

## Identifying and Addressing Students' Fears in Preaching

Alison Gerber

Ph.D. Candidate in Preaching, Baylor University

**Abstract:** *What can be done for student preachers who are afraid to preach? To determine an answer to that question, this paper considers a body of research into a phenomenon called communication apprehension (CA). In so doing, it provides practical help for teachers of preaching that they might improve their ability to identify students who are afraid, understand more deeply the possible causes of their students' fears, understand the effect of fear on their students' sermon delivery and ministry career; and finally, acquire practical skills for alleviating their students' apprehension when stepping into the classroom pulpit.*

“Sometimes preachers are given the rather lame advice to “be natural” in the pulpit... [Yet] we cannot be natural when we are not feeling natural. Preachers are not immune from nervousness, tenseness, or moodiness, and these conditions affect us when we preach...”

— Thomas Long, *The Witness of Preaching*<sup>1</sup>

When a young preacher panics as she rises from her seat to preach, what is a teacher of preaching meant to do? When a student is shaking or pacing in the pulpit, what is their professor meant to advise? When a beginner preacher's voice quivers, when he rushes through his notes, when he “Ums” and “Ahs,” and doesn't know where to put his hands, what help does a homiletics instructor have to offer?

In the past, teachers of preaching have suggested their anxious students “take a deep breath,” or “stand still,” or “take a moment” to compose themselves. Perhaps others have, as Thomas Long attests to above, told their students to “be natural.” Still others might say, “You don't need to be scared.” Yet these suggestions – are they really any more successful at assuaging fears than telling a toddler, “Don't be afraid!” when he's up late, scared of the monster lurking under his bed?

Homiletics professors *can* do better for the scared, nervous, or anxious student than urging him or her to “be natural” and “don't be afraid.” This paper draws upon a field of study that has addressed the issue of fear and anxiety in public speaking for the past fifty years – a field of study that homileticians have largely ignored. This area of scholarship, begun by speech communication researcher James C. McCroskey, examines a phenomenon known as *communication apprehension*. This paper seeks to summarize the central findings of that research and consider how it might benefit educators who are seeking to identify and address their students' fears in preaching.

### What is Communication Apprehension?

Communication apprehension (formally abbreviated “CA”) is the technical term for what some might call “a fear of public speaking” or “stage fright”—though it encompasses more than both of those terms. It was coined by McCroskey in 1970 and is defined today as “an individual's level of fear or anxiety associated with either real or anticipated communication

---

<sup>1</sup> Thomas G. Long, *The Witness of Preaching* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2016), 270.

with another person or persons.”<sup>2</sup> This fear or anxiety may appear in a variety of oral communication settings: in an interpersonal setting, in meetings, in group discussions, and during public speaking.<sup>3</sup>

An employee apprehensive about asking his boss for a raise, a teen who is nervous making telephone calls, a Sunday school member afraid to share with the group, and a businessperson anxious before delivering a conference presentation—these are all examples of CA. In the classroom, professors of accounting have identified CA among their accounting students; healthcare educators have identified CA among nursing students; language professors have identified CA among their foreign language learners; and business professors among MBAs.<sup>4</sup> *Any instance* of one person being scared, anxious, fearful, or nervous to communicate with a person or persons is subsumed under McCroskey's definition. This would, therefore, include a preaching student feeling nervous about preaching in front of a class.

### Types of Communication Apprehension

In his work, McCroskey identifies four distinct types of CA: 1) trait-like CA, 2) context-based CA, 3) audience-based CA, and 4) situational CA. Understanding the four types of CA may be a helpful first step toward understanding the variety of experiences individual students might have as they are apprehensive about preaching.

The first type of CA is *trait-like CA*. Trait-like CA is the type of CA experienced by an individual who exhibits CA across every communication environment: in group discussions, meetings, interpersonal conversations, and public speaking.<sup>5</sup> It is called “trait-like” since it appears as something like a general orientation, or personality trait, of a speaker.<sup>6</sup> When a preaching student appears to be apprehensive about communicating *all* the time—in the pulpit, in class discussions, in meetings one-on-one—that student may be experiencing trait-like CA.<sup>7</sup> Teresa Fry Brown's story of “Frank,” the student who could barely preach, who had sought medical help for his difficulty communicating and “was told that it was a psychological issue,”

---

<sup>2</sup> First used in James C. McCroskey, “Measures of Communication-Bound Anxiety,” *Speech Monographs* 37, no. 4 (1970): 269-277; Further developed in Virginia P. Richmond, Jason S. Wrench, and James C. McCroskey, *Communication Apprehension, Avoidance, and Effectiveness* (Boston, MA: Pearson, 2013), 41.

<sup>3</sup> James C. McCroskey, “The Communication Apprehension Perspective,” in *Avoiding Communication* ed. John A. Daly and James C. McCroskey (Beverly Hills: Sage, 1984), 16.

<sup>4</sup> For apprehension among accounting students, see Marann Byrne, Barbara Flood, and Dan Shanahan, “A Qualitative Exploration of Oral Communication Apprehension,” *Accounting Education* 21, no. 6 (December 1, 2012): 565–81; Among nursing students: Shannon Schulenberg et al., “Exploring Communication Apprehension in Nursing and Healthcare Education: A Scoping Review,” *Nursing & Health Sciences* 25, no. 4 (December 2023); Among foreign language learners: Nike Arnold, “Reducing Foreign Language Communication Apprehension with Computer-Mediated Communication: A Preliminary Study,” *System* 35, no. 4 (December 1, 2007): 469–86; Among MBAs: Asal Aghaz and Soroush Dehghan Salmasi, “The Impact of Cultural Values on Students' Communication Apprehension in Online Classrooms: The Moderating Role of Gender,” *The International Journal of Management Education* 22, no. 3 (November 1, 2024).

<sup>5</sup> James C. McCroskey, *An Introduction to Rhetorical Communication* (Boston, MA: Pearson, 2006), 41.

<sup>6</sup> McCroskey, *An Introduction to Rhetorical Communication*, 41.

<sup>7</sup> Studies into trait-like CA and shyness have revealed that shyness and trait-like CA are not the same, yet related: while not all shy speakers experience CA, persons with a shy personality are more likely to experience trait-like CA. James C. McCroskey, “Communication Apprehension: What Have We Learned in the Last Four Decades,” *Human Communication* 12, no. 2 (2009): 189.

who “was in therapy and was trying to overcome his fear of public speaking”<sup>8</sup> is almost certainly an account of someone with trait-like CA.

The second type of CA is *context-based CA*. Context-based CA is apprehension “restricted to a single generalized context.”<sup>9</sup> Context-based CA may be present in the preaching student who is a confident communicator during class discussions but appears deeply apprehensive about preaching to the class. When Fry Brown recalls the irregular behavior of “Paula,” who “approaches the podium with her head down, shuffling her feet,” who “is physically and emotionally disengaged when preaching” yet is generally “talkative in class” – Fry Brown may be observing, in this situation, Paula’s context-based CA.<sup>10</sup>

The third type of CA is *audience-based CA*. Audience-based CA “represents an orientation of the individual toward communication with a specific person or group of persons,”<sup>11</sup> irrespective of context. McCroskey writes, “Some people feel little stage fright if they are asked to give a speech before a class of their friends, but succumb to panic if asked to speak to a group of strangers. Many others have exactly the opposite reaction.”<sup>12</sup> A preaching class example of audience-based CA might be the student who reports feeling relaxed preaching to her home church yet nervous preaching in the presence of her professor.

Finally, the fourth type of CA is *situational CA*. This is the type of CA that appears in an individual in a specific context, before a particular person or persons, at a specific moment.<sup>13</sup> To describe situational CA, McCroskey offers the example of “a student who experiences little or no apprehension when going to a teacher to ask a question about an assignment but is suddenly terrified when the teacher instructs the student to stay after class to meet.”<sup>14</sup> In his article, “An Intimate Relationship With Flunk,” Frank Thomas describes a series of situations in which a preacher might “flunk.” Thomas describes “flunk” as “to be lousy at preaching, not lousy every time, but lousy this particular time.”<sup>15</sup> Flunk shows up, Thomas argues, in situations where the pressure is high, where the preaching assignment is “major,” where the preacher is underprepared, where the preacher is unrested or preoccupied, or where the worship is flawed in some way. In each of these instances, “flunking,” this one-off failure to “connect with or meet the needs of the people and the resulting emotional, physical, and spiritual distress the preacher experiences upon that realization,” may, in fact, be situational CA.<sup>16</sup>

## Causes of Communication Apprehension

What causes communication apprehension? A number of theories have been proposed, and to date, three significant causes have emerged. The first is a speaker’s *self-perceived communication incompetence*.<sup>17</sup> Even when a speaker is a skilled public speaker, she may nevertheless experience CA if she does not perceive herself as skilled. Self-perceived

---

<sup>8</sup> Teresa L. Fry Brown, *Delivering the Sermon: Voice, Body, and Animation in Proclamation* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2008), 1-2.

<sup>9</sup> McCroskey, *An Introduction to Rhetorical Communication*, 42.

<sup>10</sup> Fry Brown, *Delivering the Sermon*, 59.

<sup>11</sup> McCroskey, *An Introduction to Rhetorical Communication*, 43.

<sup>12</sup> McCroskey, *An Introduction to Rhetorical Communication*, 43.

<sup>13</sup> McCroskey, “The Communication Apprehension Perspective,” 18.

<sup>14</sup> McCroskey, “The Communication Apprehension Perspective,” 19.

<sup>15</sup> Frank Thomas, “An Intimate Relationship with FLUNK,” *The African American Pulpit*, (Winter 2002-2003): 23.

<sup>16</sup> Thomas, “An Intimate Relationship with FLUNK,” 23.

<sup>17</sup> McCroskey, *An Introduction to Rhetorical Communication*, 44.

communication incompetence is especially prevalent among those speakers experiencing trait-like CA and is related to several personality traits, including low self-esteem, introversion, and low sociability.<sup>18</sup> A preaching student low in self-esteem may tell themselves that they are not good enough at preaching and, as a result, experience CA—even if these thoughts are irrational.

The concept of self-perceived communication incompetence is particularly important in classrooms with second-language (L2) speakers. While Jenifer Lucas once wrote, “If international students are apprehensive about speaking their own language, their fear of communicating in English must be magnified tenfold,” research by McCroskey et al. into both Puerto Rican and Japanese students determined that “speaking a second language does not necessarily significantly increase an individual’s level of CA.”<sup>19</sup> Allen, O’Mara, Long, and Judd attempted to replicate this finding and found strong correlations again between CA in speakers L1 and L2, consistent with McCroskey’s original research.<sup>20</sup> How could this be when teachers observe their L2 speakers being nervous about speaking up in class? In such cases, it is not that L2 speakers exhibit higher levels of CA in their second language; it is that these students are experiencing heightened levels of self-perceived communication incompetence.

Self-perceived communication incompetence causes students to be reticent to speak up in a classroom.<sup>21</sup> Considering that speech practice is one mode for reducing CA, this puts L2 speakers at a disadvantage—it’s possible their CA may not improve in a speech class at the same rate as L1 speakers. As preaching classrooms in the US are ever-increasing in their cultural and linguistic diversity, especially as classes welcome international students via Zoom, teachers of preaching must employ targeted strategies to help them overcome this specific problem. A few such strategies are listed under “Strategies to Reduce Communication Apprehension below.

In addition to self-perceived communication incompetence, a second well-documented cause of CA is *learned negative expectations*.<sup>22</sup> When a speaker finds himself in a situation in which he has no positive expectations for success—perhaps where his previous communication attempts were unsuccessful—he may find himself with such negative expectations that “a fearful response is the natural outcome.”<sup>23</sup> Sally Brown observes such a fearful response in her classroom when she encounters a student who “dreads preaching class” because he “can’t shake a bad experience from a high school public speaking class.”<sup>24</sup> Brown writes, “Each time he gets up to speak, that memory takes up a seat at the back of the room and grins.”<sup>25</sup> That student is

---

<sup>18</sup> Virginia P. Richmond, James C. McCroskey, and Linda L. McCroskey, “An Investigation of Self Perceived Communication and Personality Orientations,” *Communication Research Reports* 6, no. 1 (1989): 28-35. See also James C. McCroskey and Linda L. McCroskey, “Self-report as an approach to measuring communication competence,” *Communication Research Reports* 5, no. 2 (1988), 108-113.

<sup>19</sup> Jenifer Lucas, “Communication Apprehension in the ESL Classroom: Getting Our Students to Talk,” *Foreign Language Annals* 17, no. 6 (1984): 594; James C. McCroskey, William B. Gudykunst, and Tsukasa Nishida, “Communication Apprehension among Japanese Students in Native and Second Language,” *Communication Research Reports* 2, no. 1 (1985): 14.

<sup>20</sup> Jerry L. Allen et al., “The Relationship of Communication Anxiety, Avoidance and Competence of Non-Native English Speakers in the U.S” (International Communication Association Convention, Honolulu, HI, 1985).

<sup>21</sup> Nancy F. Burroughs, Vicki Marie, and James C. McCroskey, “Relationships of Self-Perceived Communication Competence and Communication Apprehension with Willingness to Communicate: A Comparison with First and Second Languages in Micronesia,” *Communication Research Reports* 20, no. 3 (Summer 2003): 230–39.

<sup>22</sup> McCroskey, “The Communication Apprehension Perspective,” 28.

<sup>23</sup> McCroskey, “The Communication Apprehension Perspective,” 28.

<sup>24</sup> Sally A. Brown, “Embodying the Sermon,” in *Ways of the Word*, Sally A. Brown and Luke A. Powery (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2016), 189.

<sup>25</sup> Brown, “Embodying the Sermon,” 189.

potentially experiencing CA due to learned negative expectations he has carried since high school.

The third proven cause for a speaker's CA is *learned helplessness*.<sup>26</sup> Learned helplessness is a model of instrumental (or "operant") conditioning. Instrumental conditioning occurs when a creature (human or animal) engages in a behavior and that behavior is rewarded or punished. The general rule of conditioning is that rewarded behavior increases and punished behavior decreases.<sup>27</sup> However, in learned helplessness, *every* behavior is punished (for example, if a dog goes right, it receives an electric shock, and if the same dog goes left, it also receives an electric shock) such that eventually, the creature who is being punished completely shuts down, and ceases to do anything at all.<sup>28</sup>

Learned helplessness may occur in speaking (or preaching) when a speaker receives negative feedback for one behavior and then, in altering that behavior, receives negative feedback for the *opposite* behavior.<sup>29</sup> Fry Brown describes such conditioning in her own life in her book *Weary Throats and New Songs*:

too much or too little makeup, too long or too short hair, too colorful or too dull dress, too low or too high shoes ... [this] was the source of criticism. My mannerisms were also evaluated—smiling too much, crying too much, speaking too loudly or too softly, being too happy or too sad, reading too properly or with too familiar language...<sup>30</sup>

Fry Brown's experience details the kinds of patterns that lead to learned helplessness. According to McCroskey, these experiences will eventually lead to a malfunction in communicative ability and feelings of strong anxiety related to speaking.<sup>31</sup>

It should be kept in mind that McCroskey identified these last two causes as "the product of an interaction between an individual and the responses of other individuals in the environment."<sup>32</sup> This means it may be possible for a teacher of preaching to increase or even create a student's CA through inappropriate responses to their preaching in class. The ability to engender apprehension in the communication efforts of others is a sobering reminder of the special responsibility preaching educators have to nurture their students and their gifts.

There are also some *context-specific causes* for CA, one of which, again, teachers of increasingly diverse preaching classrooms should be made aware of, and that is *the presence of cultural differences*.<sup>33</sup> This expression of CA is referred to in CA literature as *intercultural*

---

<sup>26</sup> McCroskey, "The Communication Apprehension Perspective," 29.

<sup>27</sup> Saul McLeod, "What is Operant Conditioning and How Does It Work?" Simply Psychology, <https://www.simplypsychology.org/operant-conditioning.html>.

<sup>28</sup> Martin E. P. Seligman, *Helplessness: On Development, Depression and Death* (New York: WH Freeman, 1992).

<sup>29</sup> McCroskey, "The Communication Apprehension Perspective," 29.

<sup>30</sup> Teresa Fry Brown, *Weary Throats and New Songs: Black Women Proclaiming God's Word* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 2003), 13-14.

<sup>31</sup> McCroskey, "The Communication Apprehension Perspective," 29.

<sup>32</sup> McCroskey, "The Communication Apprehension Perspective," 29.

<sup>33</sup> Other context-specific studies that may be of interest to teachers of preaching include a study by professors of pharmacy that explored the relationship between race and CA among pharmacy students. Joseph M. LaRoche and Aryn C. Karpinski, "Racial Differences in Communication Apprehension and Interprofessional Socialization in Fourth-Year Doctor of Pharmacy Students," *American Journal of Pharmaceutical Education* 80, no. 1 (February 25, 2016); A Portuguese study that explored the role gender played in CA among the university students in their context is: Marlene Loureiro, Norberto Loureiro, and Rui Silva, "Differences of Gender in Oral and Written

*communication apprehension* or ICA. ICA was first formally named and measured by Neuliep and McCroskey in 1997 and has been defined as “the fear or anxiety associated with either real or anticipated interaction with people from different groups, especially different cultural or ethnic groups.”<sup>34</sup> Neuliep and McCroskey believed ICA in general stemmed from “uncertainty,” but subsequent research identified more specific causes such as language barriers, negative stereotypes, ethnocentrism, and, as for general CA, previous negative experiences.<sup>35</sup> ICA has been shown to “impede cultural understanding and adaptation, and is associated with a reduced willingness to communicate, ethnocentrism, and perceptions of White racial superiority.”<sup>36</sup> This list alone reveals the seriousness of ICA. Within the preaching classroom, ICA has the potential to negatively impact sermons, student feedback, and teachers' attitudes toward students different from themselves. While this paper's primary focus is on communication apprehension more broadly and can therefore only briefly address ICA, the implications of ICA for preachers and preaching merit further exploration.

In addition to considering how cultural differences may shape communication apprehension in preaching contexts, homileticians might also ask whether something inherent to the preaching task itself contributes to CA among preachers. One potential cause for CA unique to preaching may be *holy fear*. One way preaching is distinct from other acts of public speaking is that preachers understand themselves to participate in a divine act. As John Koessler writes, “The God who spoke the world into being uses our words to bend the world to his will.”<sup>37</sup> Leah Schade, Jerry Sumney, and Emily Askew argue this kind of communication event *should* logically engender some apprehension in a preacher: “If a preacher doesn't feel some level of ‘fear and trembling’ for the task they are undertaking with preaching, that would be cause for concern. Why? Because there is a great deal at stake in the preaching event for the congregation and their relationship with the preacher, God, one another, and the larger society, as well as God's Creation.”<sup>38</sup> David Rockness, whose thesis is one of the few studies into CA that references preaching, does consider the role of holy fear in his study of CA and speech.

---

Communication Apprehension of University Students,” *Education Sciences* 10, no. 12 (December 2020); A study in 2021 that explored the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on CA is: M. K. Sealy, “Communication in the Time of COVID-19: An Examination of Imagined Interactions and Communication Apprehension During the COVID-19 Pandemic,” *Imagination, Cognition and Personality* 41, no. 2 (December 2021): 158–86; Another by a group of communication professors at the University of Maryland that explored the impact of online learning upon a student's CA is: Victoria Ledford et al., “Communication Apprehension in the Online Presentational Speaking Course: Considerations for Synchronous Course Meetings and Asynchronous Presentations,” *Communication Teacher* 37, no. 1 (January 2, 2023): 64–82.

<sup>34</sup> James W. Neuliep and James C. McCroskey, “The Development of Intercultural and Interethnic Communication Apprehension Scales,” *Communication Research Reports* 14, no. 2 (Spring 1997): 148.

<sup>35</sup> For ethnocentrism, Mary C. Toale and James C. McCroskey, “Ethnocentrism and Trait Communication Apprehension as Predictors of Interethnic Communication....,” *Communication Quarterly* 49, no. 1 (Winter 2001): 70–83; for negative stereotypes and language barriers, Jessica Overbay, “Let's Talk: How Communication Apprehension and Intercultural Communication Affect Intercultural Conflicts and International Relations,” *Honors Theses*, May 12, 2023, [https://encompass.eku.edu/honors\\_theses/944](https://encompass.eku.edu/honors_theses/944).

<sup>36</sup> Laura Jacobi, “Seeking to understand the impact of collaboration on intercultural communication apprehension,” *Journal of International Students* 10, no. 4 (2020): 892–893.

<sup>37</sup> John Koessler, *Folly, Grace and Power* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2001), 20.

<sup>38</sup> Leah D. Schade, Jerry L. Sumney, and Emily Askew, *Introduction to Preaching: Scripture, Theology, and Sermon Preparation* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2023), 278.

However, he fails to assess the degree of holy fear among his test subjects or the relationship of holy fear to CA.<sup>39</sup> This is also an area that warrants further investigation.

### Effects of Communication Apprehension

What are the effects of CA on speakers and their speech? Understanding the effects of CA may help teachers of preaching better identify the presence of CA among their students and understand the effects of fear on a student preacher's sermon and person.

#### *Positive Effects*

It is possible there may be positive effects of CA on speakers and their speech. This is not discussed in speech communication literature, though it is worth considering for the sake of homiletics, especially if one potential cause of CA in preaching is holy fear. Consider Paul's confession in 1 Cor 2:3, "And I came to you in weakness and in fear and in much trembling." The apprehension Paul describes is not negative but a boon for his clear transmission of the gospel. Rockness also considers this a possibility—that CA might positively impact preachers and preaching—when he writes, "this primal emotion can lead towards a greater reliance on God, a strengthening of faith, and an opportunity for transformed living."<sup>40</sup>

#### *Negative Effects*

Traditionally discussed within the CA literature are the negative effects of CA, the first being *an internal experience of discomfort*. McCroskey proposes that these internal feelings of fear, anxiety, nervousness, or apprehension are the universal effect of CA across all individuals and CA types.<sup>41</sup> Fearful speakers report a number of bodily sensations along with this anxiety: "a rapid beating of the heart, increased perspiration, some shakiness, and dry mouth."<sup>42</sup> At times, these physiological responses can interact with high levels of CA to such an extreme that "a person can be subject to nausea or dizziness ... [even] blacking out temporarily."<sup>43</sup>

Preaching students do regularly report experiencing these exact kinds of discomfort when preparing to preach. What teacher of preaching has not heard a student say, "I felt sick to my stomach" or "My heart was racing"? When G. Robert Jacks wrote of butterflies as big as supersonic aircraft "hatching in the stomachs" of his students, he was writing about this internal experience of discomfort caused by CA.<sup>44</sup>

Beyond those internal effects, externally, CA *interrupts a speaker's attempt at smooth delivery*. Speech communication theorists have developed scales to measure the extent to which CA affects a speaker's delivery. One of these—the Behavioral Assessment of Speech Anxiety (BASA), created by Mulac and Sherman in 1974—lists the following 17 categories of visible symptoms of CA. A scale like the BASA provides a useful list of all the ways CA might negatively impact a preacher's speech:<sup>45</sup>

---

<sup>39</sup> David F. Rockness, "Addressing the Fear of Public Speaking" (DMin diss., Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, 2016) 14-20.

<sup>40</sup> Rockness, "Addressing the Fear of Public Speaking," 20.

<sup>41</sup> McCroskey, "The Communication Apprehension Perspective," 33.

<sup>42</sup> McCroskey, *An Introduction to Rhetorical Communication*, 54.

<sup>43</sup> McCroskey, *An Introduction to Rhetorical Communication*, 54.

<sup>44</sup> Jacks, *Getting the Word Across*, 22.

<sup>45</sup> Anthony Mulac and John M. Wiemann, "Observer Perceived Communication Anxiety," in *Avoiding Communication* ed. John A. Daly and James C. McCroskey (Beverly Hills: Sage, 1984), 111.

*Voice:* 1) Quivering or tense, 2) Too fast, 3) Too soft, 4) Monotonous / lack of emphasis  
*Verbal Fluency:* 5) Non-fluencies, stammers, halting, 6) Vocalized pauses, 7) Hunts for words, speech blocks  
*Mouth and throat:* 8) Swallowing, 9) Clears throat, 10) Breathes heavily  
*Facial Expression:* 11) Lack of eye contact, extraneous eye movements, 12) Tense face muscles, grimaces, twitches, 13) "Deadpan" facial expression  
*Arms and Hands:* 14) Rigid or tense, 15) Fidgeting, extraneous movement, 16) Motionless, lack of appropriate gestures  
*Gross Bodily Movement:* 17) Sways, paces, shuffles feet.<sup>46</sup>

Each of the items contained within this scale has been observed by preaching teachers as an example of what not to do in sermon delivery. Fry Brown warns against rigid or tense arms and hands: "Exaggerated, stiff, military posture decreases vocal efficiency."<sup>47</sup> She also warns against motionless delivery, recounting the story of "Elizabeth" who preaches completely still: "She clearly communicated her fear, but any sermon intent was lost."<sup>48</sup> Bryan Chapell warns against poor eye contact: "A speaker who will not look people in the eyes is deemed aloof, afraid or incompetent."<sup>49</sup> Schade, Sumney, and Askew warn against being too quiet: "If the congregation cannot hear the preacher, then the sermon will be lost."<sup>50</sup> Charles Spurgeon warns against a monotonous voice, claiming, "Exceedingly precious truths may be greatly marred by being delivered in monotonous tones."<sup>51</sup> Mary Alice Mulligan and Ronald Allen relate the account of a listener frustrated by their preacher's vocalized pauses: "I was in the car one time with a bunch of tapes from a minister that I happen to really like, but this minister constantly says, 'Now, listen. Now, listen. Now, listen.'"—eventually, she switched him off.<sup>52</sup> Ultimately, each of these homileticians, and others, make the same claim about these symptoms of CA: they impede the preacher's message. As Luke Powery proclaims, "Bad delivery can destroy a sermon."<sup>53</sup>

What none of these homileticians have addressed, however, is the relationship between these mannerisms and CA. Preachers are told to train themselves out of these distracting habits. "Preachers can learn to control their bodies," promises Charles Bartow.<sup>54</sup> "Choose one item to improve and go from there," instructs Mary Hulst.<sup>55</sup> While it's likely not every instance of poor sermon delivery is related to CA, for those students whose poor delivery results from chronic apprehension, this advice is akin to picking the leaves off a weed without tearing out its roots.

---

<sup>46</sup> Mulac and Wiemann, "Observer Perceived Communication Anxiety," 112.

<sup>47</sup> Fry Brown, *Delivering the Sermon*, 39.

<sup>48</sup> Fry Brown, *Delivering the Sermon*, 5.

<sup>49</sup> Bryan Chapell, *Christ-Centered Preaching: Redeeming the Expository Sermon* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2018), 311.

<sup>50</sup> Schade et al., *Introduction to Preaching*, 274.

<sup>51</sup> Charles Spurgeon, *Lectures to My Students* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1998), 110.

<sup>52</sup> Mary Alice Mulligan and Ronald J. Allen, *Make the Word Come Alive: Lessons from Laity* (St. Louis, MO: Chalice, 2005), 109.

<sup>53</sup> Luke A. Powery, "Embodying the Sermon," in *Ways of the Word*, Sally A. Brown and Luke A. Powery (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2016), 188.

<sup>54</sup> Charles Bartow, *The Preaching Moment: A Guide to Sermon Delivery*, (Dubuque, IA: Kendall Hunt, 1995), 92.

<sup>55</sup> Mary S. Hulst, *A Little Handbook for Preachers: Ten Practical Ways to a Better Sermon by Sunday* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2016), 139.

Finally, CA has been shown to *negatively impact a speaker's success*, both in school and beyond. CA has been shown to adversely affect a student's grades as well as their ability to interact with other students.<sup>56</sup> It has also been shown to prevent a speaker from seizing future opportunities to speak.<sup>57</sup> Moreover, CA has been shown to affect career choice: "To avoid having to experience high CA, people may select occupations that involve low communication responsibilities."<sup>58</sup>

To bring these studies into the ministerial context, CA may cause a student to struggle in seminary and may cause a preacher to avoid opportunities to preach. Rockness's study suggests that CA may cause Christians to avoid their calling to ministry.<sup>59</sup> A study by John W. Luton found that for those apprehensive preachers who eventually entered the ministry, their experience of CA has been linked to ministerial burnout.<sup>60</sup>

If holy fear *is* a part of CA, perhaps not all CA needs to be eradicated from the life and work of a preacher. However, when one considers the significant adverse effects of much CA upon both the sermon and the preacher, it becomes clear that at least these negative aspects of CA do need to be addressed. How, then, do teachers of preaching make a difference in the lives of students experiencing communication apprehension?

### Diagnosing Communication Apprehension

An important step in effectively addressing CA is diagnosis. At present, teachers of preaching assess a student's level of fear in one of two ways: through self-report or by observer report.<sup>61</sup> Alyce McKenzie describes her classroom self-report process in her sermon "Wise Up! The Lenten Journey from Fear to Faith."<sup>62</sup> At the outset of each semester, McKenzie explains that her students are required to supply their "greatest fear" on an index card with respect to the class ahead. Pat Batten's hybrid self-report/observer report process involves having students take turns standing before the class during their first session and asking them to share "one hope and one fear" for the semester ahead.<sup>63</sup> This early speaking assignment allows students to both report their fears and for Batten to observe any apprehension speakers might have before their first preaching assignment.

While these methods for identifying apprehension are useful, they are limited in one way: they are not quantitative. Yet, quantitative measurement of CA *is* possible. It has been made so

---

<sup>56</sup> Regarding CA's effect on grades, see James C. McCroskey, "Classroom consequences of communication apprehension" *Communication Education*, 26 (1977): 27–33; regarding its impact on student interaction, J.A. Dobos, "Collaborative learning: effects of student expectations and communication apprehension on student motivation" *Communication Education*, 45 (1996): 118–134.

<sup>57</sup> McCroskey, *An Introduction to Rhetorical Communication*, 55.

<sup>58</sup> McCroskey, "The Communication Apprehension Perspective," 35.

<sup>59</sup> Rockness, "Addressing the Fear of Public Speaking," 75.

<sup>60</sup> John W. Luton, "Effects of religious orientation and perceptions of communication competence and apprehension on burnout potential," (PhD diss., Regent University, 2000).

<sup>61</sup> These terms come from Barbara Mae Gayle et al., *Classroom Communication and Instructional Processes: Advances Through Meta-Analysis* (Routledge, 2009), 214, where it is written, "Three methods of assessing CA exist: (a) self-report, (b) observer report, and (c) physiological measures." Physiological methods for CA assessment are unlikely to be found in the preaching classroom since they require access to machines that report physiological changes such as blood pressure, heart rate, and palmar sweat.

<sup>62</sup> Alyce McKenzie, *Wise Up! The Lenten Journey from Fear to Faith*, 2020, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6\\_0nd-nIvi0](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6_0nd-nIvi0).

<sup>63</sup> Patricia M. Batten, "An Apology for Learning Educational Theory," in *Training Preachers* ed. Scott M. Gibson (Bellingham: Lexham, 2018), 29–30.

by the assessment instrument developed by McCroskey known as the Personal Report of Communication Apprehension, the final version of which is designated the PRCA-24.<sup>64</sup> Both printable versions and electronic versions of the PRCA-24 are available online.<sup>65</sup>

The PRCA-24 is a simple, 24-question survey that any speaker can complete to identify their level of communication apprehension in each of the four settings: in an interpersonal setting, in meetings, in group discussions, and during public speaking. A completed PRCA-24 is able to reveal the loci of a subject's apprehension, the degree to which they are apprehensive, and the type of apprehension they are experiencing. It takes less than 15 minutes to complete.

Perhaps the first place to address CA among preaching students would be to distribute, at the outset of a preaching class, the PRCA-24. Administering this standardized test would enable teachers to assess with greater accuracy which students not only have a history of CA but in what contexts and to what degree. With the PRCA-24, those students with CA will already be identified well before they get up to preach for a grade.

Educators in other disciplines have already used the PRCA-24 in their classrooms, not only to identify CA but also to assess their attempts at reducing it. Karen Dwyer and Dennis Fus at the University of Nebraska administered the PRCA-24 (along with the S-E scale, a self-efficacy measurement tool) at the outset, midpoint, and close of a semester to determine the relationship between self-efficacy and CA among their communication students.<sup>66</sup> Through this research, they found that improving a student's self-efficacy did reduce their CA. Nike Arnold, a linguistics professor at Portland State University, used the PRCA-24 to determine that computer-mediated language learning, which had previously been thought to reduce a speaker's fear, actually had no significant impact on CA among foreign language learners.<sup>67</sup> The PRCA-24 could be an invaluable tool for preaching teachers who wish to assess both the general progress of their students with respect to their fear of preaching and the effectiveness of any attempted intervention.

### Strategies to Reduce Communication Apprehension

With respect to interventions—this leads to the final question: how might CA be reduced? After identifying CA in their classroom, what can teachers of preaching do about it?

Following McCroskey's initial research, a plethora of projects have explored potential practices for addressing CA. These practices are most often identified as 1) *skills training*, 2) *cognitive modification*, and 3) *systematic desensitization*.<sup>68</sup> Although these strategies originated

---

<sup>64</sup> The earliest iteration of the PRCA is found in McCroskey, "Measures of Communication-Bound Anxiety." The PRCA-24 is found in McCroskey, *An Introduction to Rhetorical Communication*, 40-41.

<sup>65</sup> For the printable version, see "Personal Report of Communication Apprehension (PRCA-24)," University of California, Merced, accessed March 30, 2025, [https://assessment.ucmerced.edu/sites/assessment.ucmerced.edu/files/page/documents/personal\\_report\\_of\\_communication\\_apprehension.pdf](https://assessment.ucmerced.edu/sites/assessment.ucmerced.edu/files/page/documents/personal_report_of_communication_apprehension.pdf); for the online version visit "Personal Report of Communication Apprehension (PRCA-24)," Across Cultures, accessed March 30, 2025, <https://acrossculturesweb.com/unit1/prca.html>.

<sup>66</sup> Karen Kangas Dwyer and Dennis A. Fus, "Perceptions Of Communication Competence, Self-Efficacy, And Trait Communication Apprehension: Is There an Impact on Basic Course Success?," *Communication Research Reports* 19, no. 1 (2002): 29-37.

<sup>67</sup> Arnold, "Reducing Foreign Language Communication Apprehension with Computer-Mediated Communication," 469-86.

<sup>68</sup> Susan R. Glaser, "Oral Communication Apprehension and Avoidance: The Current Status of Treatment Research," *Communication Education* 30, no. 4 (October 1, 1981): 321-41; Michael Weissberg and Douglas and Lamb, "Comparative Effects of Cognitive Modification, Systematic Desensitization, and Speech Preparation in the Reduction of Speech and General Anxiety," *Communication Monographs* 44, no. 1 (March 1, 1977): 27-36.

in the field of psychotherapy and were originally intended to assist individuals experiencing high levels of CA, they have, over time, transformed into practical exercises for the speech classroom.<sup>69</sup> In fact, Lucas lists many of the strategies below in his widely used speech textbook, *The Art of Public Speaking*. It is likely, therefore, that although at first glance some of these strategies may seem complex, they may be able to be adapted to the preaching classroom, too.

### *Skills Training*

The most straightforward method for supporting students who struggle with CA is to *provide them with a class*. Lucas identifies this as “the first step” in reducing nervousness and promises, “as the class goes on, your fears about public speaking will gradually recede.”<sup>70</sup>

However, not all classes in public speaking are equally effective in reducing CA. Classes that are concerned with theories and abstract concepts do not fall under the umbrella of skills training. The classes that will help apprehensive students are those that involve targeted instruction in the specific competencies required for preparation and delivery—skills such as selecting a topic, organizing material, and vocal and bodily delivery.<sup>71</sup> To address the context-specific issue of intercultural communication apprehension in a diverse preaching classroom, skills training in interpersonal communication competency (ICC) might also be integrated into such a class.<sup>72</sup>

A second strategy for reducing CA through skills training is *encouraging thorough preparation*. Lucas advises his students to “prepare your speeches so thoroughly that you cannot help but be successful.”<sup>73</sup> McCroskey explains that “complete preparation” is essential for reducing CA, especially situational CA. He writes, “the more fully and carefully prepared you are the less likely any situational factor will be able to get to you.”<sup>74</sup> Conversely, “inadequate preparation will leave even the most confident speaker open to potentially severe stage fright.”<sup>75</sup>

This strategy is particularly important for reducing the anxiety of L2 speakers. One study of language learners in Malaysia revealed that CA increases dramatically when L2 speakers are asked to speak publicly without time to prepare.<sup>76</sup> In light of this, preaching instructors should consider eliminating impromptu assignments for L2 students to help reduce unnecessary stress and support more effective learning.

How might preaching teachers encourage all students to invest more time in preparing their sermons? One approach may be to devote focused time to preparing introductions. Research indicates that speech anxiety is “highest during the minute prior to speaking and the first minute of speaking, respectively.”<sup>77</sup> Anxiety typically declines thereafter. As Lucas promises, “Once you get through the introduction, you should find smoother sailing the rest of the way.”<sup>78</sup>

---

<sup>69</sup> Graham D. Bodie, “A Racing Heart, Rattling Knees, and Ruminative Thoughts: Defining, Explaining, and Treating Public Speaking Anxiety,” *Communication Education* 59, no. 1 (January 1, 2010): 86.

<sup>70</sup> Lucas, *The Art of Public Speaking*, 10.

<sup>71</sup> Graham D. Bodie, “A Racing Heart, Rattling Knees, and Ruminative Thoughts,” 89.

<sup>72</sup> Lily A. Arasaratnam, “Further Testing of a New Model of Intercultural Communication Competence,” *Communication Research Reports* 23, no. 2 (June 2006): 93–99.

<sup>73</sup> Lucas, *The Art of Public Speaking*, 10.

<sup>74</sup> McCroskey, *Introduction to Rhetorical Communication*, 58.

<sup>75</sup> McCroskey, *Introduction to Rhetorical Communication*, 58.

<sup>76</sup> Mahfuzah Binti Rafek et al., “Gender and Language: Communication Apprehension in Second Language Learning,” *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 123 (March 20, 2014): 90–96.

<sup>77</sup> Chris R. Sawyer and Ralph R. Behnke, “Reduction in Public Speaking State Anxiety during Performance as a Function of Sensitization Processes,” *Communication Quarterly* 50, no. 1 (January 2002): 111.

<sup>78</sup> Lucas, *The Art of Public Speaking*, 15.

A third strategy for reducing CA through skills training is to *supply students with carefully structured assignments*. A 1989 study into CA and speech assignments found that it was the “highly anxious students [who] often seem to be the ones who ask endless and innumerable questions about an upcoming speech assignment.”<sup>79</sup> Building on this insight, speech educators realized they could support anxious students by supplying them with assignments that, in a detailed manner, guided them through the speechmaking process.

However, research by communication studies professor Melanie Booth-Butterfield revealed that this strategy may be counterproductive for students with low levels of CA. These non-anxious students, she explained, “appear to communicate more competently when given unstructured tasks, ones which they can direct themselves.”<sup>80</sup> In response, Booth-Butterfield recommends offering all students two outlines. The first would contain the basic requirements for an assessment, and the second would contain a detailed outline of what students *may* want to include in their speech – and allowing students to pursue whichever assessment outline supported them best.<sup>81</sup>

Finally, CA may be reduced by simply *speaking more often*. As Lucas explains, “The more you learn about public speaking, and the more speeches you give, the less threatening speechmaking will become.”<sup>82</sup> This notion is supported by CA research. A study by rhetorician Mary Marcel revealed that a speaker’s CA tends to diminish with experience.<sup>83</sup> Teachers of preaching might accelerate this process by assigning multiple preaching assessments throughout the semester as well as encouraging apprehensive students to pursue additional opportunities to preach outside of the classroom.

It has already been stated that students in an L2 environment might be especially hesitant to speak, and students experiencing ICA might avoid speaking across cultural divides. How, then, might a preaching teacher encourage these students to speak more often if this is a strategy that would assist them in overcoming their fears? One strategy worth considering is to have students speak in culturally or linguistically diverse pairs. This approach may increase speech frequency while simultaneously eliminating the anxiety engendered by speaking in front of the class. Perhaps, in the preaching classroom, students could be paired to give feedback to one another on portions of their sermons before preaching their entire sermon for a grade.

Many of these skills-based strategies align with common-sense approaches to teaching preaching. It may not surprise teachers of preaching, therefore, that a 1997 nationwide survey identified skills training as the most frequently used method for addressing CA.<sup>84</sup> Yet, despite its popularity, skills training has also been shown to be the least effective of the three strategies outlined in this paper, particularly for speakers with high levels of trait CA.<sup>85</sup> For these students, “simply being enrolled in a class is sufficient to cause anxiety,” and they “are more likely to

---

<sup>79</sup> John A. Daly et al., “Pre-Performance Concerns Associated with Public Speaking Anxiety,” *Communication Quarterly* 37, no. 1 (Winter 1989), 45.

<sup>80</sup> Melanie Booth-Butterfield, “Stifle or Stimulate? The Effects of Communication Task Structure on Apprehensive and Non-Apprehensive Students,” *Communication Education* 35, no. 4 (October 1986): 342-343.

<sup>81</sup> Booth-Butterfield, “Stifle or Stimulate?,” 343.

<sup>82</sup> Lucas, *The Art of Public Speaking*, 10.

<sup>83</sup> Mary Marcel, “Communication Apprehension Across the Career Span,” *International Journal of Business Communication* 59, no. 4 (October 1, 2022): 523.

<sup>84</sup> Thomas E. Robinson II, “Communication Apprehension and the Basic Public Speaking Course: A National Survey of In-class Treatment Techniques,” *Communication Education* 46, no. 3 (July 1, 1997): 193.

<sup>85</sup> Robinson, “Communication Apprehension and the Basic Public Speaking Course”; Mike Allen, John E. Hunter, and William A. Donohue, “Meta-Analysis of Self-Report Data on the Effectiveness of Public Speaking Anxiety Treatment Techniques,” *Communication Education* 38, no. 1 (January 1989): 54–76.

withdraw from public speaking classes."<sup>86</sup> Furthermore, high-trait CA speakers "do not effectively use their preparation time," and as it has already been stated, are less likely to seek out more opportunities to speak.<sup>87</sup>

Therefore, skills training alone is insufficient for student preachers experiencing such elevated levels of CA. For them, at least, additional strategies must be considered.

### *Cognitive Modification*

The second group of strategies for addressing CA falls under the general heading of *cognitive modification*. Employing cognitive modification to reduce CA involves taking irrational beliefs related to interpersonal communication, analyzing those beliefs, and replacing them with new "coping statements incompatible with anxiety."<sup>88</sup> While skills training involves doing differently, cognitive modification involves thinking differently.

Although cognitive modification might seem out of reach for the preaching instructor, Lucas has also adapted this principle in *The Art of Public Speaking* into several basic strategies to address CA. While he does not name these "cognitive modification strategies," they are no different than those proposed by CA researchers. Each involves taking one thought, examining it, and working to replace it with another.

First, Lucas recommends anxious students *think positively*.<sup>89</sup> This process, he explains, involves transforming negative thoughts into positive ones—for example, turning "I'm always nervous when I give a speech" to "Everyone's nervous. If other people can handle it, I can too."<sup>90</sup> In the preaching classroom, students may learn to think positively by writing out negative thoughts they have concerning preaching and, with the help of their peers, their teacher, or even a trained counselor, work on constructing a list of new, positive statements about preaching.

Second, Lucas reminds students that *most nervousness is not visible*. This strategy involves modifying a single cognition—turning the thought, "everyone can see how nervous I am" to "only some of my internal anxiety is visible on the outside."<sup>91</sup> With a little guidance, it is possible for students to discover this through watching themselves preach on video. Psychologists Thomas Rodebaugh and Diane Chambless explain that watching a tape of oneself can help decrease the discrepancy between a speaker's felt anxiety and their observers' perceptions of their anxiety. Additionally, this task has been shown to most effectively impact speakers who are highly critical of themselves.<sup>92</sup>

Third, Lucas recommends students *let go of expectations of perfection*. Again, this involves modifying a single thought: exchanging the notion "I need to be perfect" to "there is no such thing as a perfect speech."<sup>93</sup> Although research into perfectionism has not been able to support claims that perfectionism *causes* CA, it does reveal that perfectionism and CA are

---

<sup>86</sup> Graham D. Bodie, "A Racing Heart, Rattling Knees, and Ruminative Thoughts," 89.

<sup>87</sup> Graham D. Bodie, "A Racing Heart, Rattling Knees, and Ruminative Thoughts," 89.

<sup>88</sup> Frederic D. Glogower, William J. Fremouw, and James C. McCroskey, "A Component Analysis of Cognitive Restructuring," *Cognitive Therapy and Research* 2, no. 3 (1978): 209.

<sup>89</sup> Lucas, *The Art of Public Speaking*, 12.

<sup>90</sup> Lucas, *The Art of Public Speaking*, 12.

<sup>91</sup> Lucas, *The Art of Public Speaking*, 13.

<sup>92</sup> Thomas Rodebaugh and Dianne Chambless, "The Effects of Video Feedback on Self-Perception of Performance: A Replication and Extension," *Cognitive Therapy and Research* 26 (October 1, 2002), 629-644.

<sup>93</sup> Lucas, *The Art of Public Speaking*, 13.

related, leading researchers to hypothesize that "interventions to treat perfectionism may reduce one's CA."<sup>94</sup>

Finally, Lucas recommends students *use the power of visualization*. As described by Lucas, visualization involves "creating a vivid mental blueprint in which you see yourself succeeding in a speech."<sup>95</sup> The standard practice for reducing CA through visualization is to have students relax using techniques borrowed from systematic desensitization (see below) and then visualize themselves experiencing success, rather than failure, at various stages in the speaking event. Such a visualization task in the preaching classroom could occur through a script written by a professor or with students writing and guiding themselves through their own personal visualization of the preaching event.

While Lucas does not address this in his textbook, there are also some cognitive modification strategies known to be particularly effective in supporting students in a culturally diverse context, the first of which is *careful teacher and peer evaluation*. Molnar's study into L2 speakers in the foreign language classroom revealed that their CA is exacerbated by a fear of negative peer in-class evaluations.<sup>96</sup> Although Molnar might not name it as such, there is a cognition at work here: "I am going to be judged harshly for my difference." Educators might alleviate such fears by providing detailed instructions on what does and does not constitute appropriate feedback, offering scripts for feedback, or responding openly to potentially harmful feedback. Engaging in such practices, teachers of preaching may be able to work with their students to move their negative cognition toward a more positive one.

In addition to careful feedback, Stevie Munz and Janet Colvin's study of communication students in Utah determined that when students find themselves in a cross-cultural context, their ability to have and feel like their own identity is supported in the classroom can alleviate their CA.<sup>97</sup> How might a teacher preaching support student's identity in their classroom? According to Munz and Colvin, educators should first increase their awareness of "a spectrum of public speaking practices and identities that are rooted in cultures and co-cultures."<sup>98</sup> For the teacher of preaching, this means familiarizing oneself with the preaching traditions of one's students. Additionally, they encourage giving voice to those on the margins, including practically assigning these students more practice/speech lab time.<sup>99</sup> Prioritizing marginalized students in this way may modify their cognition from "I don't belong in this space" to "I am welcome here"—a worthy goal for any teacher in any discipline.

### *Systematic Desensitization*

While skills training and cognitive modification may seem to be the simpler methods of addressing CA, the current, more effective than both, is a process called *systematic*

---

<sup>94</sup> Stephanie Shimotsu and Timothy P. and Mottet, "The Relationships Among Perfectionism, Communication Apprehension, and Temperament," *Communication Research Reports* 26, no. 3 (August 19, 2009): 190.

<sup>95</sup> Lucas, *The Art of Public Speaking*, 12.

<sup>96</sup> Draženka Molnar and Gabrijela Crnjak, "Exploring Foreign Language Communication Apprehension among the English Language University Students in the English Language Classroom Setting," *European Journal of Social Science Education and Research* 5 (August 1, 2018): 27–39.

<sup>97</sup> Stevie Munz and Janet Colvin, "Communication Apprehension: Understanding Communication Skills and Cultural Identity in the Basic Communication Course," *Basic Communication Course Annual* 30, no. 1 (January 24, 2018).

<sup>98</sup> Munz and Colvin, "Communication Apprehension," 191.

<sup>99</sup> Munz and Colvin, "Communication Apprehension," 191.

*desensitization*. This process has been found to be extremely effective at reducing the CA of between 80 and 90% of all speakers who have received it.<sup>100</sup> Systematic desensitization is a process for reducing anxiety that includes “1) training in deep muscle relaxation, 2) a construction of hierarchies of anxiety-eliciting stimuli, and 3) the graduated pairing, through imagery, of anxiety-eliciting stimuli with the relaxed state.”<sup>101</sup>

The first step in reducing CA through systematic desensitization involves teaching speakers to relax their entire body. This is taught using a method called *progressive relaxation*. Progressive relaxation is the art of successively tensing and relaxing muscle groups throughout the body as instructed by a trainer. “A common sequence involves hands, bicep and triceps, shoulders, neck, mouth, tongue (extended and retracted), tongue (mouth roof and floor), eyes and forehead, breathing, back, midsection, thighs, stomach, calves and feet and toes.”<sup>102</sup> With practice, speakers should be able to tense and relax all their muscle groups, allowing them to tense and relax their bodies on cue.

The next step in the systematic desensitization process for CA involves constructing a 10-15 step list of speech-related tasks. These tasks are ranked from the least anxiety-producing task related to the issue being addressed all the way to the most anxiety-producing.<sup>103</sup> G.L. Paul and D.T. Shannon conducted a study in 1996 on systematic desensitization and constructed a list of these situations related to public speaking. They are:

- 1) Lying in bed in a room just before going to sleep—describe the room.
- 2) Reading about speeches alone in a room (one to two weeks before).
- 3) Discussing the coming speech a week before (in class or after).
- 4) In the audience while another gives a speech (the week before the presentation).
- 5) Writing speech in the study area (room, library).
- 6) Practicing speech alone in a room (or in front of a roommate).
- 7) Getting dressed the morning of speech.
- 8) Activities just prior to leaving for speech (eating, practice).
- 9) Walking over to room on the day of the speech.
- 10) Entering room on the day of the speech.
- 11) Waiting while another person gives speech on day of presentation.
- 12) Walking up before the audience.
- 13) Presenting speech before the audience.<sup>104</sup>

Adapting this list for the preaching classroom is as simple as replacing “speech” with “sermon.”

The final stage of systematic desensitization is to induce the state of relaxation learned previously and then present the speaker with those stages of anxiety-provoking stimuli one by one. The speaker is not expected to *be* in these situations; all that is required is to *imagine* them.<sup>105</sup> Whenever the speaker feels tense, they must relax. “Thus, the sequence is relax,

---

<sup>100</sup> McCroskey, *An Introduction to Rhetorical Communication*, 57.

<sup>101</sup> Gustav Friedrich and Blaine Goss, “Systematic Desensitization,” in *Avoiding Communication* ed. John A. Daly and James C. McCroskey (Beverly Hills: Sage, 1984), 175.

<sup>102</sup> Friedrich and Goss, “Systematic Desensitization,” 176.

<sup>103</sup> Friedrich and Goss, “Systematic Desensitization,” 176.

<sup>104</sup> G.L. Paul and D.T. Shannon, “Treatment of anxiety through systematic desensitization in therapy groups,” *Journal of Abnormal Psychology* 71, no. 2 (Apr. 1966): 124-35.

<sup>105</sup> Friedrich and Goss, “Systematic Desensitization,” 178.

imagine, stop imagining, relax.”<sup>106</sup> This continues all the way along the hierarchy of situations until the speaker is able to relax even when considering the most stressful of situations – presenting the speech before the class.

Systematic desensitization may seem a strange practice to incorporate into the preaching classroom, but it is adaptable, easy to learn, and can be administered remotely. McCroskey’s research into systematic desensitization involved training three separate speech communication departments—at Michigan State, Illinois State, and West Virginia University—to effectively reduce the CA among their students.<sup>107</sup> If they can learn it, surely teachers of preaching can too. Educators concerned with finding the resources necessary for this program should know that there are many audio guides for progressive relaxation for free online. A quick search for “progressive muscle relaxation” on YouTube produces hundreds of results. Educators concerned with how time-consuming such a process might be should be aware that systematic desensitization effectively reduces CA in groups (no need to work with students one-on-one) and reduces CA through tape recordings (no need for the professor even to be present).<sup>108</sup> The entire process could be constructed for students as a unit of study they engage with online.

Moreover, this process has, in fact, been recommended to preachers before. Nancy Lammers Gross in *Women’s Voices and the Practice of Preaching* and Robert Jacks in his *Getting the Word Across*<sup>109</sup> both promote progressive relaxation as a tool for improved sermon delivery. However, neither of them linked progressive relaxation to systematic desensitization for the purpose of reducing CA. Homiletics has had, for some time, half the prescription—all that is needed is the second half of the process to arrive at the cure.

### *Further Strategies of Support*

While systematic desensitization is currently the most effective known single method for reducing CA among most speakers, teachers must be aware that some students require professional counseling from a licensed mental health practitioner to address their CA. Recall again Fry Brown’s student Frank who required this kind of assistance.<sup>110</sup> This is particularly the case for students who exhibit trait-like CA or CA that has developed as a result of many repeated negative experiences.<sup>111</sup> Research has shown that anti-depressant medication is also able to reduce a speaker’s CA.<sup>112</sup> Encouraging a whole class to consider pursuing such help might normalize medication and therapy for preaching students and allow the most apprehensive students to hear this advice without feeling particularly targeted.

Finally, could it be possible for homiletics to have its own unique strategy for reducing CA? The most obvious answer to that question is found in the power of prayer and the work of the Holy Spirit. Jacks tells the story of one student, Jeff, who confesses, “If God is to use my voice and my presence in ministry, I will need to pray for God to provide me a butterfly net so that I can catch the butterflies in my stomach that hatch five minutes before preaching.”<sup>113</sup> Rockness also writes of this in his thesis when he references Jesus’s promise of the Holy Spirit in

---

<sup>106</sup> Frederick and Goss, “Systematic Desensitization,” 178.

<sup>107</sup> McCroskey, “Communication Apprehension: What Have We Learned in the Last Four Decades,” 185.

<sup>108</sup> Friedrich and Goss, “Systematic Desensitization,” 179.

<sup>109</sup> Nancy Lammers Gross, *Women’s Voices and the Practice of Preaching* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2017), 102; Jacks, *Getting the Word Across*, 127-128.

<sup>110</sup> Fry Brown, *Delivering the Sermon*, 1-2.

<sup>111</sup> McCroskey, *An Introduction to Rhetorical Communication*, 53.

<sup>112</sup> McCroskey, *An Introduction to Rhetorical Communication*, 53.

<sup>113</sup> Jacks, *Getting the Word Across*, 22.

John 14:27 to calm his disciples' fears and of the act of "giving one's fear to the Lord," as inspired by the Psalmists' prayers.<sup>114</sup> Rockness offers an example of such a prayer—the prayer of a youth pastor experiencing CA, desperately anxious, who cried out before a sermon, “Do this for me because I cannot do it on my own.”<sup>115</sup> In this youth pastor’s case, his prayer was answered, and his fears were relieved.

However, even with the Spirit’s aid, teachers of preaching should not ignore the other methods and tools that are available to reduce CA. To do so would be akin to the Christian who refuses medical attention when sick or injured. Prayer, a reliance on the Holy Spirit, *and* the steps offered above can be employed by teachers of preaching in tandem to address the problem of CA in their classroom. Developing gifts for ministry is a partnership. God gifts preachers, but preachers are also tasked with the responsibility of developing those gifts in any way they can.

## **Conclusion**

James C. McCroskey did not invent communication apprehension. He merely observed it, gave it a technical designation, and developed a way to measure it. From there, McCroskey was able to construct different strategies to reduce CA and assess their effectiveness. Not only that, with a technical name and assessment tool, a group of scholars across many disciplines and even continents have been able to collectively investigate this phenomenon and share their findings. For these scholars, having a term and a tool was like finding a common language across a cultural divide—they could finally dialog about a phenomenon they had all encountered for so long.

Teachers of preaching have encountered this phenomenon, too. Teresa Fry Brown, Thomas Long, Charles Bartow, Nancy Lammers Gross, G. Robert Jacks, Sally Brown, Luke Powery, and others have all reported instances of fear of speaking in their classrooms. Now, with this term and the PRCA-24 in hand, this author hopes that homileticians will be able to enter this scholarly discussion, too. More than that, through a deeper understanding of CA and CA research, they will be able to begin to urge more than “be natural” and “don’t be afraid.” Instead, with more targeted, informed, evaluated care, teachers of preaching might see their apprehensive students thrive.

---

<sup>114</sup> Rockness, “Addressing the Fear of Public Speaking,” 18, 20.

<sup>115</sup> Rockness, “Addressing the Fear of Public Speaking,” 94.