The Effectiveness of Active Learning Techniques in Courses on Informative Speech

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Abstract
This paper analyses the effectiveness of Informative Speech, a course developed by the Communications Department of the University of the Basque Country to help communications students overcome their fear of speaking before a camera or microphone. Data extracted from surveys conducted at the beginning and end of this course and a focus group was analysed to determine the effectiveness of theoretical and practical strategies employed in teaching this subject. Findings indicate that although many students suffer stage fright when asked to perform on camera or before a microphone, the implementation of the right teaching methods can help them gain the confidence they need to make successful media presentations.

Keywords: Stage fright, oral communication, public speaking

Introduction[1]

As eminently social beings, we are highly concerned about how we appear to other people. The perceptions of others affect every aspect of our lives, from our academic performance and possibilities as professionals to our social status. Stage fright can be defined as the psychophysical reaction that occurs when someone's preconceived negative ideas of how he or she will be perceived by others prove stronger than his or her ability to take such external evaluations in stride (Légeron & André, 1997).

Stage fright is a common phenomenon. Numerous epidemiological studies have found that young people and adults alike consider situations in which they are required to speak publically to be particularly daunting. Thirty-four percent of the individuals surveyed for a study conducted by Stein, Walker and Porde (1996) professed anxiety about public speaking and between 20 and 30% of university students surveyed for a similar study conducted by Bados (1992) stated they suffered the same condition.

Anyone who has taught informational speech courses at the university level is bound to have known students who felt comfortable addressing audiences on camera or via a microphone from day one. Most, however, have problems getting started. Attempting to perform a task one barely understands on camera or in the unfamiliar environment of a recording studio in the presence of one's peers and professor can be a nerve-wracking experience.

Whereas educational systems in countries such as Italy, Argentina, Great Britain and the United States have always placed a heavy emphasis on oral expression at every level, those in Spain have tended to maintain a culturally driven focus on strong writing skills and to relegate oral expression almost exclusively to primary school classrooms in which blackboards have traditionally been emblazoned with the commandment "I will not talk in class" and the curricula employed discourages active student participation (Vilá & Castellá, 2014). According to Ballesteros and Palou (2005), the majority of Spanish schoolteachers find it difficult to teach speaking skills. Unsure as how to insert the topic into their curricula, organise oral activities without losing control or how to evaluate student competence in this area, they tend to limit oral expression to recitation and occasional oral presentation assignments.

University degree programmes are not exempt from this inertia. Despite the ongoing crisis facing print publications, the growing importance of audiovisual media, the constant introduction of new digital formats and the emergence of an Internet-based audiovisual culture, communication school curricula continue to place an enormous emphasis on writing. The findings of Tuning Educational Structures in Europe, a research project conceived to facilitate the convergence of university curricula within the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), bear this out: whereas graduates and sector employers surveyed ranked oral communications skills sixth on a long list of necessary skills, university professors considered them far less essential (Garcia Ureta, Toral et al, 2012).

[1] This article reports the partial results of a broader educational innovation project financed by the University of the Basque Country (2014–2016) titled "Informative speech: from the classroom to the radio studio. Collaboration with radio professionals as a means of fostering creativity, active learning and enhanced academic performance".

The same situation prevails in courses specifically devoted to public speaking. Conventional academic training in this area patently ignores the emotional aspects of oral communication. According to Garcia, Ureta, Toral et al (2012), "The psychological skills needed to overcome stage fright are not addressed in oral communication courses" (p. 414). It is routinely assumed the anxiety students feel starting out disappears with time and experience even though existing literature cites numerous cases in which veteran communications professionals continue to struggle with the problem.

The undergraduate journalism programme offered by The Faculty of Social Sciences and Communication at the University of the Basque Country introduced a course titled Informative Speech into its undergraduate journalism programme in the fall of 2012. During the same academic year, the school negotiated collaboration agreements with two radio stations (Cadena Ser, which broadcasts in Spanish, and Euskadi Irratia, which broadcasts in Basque) that allowed students to gain hands-on experience in a real professional environment. The new synergies and ongoing dialogue between students, professionals and professors generated by this initiative have served as a springboard for the development of enhanced teaching strategies for oral communications that foster active learning and creativity.

This highly successful programme, which was repeated and consolidated during the academic year 2014–2015, provided the foundation for an innovation project titled "Informative speech: from the classroom to the radio studio. Collaboration with radio professionals as a means of fostering creativity, active learning and enhanced academic performance". Interaction between students and professionals and professors' parallel teaching experiences made it clear that undergraduate students needed tools for overcoming stage fright in order to develop their full potential as presenters. Efforts to help them deal with their fears and inhibitions are central to the innovation project now underway.

1. Stage fright and public speaking

The overwhelming majority of studies on public speaking, clinical psychology, communication psychology and communication intelligence indicate that the ability to express oneself in public is key to personal development. That communication students have a greater need to develop this competence than most people goes without saying. The paradigm under which most audiovisual communication is carried out today places a higher premium on seduction by means of images and appeals to the emotions than on persuasion based on reason and discourse (Haranburu & Plazaola, 2000). Over the past few decades there has also been gradual deterioration of conventional distinctions between certain aspects of entertainment and news programmes. Whereas news presenters were once required to project a formal, authoritative and detached professional image, they are now expected to relate to and engage the audiences they serve at a more personal and emotional level. This requires non-verbal skills, a knack for establishing a direct connection with viewers and listeners and the ability to improvise on the spot. Professional training must prepare young communicators to assume these new roles (Toral, Murelaga et al., 2008).

"We convey our emotional states through body language and the modulation of our voices and vocal inflections as we speak" (Bregantin, 2008, p. 113). Our bodies react simultaneously on a psychological, emotional and physiological plane to given stimuli. As this reaction (which may be involuntary and even against our will)[2] is perceptible to others, it forms an integral part of anything we seek to express. Our perceptions of ourselves and the environment around us affects the way in which we communicate with others and the emotional tone of messages we seek to convey (Bustos, 2003; Gaya, 2002). A lack of self-confidence undermines one's ability to appear convincing. A camera-shy person has trouble connecting with audiences. Communications students should therefore be taught about the physiological and psychological processes public speaking entails and given tools to cope with stress factors associated with their field. Training should also cover areas related to one's ability to seduce and persuade such as body language and voice control (Ailes & Kraushar, 2001; Davis, 2002). Stage fright is a psychophysiological phenomenon that provokes a wide variety of symptoms, which can be physiological (facial rictus, tics and trembling, blushing, dry mouth or nausea), cognitive (mental blocks, an exaggerated concept of one's own mistakes or a fear of ridicule) or behavioural (a tendency to cringe, lower one's voice or stutter) and are manifested in greater or lesser degrees of intensity (Yagosesky, 2001). As various clinical studies indicate that only one out of five people claiming to be seriously afraid of speaking in public can be classified as being phobic (Bados, 2005), we can assume that symptoms generally tend to be light and few people suffer several simultaneously. Stage fright can prevent a person from expressing him or herself clearly and effectively. Strategies developed by clinical psychologists and public speaking and communication intelligence experts involving gradual, progressive exposure to public speaking situations coupled with cognitive reconstruction techniques and methods for controlling the activation of reactions are usually effective in ridding people of unwanted symptoms.

Exposure helps individuals prone to stage fright grasp three key concepts: how to break associations they have made between situations they dread and feelings of anxiety and respond differently to such situations, that as anticipated consequences cease to materialise their fears will prove to have been unfounded and that coping techniques constitute an effective means of controlling their anxiety (Bados, 2005: 28).

Exposure must be gradual. Initial experiences must be structured so as to ensure a high probability of success that translates into a sense of self-confidence students can build upon as they face more challenging circumstances. The Yerkes-Dodson law formulated in the early twentieth century, which is based on the idea that personal performance can be improved by the presence of tension sufficient to keep one alert and concentrated on a task, squares with communication professionals' testimonies that a low level of stage fright actually enhances their delivery. Given that the point at which additional stress impairs one's ability to function well varies, it is important to determine optimal levels of activation on a case-by-case basis and develop coping techniques that work for each individual (Bregantin, 2008). These frequently include muscle relaxation and breathing exercises. Cognitive reconstruction, on the other hand, often involves positive thinking and visualisation techniques. Positive thinking

[2] According to studies conducted by the Palo Alto Group it is impossible for two individuals observing each other not to communicate at some level (Haranburu & Plazaola, 2000).

entails learning to detect negative thoughts as soon as they arise, recognising their demoralising effect and replacing them with more positive thoughts that allow one to manage his or her anxiety and cope with stress-producing situations. Visualisation allows individuals to use their imagination to transform dreaded scenarios into more gratifying ones they can mentally project in real situations.

2. Teaching strategy

The first of the six units that make up the course, which covers the concepts outlined above, stresses the importance of oral communication skills in journalism. Professors frame stage fright as a condition almost everyone suffers to a greater or lesser degree and provide students with material in which veteran media professionals explain how they cope with the problem. Once the nature of the phenomenon and its symptoms have been contextualised and the effectiveness of anti-anxiety techniques explained, students are asked to prepare a brief essay about a theme of interest to them, present it orally in front of their classmates and fill out a questionnaire about their first on-camera practice session in a campus television studio – exercises that allow them to gradually identify the specific fears they need to overcome.

Assignments are heavily focused on hands-on experience. Ongoing evaluation of student's progress throughout this process of gradual exposure to simulated television and radio scenarios accounts for 80% of their final grades. Students are initially asked to present a news story in a low-tech format. From that point on, they are given increasingly complex assignments, moving from a radio to a television studio environment, learning to work with a teleprompter, mastering body language, performing as reporters in situations that require them to interact with others and ad lib, covering live events and ultimately participating in round table current events programmes that call for a greater degree of self-expression and improvisation. During this process, they are expected to handle an increasing number of transitions between topics and audiovisual feeds. Professors provide immediate and positive remedial feedback. Practical exercises are recorded and subsequently reviewed by students during weekly group sessions organised for that purpose. The success of self-learning processes depends upon the implementation of teaching methods designed to allow students to assume responsibility for their professional development and personal commitment (Pou, Álvarez et al, 2013). To help them develop a sense of autonomy, students are encouraged to handle the technical aspects of recording on their own whenever possible. Evaluation is a three-step process. Students are expected to take a critical look at their own work, which is subsequently subject to a peer review. Professors provide a final critique that addresses points not covered by this group discussion.

Opportunities to analyse the work of peers and professionals they admire boosts student motivation. Input from professors in the form of positive feedback creates a supportive environment that energizes the entire group and puts students in the right frame of mind to make individual presentations. The more motivated students are, the greater effort they put into class assignments (Tamayo & Segura, 2012).

There is a marked gap between students' perceptions about their own work and those of their peers, who tend to be generous when discussing mistakes and not especially conscious of the anxiety and fears of the person being critiqued. Informational Speech

places a strong emphasis on preparation. Training students to perform key tasks such as familiarising themselves with texts they are expected to deliver orally, knowing what they are about and how they are structured, reading them aloud several times focusing on different angles such as inflection and intonation and highlighting words that may be difficult to pronounce or need to be stressed helps boost their confidence. Students struggling with severe cases of stage fright, who tend to be less apt to do this sort of prep work than others (Daly, Vangelisti et al, 1995), are given extra encouragement and support.

In addition to the technical vocal and interpretive exercises that form an essential part of traditional public speaking courses,[3] the course on informative speech taught at the University of the Basque Country includes breathing exercises (Lodes, 2002) and basic visualisation techniques.

Direct contact and interaction with working professionals allows students to observe how veteran presenters and reporters handle their own fears of addressing audiences. Staff members of Cadena Ser, one of the radio stations with which the University of the Basque Country has developed a collaboration agreement, periodically take time to speak with students on campus. During these sessions, they answer previously submitted questions related to a wide range of topics, one of the most popular being how to deal with stage fright. Students also visit the station's installations and a few are invited to participate in round table discussions of current events organised by Cadena Ser every summer.

3. Methodology

To gauge the effectiveness of the teaching strategy used to teach this subject at the University of the Basque Country, the 150 third-year students enrolled in Informative Speech during the spring semester of 2016 were asked to participate in three separate surveys staggered throughout the course designed to determine the types of anxiety they suffered when facing a microphone or camera for the very first time, the degree to which they overcame these problems as the course progressed and whether they felt better prepared to perform the task by the end of the semester.

The 114 students participating in the first survey (conducted three weeks into the course shortly after their first television studio practice session) were asked to review a list of 22 physical, cognitive and behavioural symptoms linked to stage fright and indicate which, if any, they had suffered during this exercise using a set of predetermined response options ranging from "none" to "moderate", "notable" and "serious" based on a scale developed by Yagosesky (2001).

To track the evolution of students' ability to cope with performance-related anxieties as the semester progressed, a second survey was conducted during the fourteenth week of the course shortly after their penultimate studio session. A total of 106 participated in this survey.

[3] These techniques, which are also used to treat cases of public speaking phobia, have been known to considerably lower individuals' levels of stage fright (Bados, 2005).

To ensure a balanced comparison between responses provided at the beginning and end of the course, 8 survey responses were withdrawn at random from the larger initial set. A total of 212 questionnaires were analysed, 106 for each of the two surveys conducted.

Data gathered was filtered to eliminate the least significant responses and limit the sample to those indicating "notable" and/or "serious" manifestations of stage fright symptoms. Figures presented here display results for the ten symptoms students suffered the most.[4]

A total of 108 students participated in a third and final survey conducted during the last week of the course designed to pinpoint their greatest problems and preoccupations and the degree to which they resolved them over the course of the semester. The questionnaire distributed contained three groups of open-ended questions: a) What was the most challenging aspect of delivering an on-camera presentation? What was your greatest preoccupation? b) Have you managed to overcome the problem and feel more confident when performing this task? c) Do you consider yourself better prepared to speak on-camera or before a public audience than you were three months ago? In what ways have you been able to enhance your performance and to what do you attribute this improvement? Although none of these questions specifically mentioned stage fright, answers received frequently made reference to the issue. Many respondents cited overcoming symptoms associated with stage fright as being the toughest challenge they faced during the course.

The same techniques were applied the next time Informative Speech was offered and a focus group was organised with four students who took the course during this period.

4. Analysis and focus group

A relatively high percentage of students enrolled in the course suffered symptoms associated with stage fright (see Fig. 1). At the beginning of the course, 61 (57%) felt they were not performing at the level they aspired to. More than 40% suffered one or more of the following six symptoms: unrealistically high self-expectations (57.5%), a general sense of anxiety (47.1%), a fear of failing or appearing ridiculous (46.2%), an exaggerated conception of their own mistakes (44.3%), accelerated heart rate (43.4%) and verbal and corporal expression problems (43.4%). Many suffered severe cases of more than one of the symptoms listed in the questionnaire and all felt they suffered at least one to a notable or severe degree. Such figures indicate they were generally intimidated by the idea of speaking into a microphone when the course began.

Student stress levels dropped significantly by the end of the course. The number of problems students cited fell from a high of 447 during the first survey to 296 during the second (a reduction of 34%). Their expectations of failure fell by 48%, concerns about their ability to concentrate during a presentation by 42%, fear of appearing ridiculous by 37%, incidences of excelerated heart beat by 35% and general level of

[4] Symptoms not listed in Figure 1 but included in the survey questionnaire were (in descending order of their incidence in the survey population): fixation on the cause of anxiety, rictus, mental confusion, tendency to forget what one has intended to say, sweating, mental block, stuttering, speaking in a low voice, butterflies in the stomach, urinary urgency, loss of bladder/bowel control and nausea.

anxiety by 34%. Although only 15% fewer students claimed to suffer the most commonly reported symptom (unrealistically high self-expectations) by the end of the course. Nevertheless, the incidence of problems fell in every category of symptom analysed and 32% of the students participating in the second survey characterised the symptoms they continued to experience as not being particularly serious.

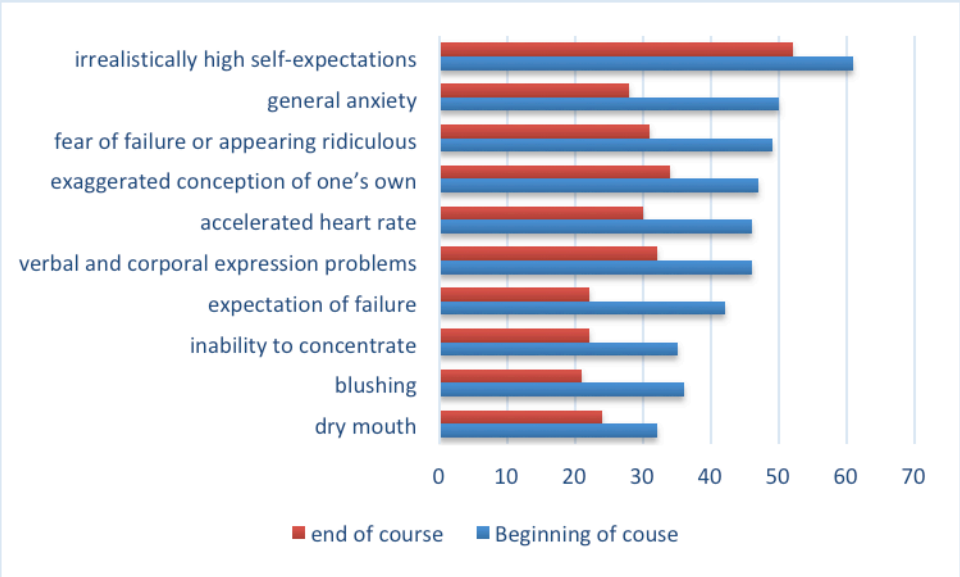

Figure 1. Evolution of students' symptoms

Student stress levels dropped significantly by the end of the course. The number of problems students cited fell from a high of 447 during the first survey to 296 during the second (a reduction of 34%). Their expectations of failure fell by 48%, concerns about their ability to concentrate during a presentation by 42%, fear of appearing ridiculous by 37%, incidences of excelerated heart beat by 35% and general level of anxiety by 34%. Although only 15% fewer students claimed to suffer the most commonly reported symptom (unrealistically high self-expectations) by the end of the course. Nevertheless, the incidence of problems fell in every category of symptom analysed and 32% of the students participating in the second survey characterised the symptoms they continued to experience as not being particularly serious.

While the question as to whether they should have been able to overcome stage fright to a greater degree is open to debate, students did make progress in every area. By the end of the course over a third had lost their fear of speaking into a microphone and on-camera and the rest had gained more self-confidence.

An analysis of student responses to the first question posed in the third survey conducted, which concerned the aspects of on-camera presentations they regarded most challenging and problems they associated with this task, revealed that students' greatest preoccupation at the beginning of the course (shared by 21%) was delivering fluid, articulate messages in near-live broadcast situations. The second greatest challenge cited was the fear of adopting an inadequate facial expression or posture: 16% of the students surveyed were worried about appearing stiff on camera or making forced or exaggerated gestures. The third problem cited (by 15%) was a fear of suffering a mental block, and the fourth (related specifically to television and cited by 11%) was the challenge of working with a teleprompter.

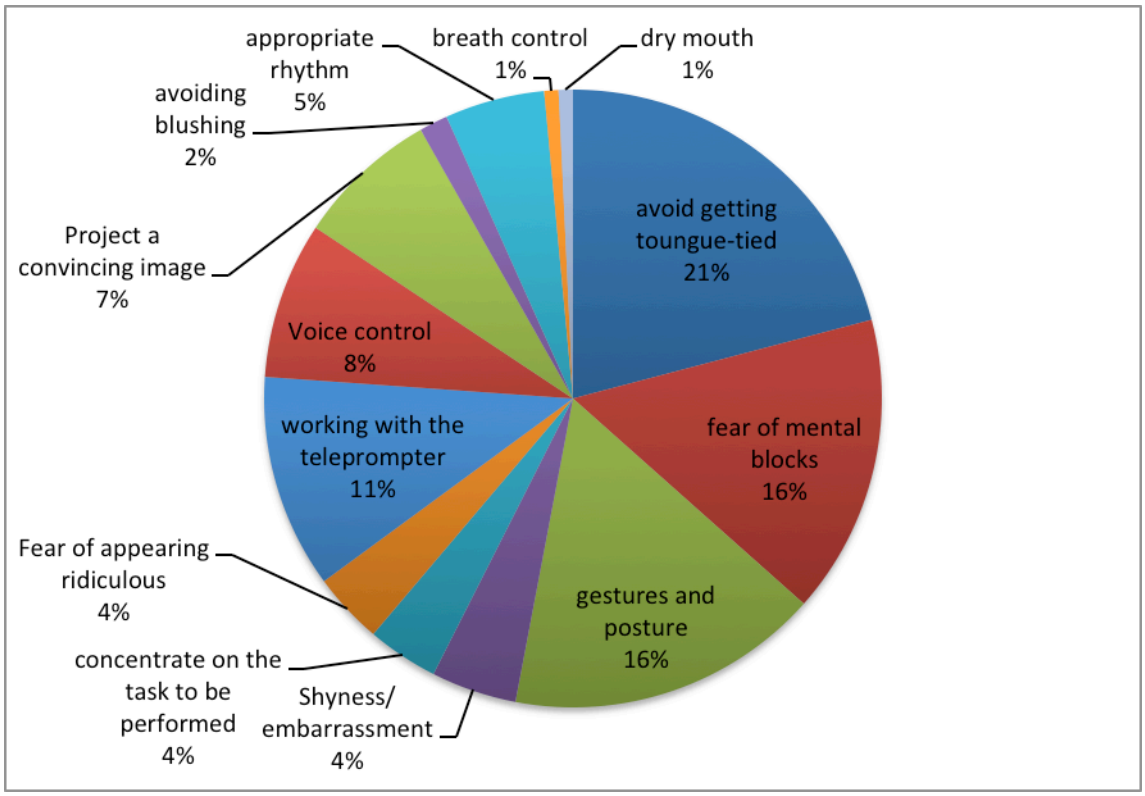

Figure 2. Breakdown of student responses to the survey questions "What was the most challenging aspect of delivering an on-camera presentation?" and "What was your greatest preoccupation?"

While anxiety about working with a teleprompter may not be a symptom of stage fright, it is linked to a fear of dealing with something new and unfamiliar. Given that the technology is question is relatively simple, most students felt comfortable using it after a few practice sessions.

The majority of the other challenges students identified as daunting were more closely associated with stage fright: 8% mentioned voice control, 5% overcoming timidity and embarrassment when addressing an audience, 4% a fear of appearing ridiculous, 2% involuntary blushing and 1% suffering a dry mouth.

By the end of the course, 31% claimed to have completely overcome the toughest challenge they had faced and 31% stated they had made significant progress towards that goal. Another 29% felt they had made some progress but needed to work harder to resolve the issue and a lesser 9% reported they had failed to overcome the problem. In response to the third question contained in the final survey, which was "Do you consider yourself better prepared to speak on-camera or before a public audience than you were three months ago?" 35% felt certain they were well prepared to take a studio test at a real radio or television station and 25% asserted a little less confidently that they thought they were better prepared to perform this task than they had been at the beginning of the course. Another 25% stated that they were better prepared after taking the course but had room to improve and 15% that they needed more practice in order to meet this challenge.

Speaking on-camera proved to be the greatest stumbling block of students claiming to have made little or no perceptible progress during the course. The inability of individuals in this segment of the study sample to relax in front of a camera was a clear indication that some students need more time to master this aspect of their future careers than others. Those who felt better prepared linked their progress to stronger feelings of confidence. Statements such as "I'm better prepared because every time I make an on-camera presentation I lose a bit more of my initial stage fright and appear less tense", "I've managed to learn a few tricks for staying calm while addressing an audience" and "Learning how a studio functions and a few basic public speaking techniques has made me feel more sure of myself in front of a camera" underscore the importance of incorporating hands-on exercises into courses of this nature. Several students mentioned the value of positive feedback, pointing out that "watching and listening to peers and getting constructive criticism from professors really helps you relax and give more fluid presentations". Others focused on building self-confidence in a number of areas, "especially intonation and articulation". One of the students who considered practical exercises stimulating admitted, "I feel lot more relaxed now and the course has given me an appetite for on-camera presentation. Before I was more into radio, but now I prefer being in a television studio. I've also realised I like the improvisation involved in solving problems that crop up in live presentations". Some were nonetheless worried about backsliding. One student acknowledged, "I don't blush anymore because I I'm used to the set up, but I'll probably have to start from zero if asked to perform in a different environment".

Researchers organised a focus group session with four fourth-year students who had taken the course the previous year, all of whom asserted that classroom activities had given them a better idea of what a career as a radio or television presenter entailed. One of the aspects of the course they claimed to have benefitted from the most was a series of on-campus talks given by professional radio presenters working for Cadena Ser. According to fourth-year journalism student Sabin Llodio:

> You tend to idealise the presenters you listen to and think of them as existing on a totally different plane. Their classroom visits helped me a lot. I remember them saying "It doesn't matter if you make a mistake. Just listen to a couple of the ones we've made. Some of them are real howlers". Comments like these make you feel better about yourself. You realise that the world isn't going to stop spinning if you goof up once in awhile.

Another course-related activity students got a lot out of was the opportunity to participate in a series of current events roundtables organised by Cadena Ser. Focus group students made several interesting comments about this experience:

> I was a bundle of nerves when I went. The way the professionals there treated us helped us relax and we managed to talk without getting the jitters. (Yaiza Arrizabalaga, fourth-year journalism student)
>
> My heart leapt into my throat when I arrived at the station. (Idoia Murias, fourth- year journalism student)
>
> I was nervous at first. Especially on the first day. You confront the feeling and gradually get over it. Everyone noticed how we changed between our first and last sessions. At the beginning, we all arrived with notes. (Sabin Llodio, fourth-year journalism student)

This experience taught participating students to prepare themselves for real-life situations. Arriving with a set of pre-prepared notes gave them a sense of security. One student reflected, “I read up on the subjects to be discussed because I tend to panic. Later I realised that this tactic really works for me. If I ever manage to pull myself together and relax perhaps I won’t feel the need to do so much prior preparation for this kind of event”.

These students discovered that a low degree of nervousness – if under control – was actually a good thing because it made them aware of the need to prepare. All agreed that preparation was the best way to overcome anxiety. They also found out that the emotional aspects of real-life situations are more authentic than those experienced under simulation conditions and learned to cope with criticism from a real audience. One member of the focus group concluded “Unlike the way you feel in a classroom, you’re conscious of the repercussion of what you say. You learn to provide a response, what you should and shouldn’t respond to and how to respond . . . in other words, to be prudent”.

Conclusions

Human communication is a complex phenomenon in which non-verbal language and the voice play important roles. Stage fright and its physiological, cognitive and behavioural symptoms impair one’s ability to make fluid and effective oral presentations. Most of the existing literature on public speaking, emotional intelligence and communication psychology consulted for this research indicated that a combination of positive, corrective feedback and cognitive reconstruction and activation control techniques helps people suffering stage fright confront and overcome their fears of addressing audiences.

A survey conducted at the beginning of the course revealed that all of the students enrolled suffered at least one form of stage fright to a fairly serious degree and that some suffered more than one symptom. When asked to indicate what they considered to have been the greatest challenge they faced during the course, the majority of the students surveyed mentioned problems associated with stage fright. Focus group participants considered their discovery that a low level of controlled anxiety could actually be positive in that it prompted them to prepare in advance for oral presentations to have been one of the high points of the course.

Although individual learning processes are unique experiences during which students discover their strengths and weaknesses and physiological, psychological and cognitive responses to personal fears, the findings of this study indicate that teaching strategies addressing these aspects of public speaking can be highly effective. During the period examined for this research, students’ levels of stress and insecurity related to microphone and on-camera presentations diminished across the board and a third of the students involved overcame their problems completely. Survey repondents considered self-learning opportunities presented in the context of collaborative practical exercises and peer critiques to have been especially beneficial and rewarding.

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