

“I FAILED BECAUSE I GOT VERY NERVOUS”.
ANXIETY AND PERFORMANCE IN INTERPRETER TRAINEES:
AN EMPIRICAL STUDY

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Fear of public speaking and anxiety

It goes without saying that conference interpreting is a very stressful activity not least because it involves the performance of a series of complex cognitive and psychomotor operations in public or at least for the public. During the process of interpreting training the high levels of stress experienced by students when having to speak (interpret) in public can become one of the major obstacles in the early stages. Stress becomes evident through symptoms of anxiety currently defined by psychologists as a normal innate emotional alarm response to the *anticipation* of danger or threat. Anxiety emerges very soon during the early training stages even when students “only” have to make monolingual presentations in front of their peers and teacher in language A or B. Those levels of anxiety do not decrease easily when monolingual presentations become real consecutive interpretations involving complex cognitive processes of language and cultural transfer. The climax is reached the day of the final consecutive interpreting examination where an attempt is made to simulate a real life situation at the University of Castellón. There are students who cannot stand the stress and abandon the exam moments before sitting it. Sometimes they even show physical symptoms (tears, difficulty in breathing, sickness, etc.). Many interpretation teachers feel they have to turn into *ad hoc* psychotherapists during office hours, trying to allay students’ terrors of interpreting even after ordinary class sessions.

The capacity to control stress has traditionally been considered one of the requisites for interpreting (Cooper, Davies and Tung 1982; Moser-Mercer 1985; Longley 1989; Klonowicz 1994; Gile 1995; Moser-Mercer, Künzli and Korac 1998) and a predictor for interpreting competence (Alexieva 1997). Although the number of empirical studies about the influence of stress in interpreting performance is scarce, there is a wide consensus that stress is intrinsic to interpreting – both in the consecutive and simultaneous mode – even though its impact is not clearly defined (Brisau, Godijns and Meuleman 1994). Interpreting research on stress has revolved around the professional realm, focusing mainly on the physiological responses to stress during interpreting and on performance: cardiovascular activity (Klonowicz 1994), causes of stress (Cooper *et al.* 1982), and the relation between stress and quality in prolonged interpreting turns

through chemical and physiological analysis (Moser-Mercer *et al.* 1998). Little empirical research has been carried out on interpreting students (Riccardi *et al.* 1998). The capacity to control stress in interpreting is sometimes taken into account in interpreting entrance exams (Moser-Mercer 1985). On those occasions the capacity to cope with a situation of continuous stress during a relatively long time is considered more important than actual performance *per se*, provided candidates show a minimum number of skills. Apparently, some candidates had to admit that they could not cope and abandoned the test (Moser-Mercer 1985). It can be inferred, especially from students' comments, that the anxiety they feel when they have first to speak and later to interpret in public may arise basically from fear of public speaking (among other causes). Let us analyse from a psychological point of view the possible origins of the two conditions that can hinder performance – fear of public speaking and anxiety.

Public speaking is generally considered to be a stressful social situation (Montorio, Guerrero and Izal 1991) that may have negative consequences leading to poor professional or academic outcomes (Greer 1965; Gutiérrez-Calvo and García-González 1999). Most studies on the fear of public speaking tend to consider it a major source of anxiety (Bados 1990; Cano-Vindel and Miguel-Tobal 1999; Gutiérrez-Calvo and García-González 1999; Montorio, Fernández, Lázaro and López 1996). Fremouw and Breitenstein (1990) describe this fear as a non-adaptive response to environmental events, resulting in inefficient behaviour. The following are outlines of some of the causes for this non-adaptive response.

Standing in judgement of others

When an individual speaks in public he or she is exposed to other people's judgement of his or her personal image. Situations in which one feels judged by others may induce negative emotions that can affect the individual's behaviour. Fear of acting in an inappropriate way, of being negatively evaluated and therefore of being rejected interferes with the capacity to perform a task (Peri and Torres 1999). When the public speaking situation is felt as threatening, it is associated with the need to achieve high performance levels as well as with a lack of self-reliance to meet demands (Gutiérrez-Calvo and García-González 1999). Consequences of the fear of public speaking are crucial for certain activities such as consecutive interpreting which heavily depends, among other things, on public speaking skills. This is an emotion interpreting trainees must overcome because otherwise it could hinder their professional performance. Research on public speaking fear considers that the resulting anxiety is responsible for the non-adaptive behaviour that emerges in a public speaking situation when it is seen as a threat (Cano-Vindel 1985). However, the

connection between fear of public speaking and poor performance in a professional activity involving public speaking has not been demonstrated.

Lack of self-confidence, insecurity

Anxiety associated with public speaking derives from feelings of insecurity or fear related to the result of the task (performance). It is an emotional reaction typical of situations of judgement arising from evaluation situations (Gutiérrez-Calvo and Miguel-Tobal 1998). These premises are in line with evidence found in empirical research pointing to a negative relation between anxiety and (non-specific) academic performance; that is, the greater the anxiety the poorer the performance (Seipp 1991). Furthermore, research has established that anxiety felt just in delivering a speech in public is an emotion linked to lack of competence in public speaking (Behnke and Sawyer 1999; Westenberg 1999). Interpreting students are a specific group for which public speaking skills and control of anxiety constitutes a main component of the interpreting operation. Lack of both aptitudes may affect performance both at the academic and professional levels.

Feelings of threat

A public speaking situation may give rise to anxiety feelings if it is interpreted as threatening and consequently is experienced with fear. This threat can objectively result in academic or professional failure and loss of social prestige or self-esteem (Gutiérrez-Calvo and García-González 1999). Public speaking situations themselves are not simply associated with anxiety. According to the model of cognitive assessment, anxiety results from a subject's interpretation of the level of threat a situation poses and the available resources to face it, that is personal capacity to deal with the threat is seen as very inadequate (Lazarus and Folkman 1986). Anxiety will be contingent on the situation if the individual considers it to be threatening; however, the subject can also interpret the situation as a challenge or as irrelevant (Cano-Vindel and Miguel-Tobal 1999; Lazarus and Folkman 1986). When the situation is considered threatening, anxiety may appear. When the subject feels the situation as a challenge or irrelevant, anxiety is not the emotion that will emerge as a result of the situational assessment. Results obtained by Cano-Vindel and Miguel-Tobal (1999) confirm the close correlation between the consideration of a situation as threatening and anxiety.

The specific goal of this paper is to study a) the existing relation between fear of speaking in public and state anxiety in translation and interpreting

students; b) the existing relation between fear of speaking in public and consecutive interpreting performance in translation and interpreting students and c) the existing relation between state anxiety and public consecutive interpreting performance in translation and interpreting students.

Method

A correlational research model has been implemented in order to discover the relationship between the above mentioned factors. In this type of study events do not happen at the experimenters' discretion. A series of variables have been selected to study the phenomenon. We have opted for this type of research because it is closer to real life situations rather than laboratory experiments, which constitutes a technical advantage over experiments in that it offers a possibility to study phenomena in natural settings. Its disadvantage is that it offers only limited possibilities to control and manipulate variables. Data are collected in a real setting with a real task in order to determine patterns of functional variation. The possibility to demonstrate the relation between two or more variables is the essence of correlational studies, although causal relations cannot be established.

Hypotheses

Hypothesis 1: there is a relation between fear of public speaking and anxiety; that is, the greater the fear of speaking in public the greater the anxiety.

Hypothesis 2: there is a negative relation between fear of public speaking and performance in interpreting; that is, the greater the fear of speaking in public the poorer the consecutive interpreting performance.

Hypothesis 3: there is a negative relation between anxiety and performance in interpreting; that is, the greater the anxiety the poorer the consecutive interpreting performance.

Variables and testing instruments

Independent variable: confidence in public speaking

In order to measure this variable an abridged version of the "Confidence in public speaking" questionnaire by Méndez *et al.* (1999) based on Bados (1991) was used. The questionnaire presents a $\alpha=0.906$ reliability. Méndez *et al.* (1999) have reviewed the existing instruments based on self-reports to measure fear of public speaking. Most testing instruments rely on the strong correlation between this construct and anxiety. The instrument proposed by Méndez *et al.* (1999) has

been validated with a Spanish sample. According to the items, lack of confidence in public speaking is synonymous with fear of the situation. The individual expresses this fear in the questionnaire with responses denoting anxiety (e.g. "I am scared and tense most of the time I am speaking in front of a group of people") The abridged version of the questionnaire "Confidence in public speaking" is made up of 12 items that can be filled out in less than 5 minutes (See Appendix). The content of the questionnaire in the negative end portrays the difficulties an individual has in responding to a situation he or she faces with fear – fear expressed with cognitive signs of anxiety when having to face an audience. It assesses both the fear felt by the subject ("I am afraid to be in front of the audience") and/or the opposite emotion with respect to the degree of personal self-confidence ("I face with self-confidence the prospect of speaking in public"). In order to obtain a final score a study of internal consistency has been carried out. Cronbach alpha shows that all 12 items have a high internal consistency ($\alpha=0.91$). Single item scores were added and subsequently divided by 12 to achieve a single score reflecting public speaking self-confidence. The scores range between 1 (fully agree) and 6 (fully disagree). High scores show that the subject is afraid to speak in public, and low scores show that the subject is confident in public speaking situations. According to research, it should be expected that low scores in the questionnaire (the lower the self-confidence in public speaking, the higher the fear to speak in public) would be associated with high scores in state anxiety, that is situational anxiety. If fear of public speaking generates anxiety when the situation is interpreted as threatening, a relation between the scores of questionnaires and interpreting performance would be expected. This relation, however, should be mediated by anxiety contingent upon the situation. Since anxiety is thought to be the emotion linking fear of public speaking with low academic/professional performance there should be a negative relation between anxiety and performance in interpreting.

Mediating variable: anxiety

Anxiety was measured using the STAI questionnaire (Spielberger, Gorsuch and Lushene 1988) This test was designed in 1970 and has been widely used worldwide since. It is appropriate for ages 14-64 and grades 9-16, it is composed of 40 items and takes approximately 20 minutes. It has been translated into more than 40 languages and is written at the 6th-grade reading level. It includes normative tables for working adults, high-school students, college students, and military recruits. The 40-question test booklet allows clients to respond on a 4-point Likert self-administered scale. The State Anxiety scale evaluates temporary conditions of apprehension, tension, nervousness and worry, which increase in response to physical danger and psychological stress. It does not

measure general traits of anxiety and is limited to a particular situation. It may be used with emotionally disturbed individuals as well as the general population.

Dependent variable: interpreting performance

The exam grade was taken as a measure for interpreting performance. Scores ranged between 1 (lowest level) and 10 (highest) according to the usual parameters of quality used by the sample's interpreting teachers. The experimenters did not participate in the assessment of interpretations. It may be argued that performance should not be identified with "academic grading", especially when that grading is only one person's responsibility and prone to subjective bias. But it must be taken into account that the main motivation to carry out this study was the usual excuses put forward by interpreting students at the University of Castellón, identifying failure with fear and anxiety. So, it was decided not to question the teacher's grading method; the teacher, on the other hand, acted completely freely, without access to the results of the questionnaires.

Sample

The sample was made up of 197 subjects, 158 women and 39 men; all of them were final-year Translation and Interpretation students at the University Jaume I (Castellón, Spain) with an average age of 23.4; they had all had a similar training in interpreting, 8 credits in consecutive interpreting and 8 credits in simultaneous interpreting, making 160 hours of interpreting training. Only few of them aim to become professional interpreters but they all have to do 16 credits in interpreting in order to obtain a Translation and Interpretation degree. They are required to give an acceptable interpretation of short general subject speeches without the usual difficulties a real interpretation may pose (speaker's accent or rate of delivery, complexity of figures, names, terminology etc.) although some figures and names are usually included and most speeches are authentic with a few modifications. Sometimes a more specific topic is chosen (e.g. genomics, Creutzfeld-Jacob disease...) but texts are always addressed to the general public and not to experts. Data were collected in three academic years in order to obtain a relatively large sample (in 1999, 2000 and 2001). The teachers and teaching method remained unvaried throughout; Spanish was the mother tongue for the whole of the sample, 23 per cent of them considered themselves to be bilingual, sharing Spanish and Catalan as mother tongue.

Procedure

The task consisted of interpreting a 6 to 8-minute speech on current affairs read out by one of the interpreting teachers. This task was also the final consecutive interpreting exam. The original speech was delivered in three segments of 2-3 minutes, after each of which there was a pause for the

interpretation. Five possible current affairs topics had been announced to all of them weeks before the testing as possible speech subjects. The experimenters asked students to fill out the two questionnaires when they were just about to enter the testing room one by one. They voluntarily started to answer the items 20 minutes before entering the interpretation room. The interpretation was performed in front of the teachers and students of lower grades who acted as the public. Once they had finished, they sat down and joined the public and were not allowed to go out until the end of the session. This situation bears a resemblance to a real interpreting setting, and although in this case neither the speaker nor the public are authentic, it can be considered a simulation of real settings. In each session, every student did the same speech.

Of course, one may argue that possible fear of public speaking adds to the natural anxiety in exams where the subject feels evaluated. Fear of evaluation is one of the most important components of the fear of public speaking. The exam situation makes the threatening potential of evaluation more explicit. The subjects are not only being evaluated but they know it. All this can reinforce fear of a negative assessment. But we must not forget that in the interpreting profession – just as in any other professional activity involving public exposure – every single performance entails a new evaluation on the part of the public or employer, so a poor performance may represent an important setback with unforeseeable consequences. Once a subject is exposed to public scrutiny the public demands quality – although they may not be able to define exactly what that quality is. There are no second chances, the first time is the last time, with little or no option to repeat anything. In this sense, an interpretation exam has a lot in common with professional interpreting situations; especially the pressure to make a good delivery, that is to perform a complex job in no time and in front of an audience, adding to that that failure in both cases may entail negative consequences. In fact, for evaluation purposes performance in ordinary practice sessions is hardly taken into account by the teachers because a student unable to do a good job in a stressful situation is not considered prepared for the profession.

Results

The mean shows that the sample has a moderate fear of public speaking ($M=3.62$; $d.t.=0.96$).

Anxiety reports also show levels of medium-high state anxiety ($M=6.93$; $d.t.=1.55$). Decatypes have been used to assess anxiety levels following the STAI manual instructions.

The performance mean was $M=5.93$; $d.t.=1.87$.

The Méndez-Carrillo, Inglés-Saura and Hidalgo-Montesinos (1999) questionnaire's internal validity is based on the interpretation of the public

speaking situation as a self-confidence/fear continuum. The authors recommend the assessment of the convergent validity of the abridged version. However, they do not clearly suggest the constructs with which the measure of the questionnaire should converge. Confidence in public speaking could be a similar construct to the one measured by the state anxiety questionnaire. A significant correlation between the two measures could demonstrate a close link between both constructs, in which case it would validate the questionnaire.

The results show that there is a significant correlation between both variables (Table 1). However, the level of correlation is moderate, insufficient to conclude that lack of confidence in public speaking is an alternative measure for anxiety.

Fear of public speaking is supposed to have a negative effect on the interpreting trainee performance if anxiety mediates between these two variables. According to the first condition a variable has to meet to be considered a mediator between other variables (Baron and Kenny 1986), the independent variable (fear of public speaking) must be able significantly to explain part of the variance of the mediating variable (state anxiety) between public speaking and performance. The correlational analysis suggests that fear of public speaking and state anxiety are significantly related (see Table 1). The regression analysis shows that fear of public speaking significantly explains 11.5% of the state anxiety scores (see Table 2), statistically meeting the first necessary condition for anxiety to mediate between fear of public speaking and performance.

| | Confidence in public speaking | State anxiety | Performance |
|-------------------------------|-------------------------------|---------------|-------------|
| Confidence in public speaking | | .340** | - 0.86 |
| State anxiety | | | - 0.73 |

Table 1. Correlations between variables (N=197)

** Significant correlation at level 0.01 (bilateral).

| | beta Coefficient | R | R ² | F | Sig. F |
|-----------------|------------------|------|----------------|--------|--------|
| Public speaking | .340** | .340 | .115 | 25.413 | .000 |

Table 2: Regression analysis "Confidence in public speaking" on state anxiety

** Significant correlation at level 0.01 (bilateral).

Nevertheless, the second mediating condition is not met. This condition demands a significant relation between the independent and the dependent variable (performance) (Baron and Kenny 1986), and results to this effect are negative (see Table 1). Self-confidence in public speaking is not related to performance in interpretation students. On the other hand, anxiety does not show any significant relation with performance either. The results show that there is a significant relation between fear of public speaking and anxiety. However, the anxiety variable does not mediate between fear of public speaking and interpreting students' performances.

Discussion and conclusions

The results show that the measure of confidence in public speaking is significantly related to anxiety showing that low confidence in public speaking is related to high scores in state anxiety. Hypothesis 1 (the higher the fear of public speaking, the higher the anxiety) is thus confirmed. This result agrees with the cognitive assessment model that contemplates anxiety as a response to a public speaking situation when interpreted as a threat (Lazarus and Folkman, 1986). There is a wide range of theoretical/empirical evidence suggesting a positive relation between fear of public speaking and anxiety (Bados 1990; Cano-Vindel and Miguel Tobal 1999; Gutiérrez-Calvo and García-González 1999; Montorio *et al.* 1996). However, this relation, although statistically significant, is insufficient for our purposes since it only explains 11.5 per cent of the variance. Considering the questionnaire content validity (Méndez-Carrillo *et al.* 1999), the results obtained in this study indicate that confidence in public speaking is not a specific measure of state anxiety. The anxiety measured in this study could, to a certain extent, be reflecting the test situation in which the task took place. The subjects' answers may have reflected not only a public speaking situation but also the fact that it was an exam. In this case, fear of evaluation adds to the fear of the objective consequences of the evaluation. Part of the anxiety variance may have reflected this circumstance. However, it must not be forgotten that the exam is a simulation of a real consecutive interpreting setting. The academic grade would be related to a public/client assessment (although professional assessment is not as straightforward as a grade and responds to industrial relations norms). Fear of getting a negative grading is partly fear of being considered incompetent, although this feeling may be mitigated by the fact that the university regulations provide students with several opportunities to sit the exam. In a real life situation a repetition of the interpretation would not be acceptable. This fact leads us to think that the students' perception of facing an exam should not represent a different source of anxiety from what they would

feel at a professional level. Students may have consciously or unconsciously applied several coping strategies to neutralize the effects of fear.

1. Wish to overcome a challenge and show competence. The desire to show professional competence could exceed examination fear, and there is also the fact that they have several chances to pass the exam. Students could have also considered the situation as a challenge to prove their professional competence to themselves and the evaluating person; this means that they would show a lack of anxiety regardless of the fact that fear of public speaking could be present as part of the situation. This possible explanation would also suggest that feelings of threat posed by the situation and feelings of challenge to show professional competence could both be present simultaneously in public interpreting situations. The “Confidence in public speaking questionnaire” does not seem to be able to measure both types of feelings when they are interrelated in a situation.

2. Interpreting resources. The public speaking questionnaire may reflect that confidence or fear but it does not seem able to determine if the subjects feel they have enough resources to cope with the situation. Fear of public speaking may not exceed personal resources to face a situation resembling a professional environment. The situation does not only have to be perceived as threatening but also the subject must feel that he or she has not enough resources to cope with it (Cano-Vindel and Miguel-Tobal 1999). It may be possible that part of the unexplained variance relating to anxiety before public speaking may be due to the fact that the sample first interpreted the situation as a challenge and secondly felt they had enough resources to cope positively with the situation, thus avoiding a response of acute anxiety to the fear of public speaking.

According to the results, anxiety is not negatively related to interpreting performance, so hypothesis 2 is not confirmed. This result does not agree with most studies, which conclude that there is a negative relation between anxiety and academic performance (Seipp 1991). The relatively high level of anxiety shown by the sample could be a sign of what psychologists call positive anxiety, the one needed to face stressful situations. Nevertheless, in our case, anxiety has not proved to have any influence in any direction. Again, coping strategies may be the explanation for this lack of influence.

3. Self-efficacy. Defined as “the belief in one’s capability to execute required actions and produce outcomes for a defined task” (Wood and Atkins 2000: 431) as well as personal resources for consecutive interpreting (global comprehension of original speech, analysis and synthesis capacity, degree of familiarization with the topic, note-taking technique, etc.) it could modulate the effect of anxiety on interpreting performance. That is to say, the belief in one’s capability and the real amount of personal resources available could produce variations in performance regardless of the anxiety felt.

4. Maturity and responsibility. Seipp's (1991) studies also report that the negative relation between anxiety and performance decreases with the level of studies and it is lower if the testing is performed just before the task. Subjects in our study are final-year university students and the testing took place just before they took their final interpreting examination. It is possible that anxiety does not influence performance in mature and well-prepared students carrying out a task that implies professional responsibility. From Seipp's results and ours it can be inferred perhaps that performance is related to responsibility, and responsibility would mediate anxiety. These results coincide with a prior similar exploratory study that analysed the relation between anxiety and performance tested in sight translation (Jiménez and Pinazo in press), which is also considered a stressful activity when the text has not been prepared beforehand (Lambert 1991).

Fear of public speaking is not related to interpreting performance. Hypothesis 3 is not confirmed. A possible explanation is that once the individual realizes that he or she is obliged to perform the task, fear of public speaking is put into the background and personal resources for interpreting prevail. Public speaking becomes only a part of the different resources needed for consecutive interpreting and the individual activates other coping strategies to perform the task. This would imply that fear of public speaking alone does not necessarily determine professional competence in interpreting.

The results, however, open up new perspectives about the relative importance of anxiety and fear of public speaking in interpreting trainees' performance. Performance difficulties in students' consecutive interpretation exams need to be explained and contrasted with more possible causes. These conclusions may not necessarily make students feel relieved or less anxious about the interpreting task. Fear and anxiety are uncomfortable and unpleasant feelings, to say the least; students should be encouraged to pay more attention to their coping strategies (interpreting resources, feelings of self-efficacy, sense of challenge, will to show competence, responsibility and maturity) and less to their feelings of fear and anxiety in order to try to overcome those unpleasant feelings and increase self-confidence, if only for reasons related to personal well-being. To this end, future interpreting research should perhaps aim at studying the relation between the effects of fear of public speaking and anxiety with resilience.

For the time being, the interpreting teachers at the University of Castellón know what to tell students when they invariably say: "I failed the exam because I got very nervous".

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APPENDIX

“CONFIDENCE IN PUBLIC SPEAKING”

Factorial structure

(Méndez-Carrillo, F.J.; Inglés-Saura, C.J.; Hidalgo-Montesinos, M.D., 1999)

| ITEM | QUESTION | FACTOR I |
|------|--|----------|
| 11 | <i>I face with confidence the prospect of speaking before an audience</i> | 0.78 |
| 9 | <i>I'm not afraid of being before an audience</i> | 0.74 |
| 22 | <i>My mind is fresh when I am before an audience</i> | 0.73 |
| 10 | <i>Although I'm nervous just before standing up, soon I forget my fear and enjoy the experience</i> | 0.72 |
| 16 | <i>I feel relaxed and at ease while I'm speaking</i> | 0.72 |
| 29 | <i>I feel terrified just at the thought of public speaking</i> | 0.70 |
| 26 | <i>I'm afraid and tense all the time I'm speaking in front of a group of people</i> | 0.68 |
| 25 | <i>My pose is forced and unnatural</i> | 0.67 |
| 8 | <i>When I speak in front of an audience, my thoughts get confused and mingled</i> | 0.66 |
| 15 | <i>Although I speak fluently with my friends, I cannot find the right words when I am at the rostrum</i> | 0.66 |
| 18 | <i>As much as I can I try to avoid public speaking</i> | 0.66 |
| 12 | <i>I think I am completely under control when I speak in public</i> | 0.65 |