

**Speak Easy:
Using Repetition Tactics to Reduce Speech Anxiety and Increase Speaker Self-Efficacy**

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Introduction

The ability to verbally convey information to an audience sets individuals apart in the workforce. Agricultural education, Extension, and communication professionals are often expected to communicate complex topics to audiences who are not heavily trained in science (Noblitt et al., 2010), which calls for additional training to strengthen oral communication skills. Understanding the role of agricultural professionals as science communicators, Doerfert et al. (2007) stated that oral communication is vital to helping people think critically and operate differently regarding issues in science. Likewise, Morgan (2012) identified oral communication as a critical skill for the success of students seeking careers in agricultural communications, ranked second to written communication.

Many universities recognize the importance of developing students' oral communication skills, often using basic communication courses with public speaking units (Bodie, 2010). While several methods can be used to teach oral communication skills, Zivkovic (2014) identified verbal presentations as the most effective way to develop oral communication skills as it allows students to practice learning outcomes, reinforce confidence, and develop career readiness. However, in a national study of agricultural communications programs, only four of 172 total courses focus directly on oral communication (Cannon et al., 2016). To aid in developing young agricultural professionals, institutions should emphasize developing oral communication skills among students studying agriculture.

Public speaking is a large contributor to social anxiety, so multiple studies have explored the impact of a speaker's confidence and self-efficacy on their communication effectiveness (Bodie, 2010; Finn et al., 2009; Tsang, 2020). Specifically, self-perceived delivery competence is directly connected to speaker anxiety (Tsang, 2020). Guest (2018) also found that anxious speakers focus more on completing their presentation than portraying their message's key points. As a result, Tsang (2020) suggested that developing a speaker's self-efficacy through instructor encouragement and feedback, as well as peer support, is an effective way to build confidence. Similarly, Finn et al. (2009) suggested that brief repeated exposure to the same audience, knowledge of a supportive environment, and consistent performance feedback may be the most beneficial methods for reducing speaker anxiety. As a result, the purpose of this innovative idea was to use the tool of repeated exposure to public speaking scenarios paired with peer support to alleviate anxiety and increase self-efficacy.

How it Works

Guided by Dubner and Mills' (1984) "TripleSpeak" structure, we used repetition tactics and exposure to public speaking in a leadership and oral communication course at New Mexico State University to reinforce communication skills and alleviate public speaking anxiety. This course was open to majors across the College of Agricultural, Consumer, and Environmental Sciences, which encompassed a diverse population of students who had varying levels of public speaking experience, many of which noted in a "welcome to the course" form that public speaking was their worst social fear. In the course, students delivered three speeches—an introduction of a keynote speaker, a prepared persuasive speech, and a prepared informative speech. For each speech, students selected topics based on their career interests in the food, agriculture, natural resources, or human (FANH) sciences.

To alleviate anxiety and build community, we incorporated several opportunities to practice speaking in lower-stakes settings before the delivery of their first speech (Dubner & Mills, 1984). For this exercise, we separated the labs into small groups of 3–4 students and allotted approximately 5 minutes for each individual to deliver their speech to the small group. Once a student delivered their speech, other group members shared two positive affirmations. Students made at least two group rotations, and then revised their speeches before presenting in front of the full lab and instructor. At that point, students had delivered their speeches at least 4–5 times before receiving a score.

We also used repetition tactics for the delivery of subsequent speeches, and instructors asked students to use audience analysis tools to help them tailor their messages. The instructors evaluated oral communication skills based on supporting evidence, pace, timing, and command of audience. Instructors also evaluated non-verbal communication skills, including eye contact, mannerisms, gestures, and poise.

Results to Date and Implications

Allowing students to repeat their first speech several times to their peers before delivering for a score made a notable difference in student performance and confidence throughout the course. Students expressed that conversing with peers before speaking in front of the entire class reduced anxiety by establishing a “friendly face in the crowd.” Knowing that their peers had already accepted and affirmed their speech allowed students to focus less on the mere completion of the presentation and more on the key points they needed to convey to the audience. We noticed that allowing time for students to revise their speeches before the final delivery increased confidence and set the stage for peer accountability throughout the course.

The three-speech structure in the course reinforced student competence and confidence in orally communicating scientific concepts. Maintaining similar scoring standards across speeches allowed students to implement feedback from previous speeches and integrate new knowledge from course lectures. At the end of each speech, students also reflected on positive attributes they observed in speeches presented by their peers, allowing them to identify practices to emulate. Throughout the semester, we observed significant improvement in each scoring area among most students. Of the competencies evaluated, command of the audience, eye contact, poise, and connection points throughout the message showed the most significant improvements. Instructors also used a short-answer evaluation in the end-of-the-year reflection to gauge students’ perceptions of their confidence when speaking. Several students commented that they appreciated the lab structure and the ability to repeat their first speech to their peers before speaking in the full class, as the course taught them that their speaking ability was about “improvement” rather than “mastery.” It took “pressure off, which reduced anxiety” because they felt the classroom was a safe space to strengthen their speaking skills.

Advice to Others

We found that students felt more comfortable giving speeches when they had a chance to repeat it several times in front of their peers before receiving a grade. We recommend allowing peers to provide real-time feedback in smaller groups as students felt it created a safe place to practice. Providing specific metrics for peers to evaluate also reinforced assessment expectations.

Cost/Resources Needed

Instructors will need a rubric and speech topics, but there are no other associated costs.

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