerning CA research. However, there remain gaps in regard to how students’ skills and cultural identity relate to CA. Therefore, we offer the following research questions:

RQ1: How do students self-describe their CA?

RQ2: What impact does culture/co-culture have on CA?

These research questions allowed us to delve into examining how students understand and self-describe their CA experiences in the basic communication

course. In the following, we describe the methodology used to participant responses in order to answer our research questions.

### **Method**

For this project, qualitative methods of analysis were utilized to answer our research questions. This methodological approach embraces a humanistic orientation to understanding and representing participants' realities (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002; Tracy, 2013). Aligned with approach, both authors identify as interpretative qualitative researchers and believe it is important to acknowledge their respective researcher positionalities, as they enable us to engage in "reflexive consideration of our role in data gathering and analysis" (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 41). Both researchers identify as White, cis-gendered females, however only the second author identifies as religious and is also a member of the Church of Latter Day Saints. We acknowledge our positions, both our material bodies and lived experiences, because we believe they intersect and inform the analysis of our participants words. Next, we detail our resultant analysis procedures.

### **Site Participants**

After Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval, data was collected from a large, multi-section, basic communication course at a Western public university. Students completed the survey as part of a larger assessment project.<sup>1</sup> Participants were asked the following three open-ended questions: (1) "What do you hope to learn in public speaking?" (2) "What are you anxious or nervous about regarding public speaking?" and (3) "How do you plan to prepare for your presentations in public speaking?" Overall, participants expounded on their experiences and the open-ended survey responses yielded a rich source of data. The survey also contained the PRPSA, instructional communication, and demographic questions (i.e., race, gender, age, year in school, as well as open-ended spaces for students to self-identity within and among categories) (McCroskey, 1970). As result of the richness of the qualitative responses, only the open-ended questions were analyzed for this project. Students completed the questionnaire within the first two weeks of the semesters because the researchers sought to understand how student self-described their communication apprehension prior to exposure to course content and speech lab experiences.

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<sup>1</sup> The data set analyzed for this research was part of a larger three-part assessment project.

Students received 10 points (equal to 1% of their overall grade) for participation. A total of 792 undergraduate students completed the survey. Participants ranged in age from 18-57 ( $M = 21.7$ ). The sample consisted of 513 male students and 279 female students. Of the participants, 373 indicated that they were freshman, 261 were sophomores, 81 were juniors, 60 were seniors, and 17 preferred to not indicate year in school. The majority, 574, of participants identified as White, 64 as Hispanic, 20 as Asian, 13 as Black, three as Native American, four as Pacific Islander, and 114 students chose to not identify race/ethnicity. All identifying information (e.g., first and last name and instructor name) were removed prior to analysis.

### **Data Procedures and Analysis**

Prior to analysis, the research team removed any cases with missing information. The average length of participant responses for each question varied from one or two sentences to short paragraph responses. Following the data organization procedures, the researchers independently read and re-read approximately 250 to 350 participant responses for each of the three open-ended questions in order to become familiar with the data. Through this process, each researcher kept separate notes about observations, relationships, and interesting participant comments. Together, we identified over 20 first level codes. During this process each member identified first-level open codes that were “provisional, comparative, and grounded in the data” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 48). After independently examining the data, we met and explored our research questions in relationship to our emergent categories. We relied on the constant comparative method to reflexively analyze our data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), and participated in an iterative process of coding procedures to organize participants’ responses (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2009). The researchers met weekly for two months to discuss first-level codes such as “uncomfortable,” “look professional in class,” “overwhelming,” “talks,” “write properly,” “ESL,” “citing sources,” “speech topics,” “being foreign” and “preparing speeches.”

Next, the researchers organized these first-level codes into categories and examined them until they were theoretically saturated (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2009). During this process, the researchers continued to meet weekly to discuss and explore the analytical categories emerging from the data (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). Through a process of examining comments and relationships among initial first-level open codes, the researchers took note of interesting comments, such as “I’m nervous about my classmates ignoring me,” “I’m nervous about giving speeches and writing

them,” “I’m anxious about figuring what to speak about and making sure everything is put together,” “I have a certain way of writing my talks down and I hope I can give an effective speech with the outline from class,” or “I’m nervous I will get tongue-tied because English is not my primary language.” A substantial portion of our analysis was devoted to close readings, discussions, and examinations of codes.

After a series of meetings and discussions related to our second-level coding, we then inductively organized the data into the overarching themes of *Skills* to address RQ1 and *Identity* to address RQ2. These themes extended and further elaborated the second-level codes by grouping abstract and theoretical issues like “I worry about my audience understanding me,” “I’m not a good writer, so how will I write a speech?” “I’m stressed about speaking in English because I’m not a native speaker,” “I give a lot of talks in church and I always get really nervous,” and “I’m scared of embarrassing myself in front of my friends.” During this process, the categories of audience analysis, writing and outlining, and argument development emerged for the theme of *Skills*. And, the categories of peer, ESL, and religion emerged for the theme of *Identity*. Once the categories were agreed upon, we began revisiting literature on CA, student learning, and cultural identity in the classroom. All in all, these procedures ensured that our data were under the constant comparison throughout the entire analysis process.

### Findings

In order to answer the research question, the following section presents the themes that emerged as explaining students’ CA. The first theme *Skills* divided into the categories of audience analysis, practice, writing/outlining, and argument development. The second theme *Identity* was further delineated into the categories of peer, ESL, and religion. Table 1 represents the theme of *Skills* and Table 2 represents the theme of *Identity* with respective categories and representative exemplars listed for each theme.

**Table 1**  
**Theme of Skills and Related Categories**

<b>Category</b>	<b>Definition</b>	<b>Exemplar</b>
Audience Analysis	Students' concerns about choosing a topic and developing it into a speech that resonates with their audience.	<p>1. "My audience not understanding my topic," (Victor, 19, Hispanic, male, freshman).</p> <p>2. ". . . I hope I can use my past experiences to relate an important topic and inspire others by doing so. I feel anxious about making a fool of myself in the process" (Jade, 20, White, female, senior).</p>
Writing and Outlining	Concerns students have about their writing and outlining abilities.	<p>1. "Writing the speech outlines and remembering my outline for when I give the speech. I'm really nervous I will forget all my hard work I did for my outline" (Carson, 18, White, male, freshman).</p> <p>2. "I worry will not be able to write good speeches" (Gemma, 19, White, female, sophomore).</p> <p>3. "I'm scared about the writing part. I used to be really good at writing but my skills have diminished...I don't feel like I'm a very good writer anymore" Andie, 25, White, female, senior).</p>
Argument Development	Represents students worries about developing arguments and integrating primary sources.	<p>1. "Giving speeches on topics I am unfamiliar with about, it's harder for me to feel like an interesting speaker when I am not fully confident in my topic," (London, 21, White, female, sophomore).</p> <p>2. "I'm worried about finding research for my speeches," (Austin, 18, Hispanic, male, freshman)</p>

**Table 2**  
**Theme of Identity and Related Categories**

Category	Definition	Exemplar
Peer	Represents students worries about their classmates' judgment and lack of support while presenting.	<p>1. "I'm scared that I will get up and make a fool out of myself in front of my classmates," (Jaymie, 21, race unknown, male, freshman).</p> <p>2. "Judgment from peers," (Rusty, 21, White, male, sophomore).</p> <p>3. "I am nervous that my trend of nervousness in delivering speeches will be strong in this course and that others will look down on me for it. Or that I will look like a fool," (Caroline, 26, White, female, freshman).</p>
ESL	Notes the apprehension students from non-native English speaking backgrounds feel.	<p>1. "I most worried about my English skills," (Ky, 19, Asian, male, freshman).</p> <p>2. "I'm nervous about getting everything perfect and I can't do that special for my English level," (Sammy, 19, Arab, male, freshman).</p> <p>3. "English language makes me nervous . . . I don't know how to control my feelings and speak better English," (Bo, 28, Asian, male, freshman).</p>
Religion	A form of apprehension related to a student's religious identity.	<p>1. "I want to learn how to give a well delivered speech. I'm kind of nervous, and I'd like to get over that for church talks" [speeches] (Jaxon, 21, White, male, sophomore).</p> <p>2. "I get stressed out and I want to be more comfortable giving speeches or talks [speeches] in front of people," (James, 18, White, freshman).</p> <p>3. "I'm LDS and I frequently have to give talks in church. I get anxious right before I stand up to give presentations and I'm hoping this class will help me become more confident," (Ty, 18, male, White, freshman)</p>

## Skills

The theme of *Skills* was defined as apprehension relating to audience analysis, writing/outlining, or argument development. This theme revealed that students conveyed an apprehension that was not exclusively about delivery or performing their speech, but rather related to perceptions by their peers about their level of knowledge or academic abilities. The comments for the *Skills* theme often reflected students' apprehension in relationship to the peer perceptions.

**Audience analysis.** The category of audience analysis was defined by comments that focused on students' concerns about choosing and developing their speech topics. To illustrate, Jesse, a 22-year-old, White, female, freshman explained: "I'm really nervous about coming up with topics for my speeches." Kaelin, a 21-year-old, White, male, explained: "Speaking about a topic and saying something that someone doesn't agree with and they calling me out on it makes me nervous. I hope I learn how to avoid this." In contrast, to Jesse and Kaelin, other students expressed nervousness not only about the topic, but also about their knowledge and ability to successfully develop the topic into a speech. Kelsey, a 21-year-old, White, male, freshman stated: "I'm worried about not being knowledgeable about the topic I'm speaking about." Much like Kelsey's comment, Dana, a 60-year-old, race unknown, female, junior also illustrated her apprehension through her statement: "I lack confidence in my knowledge of topics and therefore worry about the content of my speech." Finally, some students like Bailey, a 19-year-old, White, male, freshman articulated a sense of nervousness that was entangled with other classroom factors, he stated: "It is a big class. I am worried some speech topics may be hard to follow and I may get lost. Initial feeling(s): overwhelmed." As evidenced by our participants, finding and developing their speech topics in a way that was successful for their audience contributed to the speaking apprehension.

**Writing and outlining.** In contrast to audience analysis, this category focused on students' concerns regarding their written communication skills. Ari, a 23-year-old, White, male sophomore commented: "I worry about writing my speech because I want to learn good techniques and practices that will professionalize my speaking and presenting abilities." Similarly, Kelly, a 31-year-old, White, female, junior made a revealing comment about writing: "I'm really worried about writing my speeches. I feel like I would be okay giving one if someone else wrote it for me." In addition to writing, our participants conveyed how creating outlines for their speeches contributed to their public speaking apprehension. Many of our participants

commented how developing a speech outline both contributed and increased their apprehension. Similarly, Kris, a 21-year-old, White, female, sophomore revealed: “I hope to learn how to write a great speech outline, but writing an outline makes me nervous...and I hope to build my confidence so that I can give a speech with little anxiety.” Interestingly, we also observed how some of our students who had numerous public speaking experiences with “The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints” (LDS church) felt apprehension because they were accustomed to speaking with little to no structure. For example, Reese, a 30-year-old, White, female, junior stated: “I’m nervous about making sure I outline my speech correctly; I have a certain way of writing my talks or speeches down, so I hope I can give an effective speech with the outline from this class.” Writing and outlining speeches, for many students, evoked apprehension because they felt they lacked the necessary skills to do it “the right way” for class.

**Argument development.** This category illustrated students’ concerns about being able to properly communicate their ideas to their peers through well-reasoned arguments and citing sources. According to our participants, *argument development* was also often considered alongside maintaining their credibility. Ainsley, a 21-year-old, White, female, sophomore remarked: “I am not very good at piecing my information together so that it makes sense . . . so I’m afraid of not making sense in my speeches.” Like Ainsley’s comment, Casey, a 23-year-old, White, male, junior, also expressed: “I’m anxious about doing research about a topic I know nothing about and making sense.” Students expressed apprehension about being able to properly cite sources in their speeches. Remy, a 50-year-old, White, female, senior, commented: “I’m nervous about failing to properly cite my sources.” Similarly, Peyton, a 25-year-old, White, female, sophomore, explained “I’m worried about writing a decent speech with good quotes and resources.” Taken together, this category reflected how students felt apprehension about developing cogent arguments and citing sources for the speeches.

## Identity

The theme of identity emerged from the data in ways that both support and contradict previous research. Overall, this theme revealed the importance and complexity of identity as it relates to students’ CA when delivering a speech. Interestingly, this theme and each of the subcategories of peer, ESL, and religion reflected a perceived relationship between the speaker and the audience. Put another

way, students illustrated an apprehension about their identity in relationship to their peers' perceptions.

**Peer.** This category was revealed through students' comments about their fears for their peers' judgment or lack of support. The peer category for our participants revealed how students feared being ridiculed for their speaking ability or judged by their peers in the classroom. When considering giving a speech in the classroom, Sage, an 18-year-old, White, female, freshman, explained: "I am anxious about the quality of my speeches and what people will think of me...I'm don't think I'm very funny in my speeches and I worry about being lackluster." Or as, Mary, a 21-year-old, Hispanic, female, freshman, stated:

I'm nervous about getting up in front of a group of people and talking about something that I might not know about. I have a fear of sounding stupid or being asked a question that I don't know the answer to and being laughed at by my classmates.

Jackie, a 20-year-old, White, female, junior noted: "Being judged by my peers. Messing up in front of everyone. Not being ready, and getting called on out of nowhere." Through their comments, students in this study reveal how their peers in the basic communication course are a source of apprehension for them.

**ESL.** The category of ESL represented how students who were non-native English speakers felt apprehensive about expressing their ideas. In the following example, Maria, a 19-year-old, Hispanic, female, freshman, explained how being an ESL<sup>2</sup> student contributes to concerns in the public speaking classroom: "I worry about my grade because they want everything perfect and I can't do [anything] that special [because of] my English level." Mason, a 28-year-old, Hispanic, male, freshman, stated: "I want to speak well in public, [but] my English is not well and I want to be fluent so I can speak well." Similarly, Angel, a 30-year-old, Hispanic, male, senior, said: "English is my second language, and sometimes there can be words that I mispronounce. Also, this is going to be the first time I am going to record myself giving a speech." Additionally, Lee, a 27-year-old, Asian, male, freshman expressed similar sentiments:

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<sup>2</sup> Students identified as ESL learners in the demographic questionnaire.

I worry that the language barrier won't allow me to express myself clearly enough and for that to lead to failure. English is not my native language so I have to learn to prepare more and be more in control with my vocabulary and therefore be in control on my posture and my delivery methods.

As our participants suggested, being a non-native English speaker may contribute to their CA and speaking confidence. Alex, a 41-year-old, Hispanic, male, senior, summarized this feeling when he said: "I want to be more confident when I speak since English is my second language." For ESL students in our study, being a non-native English speaker was a possible contributing source of apprehension both in writing/outlining and presenting their speeches in class. However, it is important to note that a student identifying as an ESL learner is not necessarily their only source of apprehension and is also not mutually exclusive from other factors that contribute to CA.

**Religion.** The category of religion was in part grounded in the uniqueness of the demographics on our university campus. Comments related to this category highlighted how LDS students identified the desire to address their apprehension in order to more effectively speak at church. In this way, the students often conveyed the apprehension as well as the goal of hoping to transfer their public speaking skills to church speeches, or as they identify such speeches, "talks." Jordan, a 21-year-old, White, male, explained: "I hope to learn how to properly express my topic as I speak. I give talks in church sometimes and I never really know how to put my point across." When considering his apprehension, Taylor, an 18-year-old, White, freshman, stated: "I want to be more comfortable when giving speeches or talks in front of people... I am fine with writing the speeches it's the giving them and trying to remember everything I wanted to say." Riley, a 30-year old, White, female, junior commented: "I'm nervous about making sure I outline my speech correctly. I have a certain way of writing my talks down, so I don't know if I can give an effective speech with an outline in this class." As evidenced by the students in our study, their religious identity contributed to feelings of apprehension as well as a desire to improve their speaking for future religious speaking experiences. In this way, religious identity reflected an interesting connection to speaking both in the classroom and in religious contexts.

All in all, the student responses in our study reveal how they understand their CA in the basic communication course. Through their comments, we learn that their CA

is situated within the overarching themes of *Skills* and *Identity*. Because of the richness of their self-explanations, we gain a depth of understanding that reveals the complexity of CA for students in the basic communication course. Specifically, the students' comments suggest that transferable skills such as writing/outlining, developing cogent arguments, and citing sources, as well as cultural factors such as language skills, peers, and religious background, contribute to their CA.

### Discussion

The impetus of this study was to understand how students self-described and understood their CA. Responses revealed a variety of factors that students in a basic communication course attribute to their CA. Our findings suggest that students experience CA as a result of particular identity markers as well as on the basis of their writing, researching, or argumentation skills. By integrating cultural background into CA and using qualitative self-reports, we add to what is known about CA in the classroom. In the remainder of this discussion section, we reflect on our analysis, forward practical implications, and finally, address the limitations of our study.

Similar to previous research (e.g., King, 2016; Paxman, 2011) this study found that students fear evaluation from their peers, including negative judgment, lack of support, and even beyond the speech itself, what their peers will think of them personally. Students repeatedly noted that they were worried the other students would not like their topic, would feel that their speech was not organized correctly, or that they would “mess up” in front of their classmates. This was especially true of ESL speakers who were worried about being perfect, having others not understand them, and giving speeches in a way that the instructor wanted. These findings support Ayres, Hopf, and Peterson's (2000) findings that students from different backgrounds may give speeches differently but are also aware that they need to adhere to what the instructor is looking for in a graded speech. There was a clear relationship identified between students and their classmates with speakers wanting to be perceived as competent in their ability to give speeches.

However, contrary to what others have found (i.e., Housley Gaffney & Kerckmar, 2016), this research demonstrated that in having a relationship with peers in their classes, some felt that familiarity actually increased their apprehension. Students felt that their identity was threatened more when they knew their classmates and had a relationship with them. This threat came from speakers feeling that other students would think less of them. This could also be a reflection of membership in the predominant religion in the area (e.g., students attending the same church ward

or group). While it is dominant in the area, it is a co-cultural group when considering public speaking students in general. Students who are LDS typically have a lot of experience speaking in public church settings and giving what is termed “talks” rather than “speeches.” Often these talks are unrehearsed. This led many of the students to feel fairly comfortable standing up in front of others. However, when they attend church together and are in class together, they expressed apprehension not necessarily of the act of speaking, but of speaking in front of peers who knew them in a number of capacities and could possibly think less of them if they did not give a good speech in class. Keller (2016) suggests looking at subjects such as religion could render discursive concepts more clearly by asking questions such as “Does it make sense to them? Do they use it? What is *their* understanding of the phenomena we are looking for?” (p. 319). Hamlet (2016) used these techniques in her study of African American worship and records such speaking practices as call and response, collective worship experiences, and dramatic storytelling. In the LDS culture, the practice of unrehearsed “talks” and community building demonstrate particular religious discourse as well. Sprague (2016) admonishes communication instructors to view students as having many aspects of identity, and that traits such as religion could override other identities. In our study, religion and religious practices of speaking overrode such traits as ethnicity or race. As such, religion in our study calls for further study in the areas of how religious or other co-cultural discursive practices are embedded in public speaking and how those practices impact CA for the speaker and perception for the audience.

Skills were also identified as something that is not only important but also induces apprehension in a public speaking classroom. Students expressed concern about “doing it right” when finding a topic, finding sources, and creating an outline. Part of this skill is audience analysis and finding topics that not only the speaker is passionate about but to which the audience can also relate. Seiter and Gass (2007) noted that connecting a message to the audience is a skill which speakers must learn. Often, research on apprehension focuses on delivery of a message, but the construction of that message (both the writing and speaking acts) also induced apprehension for the students in this study. When prompted to consider their CA, many students described at length that a successful public speaking performance was related to their ability to write, research, and develop cogent arguments.

## **Practical Implications**

The findings and resultant analysis of our study afford multiple implications for the basic communication course. One key implication is that CA is not just about delivery, but about writing and researching skills, supporting Badrasawi et al. (2016). To remedy apprehension, teachers should spend time in class, possibly offer workshops, and in general, not just visit the skills side of speech performance and preparation but also discuss, and provide directions for managing, the apprehension that may be occurring.

Another important implication of this study is recognizing and acknowledging the importance of students having and feeling like their own identity has space in the classroom. Instructors should be aware that there is a spectrum of public speaking practices and identities (Sprague, 2016) that are rooted in culture and co-cultures. Most public speaking and apprehension research has been homogenous with a focus on a particular style of speech, with particular mainstream students, particular kinds of speeches, and particular ways of identifying CA. By far, the majority of this research has been rooted in a white, Euro-western perspective. Hendrix and Jackson (2016) in their article on diversity and difference in communication education, call for providing a platform “where we might give voice to those on the margins” (p. 247). This study demonstrates that co-cultures which might be on the margins, such as religion and ESL, can impact each one of the previously mentioned foci. In fact, Keller (2016) calls for more research in contexts that might be shaped by religion. We believe public speaking might be one of these contexts. Additionally, if resources permit, instructors should arrange practice/speech lab time especially for these types of students.

Ultimately, there is still a lot we do not know about apprehension in the basic communication course classroom. What we do know is that the classroom community is connected in much more complicated ways than we sometimes think. Students should feel supported in their public speaking experience and instructors should find ways to identify the types of apprehension that are occurring in students in each class and adapt teaching to support students and reduce the risk of failure. Activities such as informal speaking opportunities in class or more formal worksheets that allow students to explain their identity and previous speaking experiences in their own words could afford opportunities for students to feel more connected to their classmates and instructor. Finally, these types of opportunities

would also allow the instructor to be more sensitive to the complexities of the students' lived experiences.

### **Limitations and Future Research**

Because this was a student self-report, the timing of the administration of the survey can make a difference. Students may perceive their CA to be high at the beginning of the semester because they are generally apprehensive about being in a basic communication class and do not know what will be happening. Or, conversely, it may be that their CA is lower at the very beginning of the semester because they assume they can give speeches but have not yet been introduced to some of the writing aspects that previous research has indicated increase CA.

It may be that particular religions could make a difference for participation in speaking, speaking style, and manifestation of apprehension. This was not a focus but rather a finding in this study. For example, those in the LDS community had a difficult time distinguishing between religious “talks” and public speeches, and also felt constrained by their close relationship with some of their classmates. In other religions such as Islam or Judaism, it may be that students who are from traditional communities where gender and age intersect with religion feel “allowed/not allowed” to speak. In the forum on diversity and scholarship on instructional communication, the editors (Hendrix, Mazer, & Hess, 2016) call for infusing diverse perspectives into instructional communication research. Delving into identities and cultures such as religion which could impact public speaking practices is one way to increase understanding of diverse perspectives.

Individual issues which we did not study could affect CA. Friendships in the class could make a difference in apprehension. This may be a religious aspect, as mentioned earlier, or it may be an important emphasis for future studies. It also may be that students who come from non-traditional K-12 backgrounds, such as homeschoolers, have not been exposed to speaking at a young age.

Finally, we believe our study illuminates how findings from the PRPSA instrument itself may be limited in its applicability to non-Euro-Western students (Croucher et al., 2015). ESL students in this study came from Hispanic, Chinese, Pacific Islander, Native American, and Middle Eastern backgrounds. Research by Croucher et al. (2015) found significant differences among participants taking the PRPSA from England, Germany, and Finland. There may be idiomatic problems with Spanish and other languages spoken by students in our study such as Arabic,

Tagalog, Mandarin, and Cantonese. Additionally, we do not know how long international students have lived or studied in the U.S. We, along with Croucher et al., call for more studies looking for how the PRPSA affects culturally specific communication patterns. Future research should more closely examine the relationship among identity markers and experiences to better understand possible relationships with CA.

Overall, our findings indicate that identity and context do make a difference in CA. Religion, familiarity with peers, language, written skills, and perhaps the instrument itself can affect students' self-perception of CA. Future studies need to examine these aspects to gain greater insight into how CA can affect students in the public speaking classroom.

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