



Public Speaking Training Plan for Mitigating Oral Communication Apprehension

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Abstract

This paper presents a public speaking training plan adapted from Toastmasters International's Handbook of Competent Communication to reduce students' communication apprehension. The training plan draws on Kolb's (1984) experiential learning theory, which links experience, perception, cognition and behaviour, making it particularly well suited for developing practical skills such as public speaking. The programme engages participants in a cycle of concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualisation and active experimentation consistent with successful public speaking training principles. The training addresses aspects of public speaking that often contribute to communication apprehension, such as language structure, language use, non-verbal communication and voice modulation. The programme also emphasises active experimentation through visual aids and the delivery of persuasive and inspiring speeches so that participants have ample opportunity to practise and hone their public speaking skills. This approach effectively reduces communication apprehension and gives students the skills and confidence to deliver impressive oral presentations. However, the effectiveness of this training plan can be influenced by various factors, such as cultural background, language proficiency, and individual personality traits. Therefore, successful training should be flexible and adaptable to meet learners' different needs and contexts.

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Introduction

A common problem faced by many students worldwide is oral communication apprehension. It is described as the worry or discomfort a person feels when preparing for oral encounters such as presentations or speeches (McCroskey, 2013). This anxiety can manifest itself in many ways, such as increased heart rate, sweating, or even panic attacks, and it can seriously affect academic and personal development. For example, students may refrain from speaking up in class or avoid giving presentations, which can limit their learning opportunities and adversely affect their grades (Daly & Stafford, 1984). At-risk students often appear to lack confidence in classroom communication. By definition, at-risk students have experienced academic failure, which can create communication apprehension and fear of failure. Their family environment, where parents may not have a college degree, and siblings may have dropped out of school, often exacerbates this problem. In these situations, schools do not encourage dialogue as students may feel alienated or think they are doomed to fail like their relatives, and it becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Poor language mastery heightens the problem of oral communication apprehension. Limited English proficiency is an important factor affecting the oral communication skills of these at-risk students in second and foreign-language classrooms (Chesebro, McCroskey, Atwater, Bahrenfuss, Cawelti, Gaudino, & Hodges, 1992). For example, a student with problems with English grammar may be afraid to speak in front of the class for fear of making mistakes and being ridiculed by classmates. It takes time to build students' English proficiency in an environment where some speak little or no English during the day (Marzuki, Ting, Jerome, Chuah & Misieng, 2013). However, it may be achievable to train students to perform public speaking with confidence at their existing level of language proficiency.

A quicker way to overcome oral communication apprehension is through public speaking training. This can include giving speeches, participating in discussions or performing in front of the class. These practices can reduce the student's communication apprehension and help them feel more comfortable speaking in front of an audience. For example, a student who is initially afraid to give a presentation may gain more confidence and reduce their fears after several practice sessions and helpful criticism. Conversational skills courses conducted in an informal and non-threatening environment

can help students to gain confidence in speaking English (Marzuki et al., 2013).

This paper presents a public speaking training plan adapted from Toastmasters International's Handbook of Competent Communication to reduce students' communication apprehension. The training plan draws on Kolb's (1984) experiential learning theory, which links experience, perception, cognition and behaviour, making it particularly well suited for developing practical skills such as public speaking.

Theoretical Underpinning of the Public Speaking Training Plan

The theoretical underpinning of the public speaking training plan is Kolb's (1984) experiential learning theory. This holistic model, which views learning as a process that combines experience, perception, cognition and behaviour, has already been successfully applied in various fields. For example, it has been used in multidisciplinary extracurricular events (Almalag, Saja, Abouzaid, Aljuffali, Alzamil, Almater, Alothman & Alzamel, 2022), in educational supervision (Gordon, 2022) and engineering education (Garcés & Peña, 2022). Consequently, it is particularly well suited for developing practical skills, such as public speaking, which requires cognitive understanding and the application and practice of acquired knowledge (Kolb & Kolb, 2005).

Building on this, Kolb's (1984) experiential learning theory outlines a circular learning process that includes four distinct phases: concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualisation and active experimentation. Each phase is central to promoting learning and enhancing the learner's understanding of a subject (Kolb, 1984). In the field of public speaking, this includes both theoretical knowledge and its practical application (Kolb & Kolb, 2009).

Within the public speaking training plan, the first stage is the concrete experience where students give a speech. This gives them a concrete experience to reflect on and improve. The second stage follows this, the reflective observation stage. After the presentation, the students write a reflection journal, which is when they think about the strengths and weaknesses of their public speaking. This reflection is documented so that students can identify and work on their shortcomings during the training. The reflection journal allows them to personalise the public speaking training and consider individual differences in strengths and weaknesses.

The reflection process triggers the abstract conceptualisation stage. This means that students can understand the expectations of good speaking skills and identify areas for possible improvement. Finally, in the active experimentation stage, students apply their newly acquired knowledge to subsequent presentations, completing the experiential learning cycle. Students practise their speeches, receive immediate feedback, reflect on their performance and identify their strengths and areas for improvement.

Experiential learning theory is highly adaptable as it caters to different learning styles. According to Kolb (1984), people approach learning tasks differently, fluctuating between active experimentation and reflective observation and between abstract conceptualisation and concrete experience. By incorporating activities that address these different learning styles, public speaking training based on experiential learning theory becomes more engaging and enhances the learning

experience.

Moreover, experiential learning theory promotes deep learning by motivating learners to actively engage with the material rather than passively absorbing the information (Kolb, 1984). In public speaking, learners are encouraged to actively participate in preparing their speeches and critically evaluate and reflect on their work, leading to a deeper understanding and retention of the techniques and strategies learned in training (Kolb & Kolb, 2005).

In doing so, they improve their skills as speakers and their ability to learn from experience, solve problems and adapt to new situations (Kolb & Kolb, 2009). These skills, fostered by experiential learning theory, are crucial for reducing communication apprehension and increasing confidence in public speaking. Communication apprehension is the fear or anxiety associated with actual or expected communication with others (McCroskey, 1977). It is a common problem among people who have to speak in public and can significantly affect their performance and effectiveness.

Through the active experimentation phase of Kolb's (1984) theory, students can practise their public speaking skills in a safe environment, gradually reducing their apprehension and increasing their confidence. Recent research by Kho and Ting (2023) supports this claim. In their study, a significant negative correlation was found between experience with oral presentations and the level of communication apprehension in polytechnic students. In other words, the more public speaking experience the students have, the lower their communication apprehension. This suggests that the active experimentation stage of Kolb's (1984) experiential learning theory, in which students apply their newly acquired knowledge to subsequent presentations, may effectively reduce communication apprehension and increase confidence in public speaking.

Principles of Effective Public Speaking Training Plan

This section explains the six key principles of successful public speaking training based on research, and these will be applied in the public speaking training plan described in the next section.

The primary principle of effective public speaking training is to lower public speaking anxiety and increase confidence. Fear and anxiety are significant barriers to public speaking for many people (Illianis, 2019; Ireland, 2018; Westwick, Hunter, & Kleinjan, 2019). It is, therefore, important to recognise and actively address these fears. Ireland's (2018) study demonstrates the effectiveness of a comprehensive, multi-layered approach that includes group presentations, self-reflection and peer feedback, enabling learners to take a holistic public speaking perspective. In Ireland's (2018) study, the multi-layered nature of this intervention not only enhanced learners' understanding and presentation skills and significantly reduced their anxiety. Moreover, integrating confidence-building measures in such training programmes enriches the learning experience by linking the psychological aspect of public speaking with the practical one.

The second principle for effective public speaking training is an active practice, role-playing and a well-structured training module. Role-plays in real-life scenarios are an integral part of the training programme so that participants are directly confronted with the challenges of public speaking (Illianis, 2019). Overcoming these hurdles promotes resilience and

adaptability — important skills for effective public speaking — and underscores the need for training to focus on refining language use to achieve clarity and effectiveness, for example, by reducing “filler words”. An example of a structured and systematic training framework is Illianis’s (2019) “Oral Communication Skill (OCS)” module, which provides a step-by-step guide for learners to acquire competence and confidence in public speaking.

The third principle for successful public speaking training, according to Illianis (2014), is a dual evaluation process that evaluates the learners’ progress and the programme’s effectiveness. Illianis (2014) recommend using quantitative measures, such as pretest and posttest scores, to provide objective indicators of improvement, while qualitative data, derived from sources such as interviews, shed more light on learners’ experiences, feelings and perceived challenges. The dual evaluation is crucial to identify improvements and areas that need further development, thus promoting a holistic understanding of progress made during training.

The fourth principle for successful public speaking training is creating a supportive, engaging and encouraging learning environment. Research, including studies by Ireland (2018), Illianis (2014), Illianis (2019), and Westwick et al. (2019), confirms the central role of the learning environment in the effectiveness of training. Given the fears and anxieties often associated with public speaking, it is crucial to create an environment where learners feel comfortable expressing themselves, experimenting, making mistakes and learning without fear of judgement. A supportive learning environment means encouraging active participation, providing ample practice opportunities, and giving sensitive, patient and constructive feedback. Personal tuition in the form of one-to-one lessons can further enhance the learning experience and create an atmosphere conducive to growth, development and overall improvement of skills.

The fifth principle, highlighted by both Illianis (2019) and Westwick et al. (2019), is recognising learners’ unique needs and characteristics through reflective writing. Learners bring their abilities, backgrounds, learning styles and needs to the training. Therefore, effective public speaking training programmes should be flexible and adaptable to accommodate this diversity, possibly involving different teaching approaches or additional support for vulnerable learners. Reflective writing can foster a deeper level of self-knowledge that enables learners to assess their progress, identify areas needing further improvement and track their development over time. This dual focus promotes continuous learning, self-improvement and ensures inclusivity and equity in learning.

Finally, the sixth principle for successful public speaking training is to explore different sources of tutoring and support. Westwick et al. (2019) suggest that broadening tutoring resources, including student teaching assistants who have already completed the course, can bring in additional perspectives and create a richer learning environment. This can expose learners to a wider range of experiences and knowledge, enhancing their learning experience.

Successful public speaking training programmes should look beyond the immediate results and assess the lasting impact of the training, particularly whether the training has reduced fear of public speaking and increased self-confidence. There is a caveat, though. Cultural background, language proficiency and individual personality traits can greatly influence training effectiveness.

Public Speaking Training Plan based on the Toastmasters International Competent Communication Manual

This section describes the public speaking training plan to improve students' oral communication skills to reduce their communication apprehension and the theoretical underpinning for it based on Kolb's (1984) experiential learning theory. The public speaking training plan was developed based on the framework established by Toastmasters International's Handbook of Competent Communication (Toastmasters International, 2011).

The Projects in the Public Speaking Training Plan

The public speaking training programme, designed based on Toastmasters International's Handbook of Competent Communication, consists of 10 sequential speaking projects carefully crafted to improve public speaking skills progressively. Each project takes two hours and is conducted once every two weeks. The structure of this programme ensures a cumulative learning process, where knowledge from each project feeds into and builds upon previous projects.

Project 1, "The Icebreaker", marks the introduction to public speaking. Here, participants introduce themselves and discuss their backgrounds, interests and goals. The three main goals of this 4-6 minute presentation are to get started in public speaking, identify innate speaking talents, and highlight areas that need refinement.

Moving on to Project 2, "Organise your speech," the focus is on the vital need for an orderly structure when preparing a speech. The audience's understanding depends on the speaker's ability to organise their thoughts logically and coherently. The topic dictates the choice of organisational patterns. A persuasive speech engages the audience right at the beginning, consolidates the central idea and concludes with a re-emphasis of key concepts. This 5-7 minute project aims to develop a clear and understandable speech structure, formulate a clear message and build solid opening and closing sections.

Project 3, "Get to the point," focuses on describing the purpose of the speech. The purpose can be broad (inform, persuade, entertain, inspire) or specific (desired audience response). A clearly defined purpose helps organise the speech and builds confidence in the speech. For this 5-7 minute project, the key is to match the organisation of the speech to the stated purpose and to ensure that all elements of the speech reinforce the purpose.

Project 4, "How to say it," emphasises the importance of precise word choice. In this 5-7 minute exercise, participants need to pay as much attention to word choice and arrangement as they do to the structure and purpose of the speech. It is recommended to use clear, precise and descriptive words placed in such a way as to achieve maximum impact. The ultimate goal is to weed out jargon and unnecessary use of language, ensuring clear, accurate and lively communication with correct grammar.

Project 5, "Your Body Speaks," emphasises the importance of non-verbal communication. In this 5-7 minute project, participants learn to synchronise their body language, including posture, movement, gestures, facial expressions and eye contact, with their verbal message, aiming for a natural and fluid delivery.

Project 6, “Vocal Variety,” focuses on the auditory aspects of a speech over a 5-7 minute period. Participants learn to modulate the voice’s volume, pitch, speed and quality to add depth and interest to the message and strategically incorporate pauses for emphasis.

Project 7, “Research your topic,” highlights the importance of thorough research when preparing a speech. In this 5-7 minute presentation, speakers are encouraged to gather various information on their topic and support their points and opinions with specific facts, examples and illustrations.

Project 8, “Get comfortable with visual aids,” is a 5-7 minute exercise emphasising using visual aids to improve audience understanding and recall. The aim is to select and use appropriate visual aids according to the content and size of the audience.

Project 9: “Persuade with Power” lasts 5-7 minutes and introduces participants to the art of persuasion. Here the aim is to convince the audience to take a stand or action by appealing to their interests and supporting their arguments logically and emotionally.

Finally, in Project 10, “Inspire your audience,” participants learn to deliver an 8-10 minute inspirational speech. The aim is to move the audience by appealing to their higher motives and aspirations, asking them to improve their beliefs or achievements, and appealing to their needs and emotions.

The adaptation of the public speaking Training Plan based on Toastmasters International’s Handbook of Competent Communication is mapped out in Table 1.

Table 1: Public Speaking Training: Content, Description and Task

Session	Content of training	Description	Task and Theoretical Basis
1	Introduction – Overcoming Nervousness <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Introduce yourself and learn how to overcome your nervousness when speaking in front of a group. 	Start with a personal story to engage the audience and speak slowly and clearly. Use notes to keep track, but do not read directly from them. Rehearse your speech several times before the presentation to feel more confident and prepared.	3–5-minute speech/ Concrete experience
2	Organising Your Thoughts <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Organise your thoughts and logically present them with a clear introduction, main body and conclusion. 	Use an outline or mind map to structure your speech and ensure each section flows seamlessly into the next. Use transitions between sections to help the audience follow you. Start with a clear introduction to grab the audience’s attention and end with a strong conclusion that underlines your key message.	4–6-minute speech/ Reflective observation

3	<p>Focusing on Your Message</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Learn how to focus your speech on a key message or idea and use supporting material to reinforce that message. 	<p>Focus your speech on one main point and use examples, stories and statistics to support your message. Avoid straying from the topic, and make sure your supporting material is relevant and interesting to the audience.</p>	<p>4–6-minute speech/ Abstract conceptualisation</p>
4	<p>Choosing the Right Words</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Learn how to choose the right words to convey your message effectively and use rhetorical devices such as repetition, parallelism and metaphors. 	<p>Choose clear and easily understandable words and avoid jargon or technical terms that might confuse the audience. Use rhetorical devices such as repetition and metaphors to make your message more memorable and appealing.</p>	<p>4–6-minute speech/ Abstract conceptualisation</p>
5	<p>Body Language and Stage Presence</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Understand the importance of body language in getting your message across and learn techniques to improve your posture, eye contact, gestures and movements on stage. 	<p>Make sure you have good posture to exude confidence and authority and make eye contact with the audience to connect with them. Use gestures and movements on stage to emphasise your message and engage the audience.</p>	<p>4–6-minute speech/ Active experimentation</p>
6	<p>Using Your Voice Effectively</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Learn how to use your voice to create interest and convey meaning by varying your pitch, pace, volume and tone. 	<p>Use vocal variety to make your speech more interesting and emotional and to emphasise important points. Vary pitch, tempo, volume and tone to keep the audience engaged, and rehearse your speech several times to familiarise yourself with your voice.</p>	<p>4–6-minute speech/ Active experimentation</p>
7	<p>Researching Your Topic</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> To help participants gather supporting information and evidence for their topic. 	<p>Use various sources, such as books, articles and online resources, to research your topic. Take notes and organise your research to make it easier to incorporate into your speech. Use proper citations and source references to avoid plagiarism.</p>	<p>4–6-minute speech/ Active experimentation</p>
	<p>Using Visual Aids</p>		

8	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Learn how to effectively use visual aids such as PowerPoint, flipcharts and props to reinforce your message and engage your audience. 	<p>Use visual aids to support your message and make your speech more interesting, but do not rely on them too much. Use clear, simple visuals that are easy to read and understand, and practise their use before your speech to avoid technical problems.</p>	<p>4–6-minute speech/ Active experimentation</p>
9	<p>Using Persuasion Techniques</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Learn how to influence your audience with persuasive techniques, using emotion, logic and credibility to support your message. 	<p>Use emotional appeals, logical arguments and credible sources to convince your audience. Use stories and examples to illustrate your arguments and make them understandable. Address any counterarguments or concerns your audience may have, and be prepared to back up your claims with evidence. Use clear and concise language and vary your tone and pace to keep your audience engaged. Practise your speech and get feedback from others to improve your delivery and impact. Finally, remember that persuasion is about building trust and credibility with your audience so be authentic and passionate about your message.</p>	<p>4–6-minute speech/ Active experimentation</p>
10	<p>Delivering an Inspiring Speech</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Learn how to inspire and motivate your audience by sharing your experiences, using powerful stories and leaving a lasting impression. 	<p>Use a personal story or experience to connect emotionally with your audience and create a sense of commonality. Use vivid language and strong imagery to convey your message, and use repetition and rhetorical devices to emphasise key points. End your speech with a call to action that encourages the audience to take action or make a change. Rehearse your speech several times and get feedback from others to refine your message and delivery. Finally, remember to have confidence in your ability to inspire and motivate your audience!</p>	<p>3–5-minute speech/ Active experimentation</p>

Elements of Experiential Learning in the Public Speaking Training Plan

This section explains how the public speaking training programme aligns with Kolb’s (1984) four-stage experiential learning theory, which includes concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualisation and active experimentation.

The programme begins with the “Introduction – Overcoming Nervousness” session, which embodies Kolb’s (1984) concrete experience stage. Participants actively introduce themselves in this session and discuss their backgrounds, interests and goals. At the same time, the facilitator introduces strategies to reduce communication apprehension and thus promote the participants’ self-confidence. In the second session, “Organise your thoughts,” participants are put into the reflective observation phase. This session emphasises the importance of structuring speeches as the facilitator guides participants to deliver presentations with clearly defined objectives. The selected topics and the transition words’ introduction help create a seamless flow of ideas.

In the transition to the abstract conceptualisation phase, participants are encouraged to form abstract principles from their reflected observations in the third and fourth sessions, “Focus on your message” and “Choose the right words”. In these sessions, the facilitator guides preparing a speech, its structure, purpose and effective use of language. Participants learn

to use clear, concise and action-oriented words and phrases while avoiding jargon and adhering to correct grammar. The programme then moves into the Active Experimentation phase, where participants test their conceptual understanding of speech. The fifth and sixth sessions focus on the non-verbal aspects of public speaking and the modulation of the voice. The focus is on the complementary role of body language, facial expressions and eye contact, and the right balance of volume, pitch and tempo.

In the seventh and eighth sessions, active experimentation is extended through in-depth research on selected topics and PowerPoint presentations. Participants are guided to support their arguments with concrete facts and examples and are introduced to effective slide design strategies. Later in the programme, in the ninth and tenth sessions, the focus shifts to persuasive speeches and inspiring the audience. Participants learn to combine logical and emotional appeals in their speeches and to emphasise the audience's self-interest. Strategies to combat nervousness and effectively use stories, anecdotes and quotes are discussed.

Adapted from Toastmasters International's Handbook of Competent Communication and based on Kolb's experiential learning theory, this comprehensive public speaking training programme provides a solid, systematic and flexible approach for students to develop their public speaking skills and overcome communication apprehension. Each session strategically builds on the skills acquired in previous sessions. It begins with "Introduction – Overcoming Nervousness", a session that provides a safe and supportive environment for participants to introduce themselves and share their personal stories, reducing initial apprehension and building confidence. The cyclical structure of the programme, inspired by Kolb's four-phase cycle of concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualisation and active experimentation, provides a valuable learning context for different learning styles. This structure promotes an iterative and enriching learning process and encourages students to reflect on their experiences, formulate new strategies for public speaking, and experiment with these strategies in a supportive environment. Through this approach, students' public speaking skills are gradually built engagingly and effectively so that the fear of public speaking diminishes over time.

Furthermore, the programme addresses specific aspects of public speaking that often contribute to communication apprehension. For example, sessions on "Organise your thoughts", "Focus on your message", and "Choose the right words" teach students how to structure their speeches effectively, focus on their core message and use language effectively. These skills can help students feel more prepared and confident, reducing anxiety. The programme also includes sessions on non-verbal communication and voice modulation, crucial aspects of effective public speaking. Teaching students how to effectively use body language, facial expressions, eye contact and voice modulation, these sessions help students feel more in control of their presentations and further reduce their communication apprehension.

Moreover, the programme's emphasis on active experimentation through extensive research, visual aids and the delivery of persuasive and inspiring speeches gives students ample opportunity to practise and hone their public speaking skills. This hands-on approach helps students consolidate what they have learned and allows them to gain confidence through repeated practice, further reducing their communication apprehension.

Hence, the public speaking training plan provides a comprehensive and systematic approach to reducing students' communication apprehension. The programme addresses common fears, provides a supportive learning environment,

teaches important public speaking skills and offers opportunities for active experimentation. This reduces communication apprehension and equips students with the skills and confidence to make effective oral presentations.

Conclusion

This paper presents a comprehensive public speaking training plan as an innovative way to address the widespread problem of communication apprehension in public speaking. The training plan is based on Toastmasters International's Handbook for Competent Communication and Kolb's (1984) experiential learning theory. The training plan engages students in an iterative learning cycle of concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualisation and active experimentation. This process enables students to reflect on their experiences, formulate new strategies for public speaking, and apply these strategies in a supportive environment. The programme specifically targets the aspects of public speaking that often contribute to communication apprehension, such as language structure, fluency, non-verbal communication and voice modulation. The programme strengthens students' readiness and confidence by teaching these skills, thereby alleviating their anxiety. The programme also emphasises active experimentation through extensive research, the use of visual aids and the delivery of persuasive and inspiring speeches. This hands-on approach consolidates what has been learnt and boosts students' confidence through repeated practice, further reducing their communication apprehension.

The public speaking training plan emphasises the importance of inclusive education by promoting reflective writing and fostering a supportive learning environment that ensures inclusion and equity in learning. The emphasis on the long-term impact and sustainability of public speaking skills encourages a shift in educational focus from short-term academic achievement to prioritising long-term skill development and student well-being. Future research could explore the long-term impact of this training plan on students' communication apprehension and public speaking skills, as well as its adaptability to different learning contexts and styles.

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