

## Assessment of Public Speaking Anxiety (PSA): A Study Based on the Second Year Law Undergraduates in Kotelawala Defence University, Sri Lanka

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**Abstract:** Eliminating the apprehension of public speaking is vital for law undergraduates to perform well as future attorneys and other legal professionals. A descriptive cross-sectional study assessed Public Speaking Anxiety (PSA) among all the (n=140) second-year law undergraduates who followed the compulsory Public Speaking module in KDU, Sri-Lanka. A pre-tested, self-administered questionnaire followed by the Personal Report of Public Speaking Anxiety (PRPSA) scale developed by McCroskey was used for data collection. Data was analysed using descriptive statistics, t-test, and one-way ANOVA in SPSS 23.0. All the participants had a 'low' level of PSA. The majority (90.9%: n=100) had the previous experience of performing in front of an audience, and 60% (n=66) were involved in extra-curricular activities related to public speaking. However, the majority (75.5%: n=83) had not followed any course related to public speaking. The mean of the PRPSA score of the students who had participated in extra-curricular activities related to public speaking was significantly different from that of the ones who had not (P=0.030). Tukey post hoc test on a one-way ANOVA revealed that the students who had participated in debating had a significant mean difference in PRPSA score with the students who had taken part in Toastmasters (P=0.000) and with those who had not participated in any activity related to public speaking (P=0.000).

Previous exposure and having a compulsory course module on public speaking were identified as the critical elements in reducing the PSA among the law undergraduates. It would lead to the transformation of self-confidence and ultimately, a positive transformation in their professionalism and personality.

**Keywords:** Public speaking anxiety, Law undergraduates, University education, Communication apprehension

### Introduction

Public Speaking Anxiety (PSA) is identified in the DSM-5 (*Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders; American Psychiatric Association*) as a social anxiety disorder (APA, 2013). It is also named as Glassophobia, and identified as a state of nervousness or distress triggered by the expectation of something threatening. Further, PSA is classified as one of the prevailing social phobias among the modern generation (Herath, 2019). It is reported as prevalent in 15% to 30% of the general population (Pull, 2012). Up to 10% of those say that their PSA results in an intrusion with daily activities, including work and education (Heeren et al., 2013; Stein et al., 1996). Regardless of being knowledgeable in their field of specialisation, many professionals struggle due to poor public speaking skills. Even professionals involved in business and politics may also undergo stressful

conditions due to the fear of public speaking. For certain individuals, the fear of public speaking has become a threat to achieving success in their career. Further, society has an underestimation on them as they fail to create a strong impression among the public.

Fear of public speaking can lead to various physiological changes in the speaker such as experiencing dryness of mouth, increasing the level of blood pressure, asymmetrical breathing, reddening of the face and perspiring due to the feeling of embarrassment (Kushner, 2004). People who experience speaking anxiety, get confused very quickly and they may feel anxious and uncomfortable even when they are in front of a small crowd. They may experience a weakness in their body due to the stressful condition. The very thought of giving a speech in front of the public may bring them a sense of discomfort and nervousness (Furmark, 2002). The symptoms of Glassophobia can be classified into three: physical, verbal, and non-verbal. The individuals with Public speaking anxiety may undergo physical symptoms such as acute hearing, raised heartbeat, dilated pupils, enhanced sweating, increased oxygen intake, spasm of upper back muscles and neck rigidity. They will also experience verbal symptoms such as tense and shaking voice and vocalised pauses and non-verbal symptoms like disturbed body language (Furmark, 2002). Studies reveal that females have a high prevalence of social phobia than males (Kessler et al., 1994; McLean et al., 2011).

Communication Apprehension, which weakens the competency and the disposition to speak in public, can be treated with three approaches, such as systematic desensitisation, cognitive restructuring, and competence/skill-building. The above approaches are classified as the most effective techniques in maximising the students' performance.

Systematic desensitisation comprises in a determination to engage, repetitively, in the same apprehension-causing exercise or event in order to reduce its newness and intensify the comfort with that activity (Colbeck, 2011). This is an gradual exposure for the fear occurring stimuli that leads to a decrease in the stress levels with the aid of the relaxation techniques. The mechanism of cognitive restructuring aims at directing the individuals with high levels of Communication Apprehension to an instructor who will identify the weaknesses of the participants' and rebuild and replace them with positive motivation (Stein, 2009). Skills training serves as one of the fundamental approaches utilised in the universities in public speaking programmes. This approach strengthens the students' confidence in public speaking as they gain the assistance of their instructors in enhancing their skills of public speaking. The main focus of this approach is to reduce the public speaking anxiety through competence/ skill-building approach. An experimental study which has surveyed this method has proven a reduction in the level of PRPSA (Colbeck, 2011).

It has become a common practice among many young students that they try to escape from the instances where they are expected to do a presentation or deliver a speech. Further, they have a high tendency of avoiding social gatherings. Studies have revealed that language speaking courses play an influential role in reducing the level of speakers' anxiety and create positive reinforcement in the level of performance (Scovel, 2006). Further, recent survey studies highlighted that the incidence of PSA among university students is parallel to that of the general population (Tejwani et al., 2016). Since this is a significant barrier in achieving one's personal and professional goals, the university undergraduates must be trained to

overcome the fear of public speaking before they become professionals (Raja, 2017). As a result of this high incidence of public speaking fear, and in light of its clinical implications, the need for brief and precise measurement of this construct is critical (Heeren et al., 2013).

A positive, pre-speech self-talk experience is also identified as a very effective mechanism in assessing the influence of anxiety on student performance in various disciplines. The research studies highlight the significance of providing the students with an opportunity to narrate aloud a self-affirming statement in unison before they deliver the relevant presentation or speech. This will have a profound effect on reducing the anxiety of the students in public speaking. Nevertheless, the recurrent use of the recited positive affirmation practice over numerous instances in the same course module and academic semester did not result in a noteworthy additional decrease in performance anxiety over classes in which only one speech or presentation was performed during the term (Shadinger et al., 2020).

Psychological distress has been categorised as an influential element in the student's transition and success. Many university students across all the academic disciplines undergo different levels of anxiety and distress in their interpersonal, social and performance situations, and that serves as a strong barrier into their competency in achieving success in their higher education. Hence the Performance Anxiety, Public Speaking Anxiety, Stage Fear and Communication Apprehension are the most common types of anxieties experienced by the University Undergraduates (Martin-Lynch et al., 2016).

In general, the public speaking anxiety is a common issue that many Law

undergraduates, as well as aspiring Law students, struggle with. A Lawyer is expected not only to interact with clients but also to deliver the arguments persuasively and constructively before the court. When the students master the art of public speaking during their university education, this may lead to a transformation in their self-confidence. Therefore, eliminating the fear of public speaking is of crucial importance to Law undergraduates since it may threaten the confidence in their future as attorneys. Hence, improving the public speaking skills of Law undergraduates is a key to have a promising legal career and a source of empowerment (Brown, 2015). However, there are only a few studies conducted in Sri-Lanka regarding the PSA among the Law undergraduates. Therefore, the study aimed at assessing the PSA among the second-year Law undergraduates who follow compulsory public speaking module in General Sir John Kotelawala Defence University, Sri-Lanka.

### Literature Review

The fear of public speaking is even more dreadful than their fear of death for some individuals. However, the psychologists identify this as one of the irrational fears which can easily be eliminated through constructive intervention. Many researches have highlighted the need to include the public speaking modules into the curriculum right from School to Higher education at universities (Raja, 2017). A study revealed that the students who get exposed to the training on public speaking before they enter the world of professionalism are more likely to be competent and confident than those who had no prior exposure (Akin and Kunzman, 1974).

A study was conducted in Japan to assess the efficiency of a skills-based program as a mechanism in decreasing the PSA. The

study population comprised of twenty-five college sophomores who were subjected to a methodical approach for developing a presentation that was theoretically associated with approaches in reducing Communication Apprehension. The students were provided with the opportunity to conduct four presentations. The performance was evaluated and graded by the teacher and the colleagues. Results of the study shown that the experimental group reported a significant decrease in the level of public speaking anxiety than the control group of 86 students (Priby et al., 2001).

Another study was conducted in Midwestern university to determine the impact of a basic-level speech course on students' CA. The McCroskey's Personal Report of Public Speaking Anxiety (PRPSA) questionnaire was used in both pre- and post-test. The pre-test was conducted during the first two weeks of the course to assess their level of anxiety in public speaking while a post-test was conducted at the end of the course to assess their level of improvement. The study population comprised of 324 students at Midwestern University. The results have shown a significant decrease in the level of CA after completion of the speech course (Colbeck, 2011)

An experimental study conducted in Sri-Lanka among the third year undergraduates who follow compulsory module on public Speaking at Uva Wellassa University revealed that the students who had a high level of anxiety in public speaking (64%) at the beginning of the module, were able to reduce their anxiety to 5% at the end of the module. The level of anxiety was measured using the questionnaire of Personal Report of Public Speaking Anxiety (PRPSA) developed by McCroskey. This highlights the significance of having a separate course module on

public speaking for university undergraduates (Herath, 2019).

## Methodology

The study was conducted as a descriptive cross-sectional study among all the (N=140) second-year Law undergraduates who study compulsory Public Speaking module in General Sir John Kotelawala Defence University, Sri-Lanka. Self-administrated questionnaires were hand-delivered among the participants once the informed written consent was taken. A self-administered questionnaire consisted of an assessment of socio-demographic data followed by the Personal Report of Public Speaking Anxiety (PRPSA) scale was used for data collection. Personal Report of Public Speaking Anxiety (PRPSA) scale is a 34-item developed by McCroskey, J. C. (McCroskey, 1970) which is an excellent measure of public speaking anxiety. Cronbach's alpha of PRPSA scale ranges from 0.84 to 0.94 (Mörtberg et al., 2018), which proves that the scale is very reliable. The severity of the PSA is categorised in PRPSA under three levels (High = > 131, Low = < 98 and Moderate = 98-131) and the response to each item was scaled in a Likert scale (1- Strongly Disagree, 2-Disagree, 3- Neutral, 4-Agree, 5-Strongly Agree).

The questionnaire was piloted among ten second-year law undergraduates to evaluate cultural appropriateness and comprehension, and they were excluded from the study population. Data was analysed using SPSS 23.0, including the descriptive statistics, independent sample t-test and Turkey Post hoc test on one-way ANOVA.

## Results

The response rate of the participants was 78.57%(n=110), and the mean ( $\pm$ SD) age of the participants was 21.58( $\pm$ 3.567) years. Majority of them were females (59.1 %: n=65), and the native language of most of

the participants was Sinhalese (91.8%; n=101). Many of them (90.9%: n=100) had the experience of presenting an item in front of an audience, and 60% (n=66) have involved in the extra-curricular activities related to public speaking such as Toastmaster (30%: n=33), Debating (28.2%: n=31) and Model United Nations (MUN) (1.8%: n=2). However, most of the participants (75.5%: n=83) have not followed any courses related to public speaking.

Table 1. Socio-Demographic Data

Parameter	Status	
<b>Demographic Data</b>		
<b>Age</b>	Mean	21.58
	Median	22
	Mode	21
	SD	3.567
<b>Gender</b>	Male	40.9%(n=45)
	Female	59.1(n=65)
<b>Native Language</b>	Sinhala	91.8%(n=101)
	English	4.5%(n=5)
	Tamil	3.6%(n=4)
<b>Had the experience</b>	Yes	90.9%(n=100)
	No	9.1%(n=10)
<b>Extra-curricular activities</b>	Yes	60%(n=66)
	No	40%(n=44)
<b>Type of activities involved</b>	Toastmaster	30.0%(n=33)
	Debating	28.2%(n=31)
	MUN	1.8%(n=2)
	Nothing	40%(n=44)
<b>Followed courses</b>	Yes	24.5%(n=27)
	No	75.5%(n=83)

All the participants had a 'low' level of PSA, and the mean score was 40.35 ( $\pm 19.09$ ). There was no significant mean difference in PRPSA score between the two genders ( $P=0.058$ ), and the mean of the PRPSA score was significantly different between the students who have participated in

extra-curricular activities related to public speaking and the ones who have not ( $P=0.030$ ). One-Way ANOVA suggested that there is a statistically significant difference in the mean PRPSA score between the types of extra-curricular activities that the participants have taken part related to public speaking ( $P=0.000$ ). The students who have done debating had a significant mean difference in PRPSA score with the students who have taken part in Toastmaster ( $P=0.000$ ) and those who have not participated in any activities related to public speaking ( $P=0.000$ ). However, the students who have taken part in MUN had no significant mean difference in PRPSA score with the students who have done Debating ( $P=0.999$ ), Toastmaster ( $P=0.246$ ) and those who have not participated in any activities related to public speaking ( $P=0.408$ ).

Table 2. Multiple Comparisons  
Dependent Variable: PRPSA Value  
Tukey HSD

(I) type of activity	(J) type of activity	Mean Difference (I-J)	Sig.
<b>Done nothing</b>	Debating	-20.090*	.000
	Toastmaster	3.917	.729
	MUN	-18.477	.408
<b>Debating</b>	Done nothing	20.090*	.000
	Toastmaster	24.007*	.000
	MUN	1.613	.999
<b>Toastmaster</b>	Done nothing	-3.917	.729
	Debating	-24.007*	.000
	MUN	-22.394	.246

<b>MUN</b>	Done nothing	18.477	.408
	Debatin g	-1.613	.999
	Toast master	22.394	.246

### Discussion

This descriptive cross-sectional study was aimed to assess PSA among all the second-year Law undergraduates who follow a compulsory public speaking module in KDU, Sri-Lanka. The study revealed that all the participants had a low level of PSA. A similar study conducted in medical undergraduates in Pakistan found that the majority of the study population had a moderate PRPSA level (Khan et al., 2015). Further, there was a significant difference between the gender and PRPSA level, which was not found in the present study. Further, a similar experimental study conducted in Sri-Lanka among the 3<sup>rd</sup> year undergraduates who follow compulsory module on public Speaking at Uva Wellassa university revealed that the students who had a high level of anxiety in public speaking (64%) at the beginning of the module, were able to reduce their anxiety to 5% at the end of the module. This highlights the significance of including a specific module on public speaking into the curriculum of the university undergraduates (Herath, 2019).

In this study, majority of the participants have had the previous experience on presenting an item in front of an audience, and 60% (n=66) have involved in the extra-curricular activities related to public speaking. Moreover, PRPSA score was significantly different between the students who have participated in extra-curricular activities on public speaking and the ones who have not. The previous experience and the mandatory course module on public speaking should be the reason behind the low PSA among the

study population. Further, many researchers have highlighted the need for including Public speaking modules into the curriculum higher education. Another study revealed that the students who had exposure to public speaking are more likely to be competent and confident than those who had no prior exposure (Akin and Kunzman, 1974). Further, exposure to virtual environments and the use of cognitive-behavioural self-help programs delivered on the Internet would reduce the PSA (Pull, 2012).

### Conclusion

The study was conducted to identify the PSA among the second-year law undergraduates who followed the compulsory Public Speaking module in KDU, Sri-Lanka. It was revealed that the PSA level among all the participants was 'low'. Previous exposure to extra-curricular activities related to public speaking and having a compulsory course module on public speaking are critical elements in reducing the PSA among the Law undergraduates. This would lead to the transformation of their self-confidence, speaking style, intonation pattern and ultimately, a constructive alteration in their professionalism and personality.

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