

## Public Speaking Apprehension-Challenges and Remedies

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### Abstract

Public speaking is one of the most sought after language activities that students seek in their careers. The ability to speak well has many advantages. It gives students a sense of self-confidence, motivation, courage, and contentment. When students speak well in their allotted time, they feel a sense of self-worth. However, what is actually witnessed by teachers is that students shun from public speaking. If there is one activity they would prefer to avoid or not be called onto the dais, it is public speaking. Public speaking puts pressure on the students to speak. It is an act of individual performance subject to the perception of 60 students in the classroom. Apprehensive of what the teacher thinks, what the classmates think of them, students simply hesitate to seize the opportunity to speak. Here is where the role of the teacher is so critical and monumental. Teachers have to play the role of a motivator and a facilitator in encouraging the students to take up public speaking because it has many benefits. They can motivate the students by giving the outline of what public speaking performance comprises, and what points can be discussed as part of their topic, and the verbal and nonverbal mechanisms inherent in public speaking. If our students are motivated positively for their efforts, then surely public speaking becomes an activity that students will thoroughly enjoy and excel in since this activity determines their career success to a considerable extent.

**Keywords:** Public speaking, practice, motivation, skill, preparation, self-efficacy

### Introduction

Public speaking has many advantages to students. Firstly, they can gain confidence in their ability to speak. Secondly, their sense of self-worth is significantly strengthened. Thirdly, this activity gives them confidence to do their power point presentations well. So, as can be seen, public speaking has huge advantages for students. Teachers must note that they have a huge responsibility to guide and help their students to achieve their goals. It is easy to assume that students are good at public speaking. But any teacher would certify that when it comes to public speaking, majority of students hesitate and would rather not participate. The apprehensions that students have with regard to public speaking can easily be handled and resolved. Public speaking is an activity worth doing. It is not enough for students to be good at technical skills alone at the cost of language skills. After all, at the end of the day, students have to give seminars, participate in seminars, present their ideas in front of an audience throughout their engineering careers. Hence, public speaking activity can be considered as the foundation for their professional careers.

At this point, it is apt to ask this pertinent question: Why do students hesitate to do public speaking? How can one improve his/her public speaking performance? What are the difficult areas to be tackled? What are the steps involved in public speaking?

### Following are Some Reasons Why Students Hesitate to Participate in Public Speaking

1. **Uncertainty about the Topic:** One common reason students give teachers as to why they are unable to speak is because they have no idea about the topic. Suppose, the teacher gave a student, a topic titled "Population

explosion." Students will simply confess that they have no idea as to what to talk about this topic. The point here is that the topic is not difficult. The point here is that students are not sure about what to talk. This is because today's students hardly read newspapers, magazines, follow news discussions. Obviously, they will not be in a position to speak if they hardly read.

2. **Fear of Teacher's Judgement:** The author of this article has come across students who have admitted that they are afraid of what the teacher may think of their performance. Since they will not be able to speak, they opine that the teacher may form a poor impression of them. It is this worry or apprehension that prevents them from speaking.
3. **Fear of Classmates' Judgement:** Another area that causes so much concern to students is that they are all the time worried about what their classmates think of them when they are speaking. Many students have admitted to the author of this article that they are worried about what their classmates would think of them. The reality is that classmates are highly supportive of their classmate who is on the dais. They readily empathise with the student who is speaking because they too are in the same boat!
4. **Topic Complexity:** Students feel that whatever topic is given to them is complex. And the common refrain is a request to give them a simpler topic. They forget to understand that real time situations in life call for unexpected questions. In interviews, they have to be ready for any questions that may be asked. They cannot say that interviewers have to ask them questions for which they have answers. Life itself is combination of known and unknown factors. While we can expect some

predictability, there is also so much unpredictability equally. So, here, students need to understand that any topic is worth attempting as long as they prepare well.

5. **Apprehension of Failure:** Another reason why students are apprehensive of public speaking is that they think they would fail in their public speaking performance. They think they would be “trapped” once they go onto the dais. They feel that they would miserably fail in their public speaking act as they would not be able to say anything. This is another worrying thing from students’ perspective. For them, the inability to speak is tantamount to failure. However, the moot question is why should poor performance be considered a failure? Here is where teachers can play an important role in sensitising the students that they should not consider their inability to talk on the dais as an act of failure. It is not success or failure when it comes to public speaking. Students must consider their public speaking performances as a series of acts that they can improve incrementally.
6. **Lack of Sufficient Opportunities to Practice:** The author of this article, in her teaching career spanning 25 years, has found that the curriculum offers too few opportunities for students to practice public speaking. Public speaking is just one component in the curriculum. It cannot be done on a daily basis. The activity must be over in a span of one week. After that, it is group discussion or debates as part of the curriculum. So, the chief problem is that the curriculum is unable to cater sufficient time to public speaking activities to become a regular feature in classrooms. Public speaking sessions should be conducted on a regular basis in the classrooms. Assignments pertaining to public speaking should be given so that students evince interest and show responsibility to partake in public speaking sessions.

Till here, the primary reasons for poor public speaking have been delineated. Now, what should be done to enhance the students’ confidence in public speaking?

1. **Content Preparation:** The teacher can solve the “public speaking chaos” experienced by students by giving them sufficient reading materials to read. Students basically do not spend sufficient time to do research on the topic they wish to speak. The teacher should facilitate by directing students to spend quality time on researching the topic they would be speaking on. According to the author of this article, the right amount of content is the best way to tackle public speaking apprehension or incompetence. Teachers should bring a lot of content to the classrooms, give the students these reading materials and give them sufficient time to read.
2. **Skimming and Scanning:** Two sub-skills of reading, namely, skimming and scanning can be taught. Skimming is reading a piece of text for a brief overview of the topic. It is a bird’s eye view of what the topic is about. This way, the teacher can confirm whether the students are on the right path. Another skill is scanning. Scanning is reading a piece of text for specific information. This skill will help them locate specific information related to an important point in the passage. For example, a student is given the topic “Population explosion.” The student can locate specific information related to some important points pertaining to this topic. He/she can clarify immediately with the instructor if

what they understood is correct. These two skills may be related to reading. However, the teacher can pose some questions and ask the students to give a bird’s eye view of the topic. In the experience of this author, many students admit to the teacher that despite being given sufficient time to prepare, they are not ready to speak. Why? Their inability to understand what the topic is about is the chief reason. This problem can be avoided if the teacher asks the students to give a bird’s eye view of the topic they have just read.

3. **Note Making:** This is one of most important skills students should be taught. No amount of reading can help a student master a topic. It is only the skill of note making that will give them a sense of coherence. It is only note making that will give them confidence that they have understood the topic. Students must be encouraged to make notes in the form of points, tree diagrams, and using abbreviations. The point is by making notes, students get the clarity needed to speak as note making would be done on a scientific basis with headings and subheadings and the various relevant points under them.
4. **Relaxation Techniques:** To counter the problem of apprehension about their performance, teachers can ask students to do simple, deep breathing before going onto the dais for public speaking. Calming down, being relaxed will help the students not to be tensed or become too nervous on the dais. When students learn to breathe calmly and in a relaxed manner, they will not forget the points that they should mention in their public speaking performance. Anxiety destroys a student’s public speaking performance. Hence, they must be told to be calm by gently doing some deep breathing exercises.
5. **Patterns in Topic Public Speaking:** In public speaking, there are so many patterns that can be effectively utilized by the students. One pattern is the cause-effect-solutions. Another pattern is advantages-disadvantages. A third pattern is past-present-future. Once a topic is assigned to the student, answers can be elicited as to which pattern their public speaking topic falls under. For example, a topic like ‘mobile phone’ can be dealt with under the pattern of advantages-disadvantages. That means, there are many advantages of mobile phones. On the other hand, there are many disadvantages of mobile phones. So, the student can list some 7-8 advantages of using mobile phones, and also list some 7-8 disadvantages of using mobile phones. This way, confidence builds up in the student since he/she has listed multiple advantages and disadvantages of mobile phones. Student who are unaware of the patterns that most public speaking topics fall under will be confused and tensed on what to say or not to say. However, if they are told that a public speaking topic like mobile phones can be discussed under advantages-disadvantages, the task becomes easy for the students. Their self-confidence increases. And they will be ready to speak on the dais. So, teaching the various patterns that exist in public speaking will benefit the students immensely.

6. **Managing Non-Verbal Communication:** Many students do not maintain eye contact with the audience when it comes to public speaking. They are unable to maintain eye contact because of tremendous amount of nervousness. They just look at the ceiling or the floor or just the teacher or just their friends. However, it must be noted that the goal of public speaking is persuasion. We need to persuade the audience in what we believe is true pertaining to that topic. So, if we do not maintain eye contact, it is equal to disrespect and disregard. So, students must be encouraged to maintain eye contact with the audience. Many students have tense shoulders while doing public speaking. Tensed shoulders is another reflection of nervousness. So, teachers should tell the students to be calm and relax their shoulders while speaking. The point here is that nonverbal communication plays a huge role in the impressions an audience forms of the speaker.
  7. **Consistent Practice:** Finally, teachers should tell students that public speaking skill is not something people will acquire overnight. To be good at public speaking, students must frequently participate in public speaking sessions. Like a skilled carpenter or a skilled swimmer, public speaking too can be acquired with consistent and dedicated practice. In the experience of the author of this article, students who have come forward with a desire to improve their public speaking have seen a tangential increase in their public speaking performance. Secondly, students who have consistently practised speaking in front of audiences despite their limitations have improved in the long run. The point is students can become competent public speakers with consistent and committed practice.
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### Conclusion

Public speaking is one of the most important language activities conducted in classrooms. However, majority of the students are hesitant and wish to avoid doing public speaking due to various factors like poor self-esteem, lack of preparation, nervousness, and lack of a scientific approach. Teachers have a huge responsibility in encouraging the students by giving them the inputs related to public speaking. Extensive reading materials for researching, note making skills, knowledge of the patterns inherent in public speaking will immensely help the student to excel in public speaking. Students must be encouraged to take feedback from teachers as well as their classmates once they finish public speaking. Constructive feedback by teachers and also their own classmates will help them identify their strengths and consolidate them, and identify their weaknesses and improve upon them. Lastly, teachers should inform the students that consistent, committed, and deliberate practice is the key to excelling in public speaking.

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