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# UNIVERSITY STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF THE EFFECTIVENESS OF A COURSE IN COMMUNICATION CONFIDENCE

## *A qualitative study*

**Maija Gerlander & Anne Alanne**

A university pedagogy that emphasises students' agency and collaborative learning highlights the importance of active participation and interaction, including oral assessment. Students high in oral communication apprehension (OCA) can find these interaction-focused approaches as increasing harmful stress, leading them to avoid studies. Additionally, the inclusion of communication skills in the competency requirements for a wide range of professional fields may have increased stress for communication-anxious students. The aim of this study is to investigate the effectiveness of the course Gaining Confidence for Public Speaking, designed for students who assess their OCA as harming their studies. The research examined the qualitative changes in students' communication confidence and the factors that supported learning during the course, based on students' own descriptions. In addition, the study aims to generate insights and knowledge for the pedagogical development of the course, and to create a design for assessing its effectiveness. The research data consist of 38 reflective essays that university students wrote at the end of the courses held between 2018 and 2021 at the University of Jyväskylä. The study employed a qualitative approach using theory-guided content analysis conducted with [ATLAS.ti 22](#) data analysis software. The key changes in communication confidence related to (a) orientational elements, such as increased acceptance of anxiety, loosening of the criteria for public speaking and reinforced communication orientation towards the audience, (b) improved oral communication self-efficacy, (c) more appropriate preparation skills, and (d) less avoidance of courses involving oral presentations, along with increased participation in communication situations. The main factors identified as supporting learning encompassed the peer group, video reflection, and research- and experience-based knowledge about anxiety. The findings support the need for courses on developing communication confidence for students high in OCA, as well the need to design pedagogical approaches for adopting in these courses.

**Keywords:** communication confidence, public speaking anxiety, social anxiety, oral communication apprehension, communication competence, oral communication self-efficacy, university students

Opiskelijakeskeisyyteen perustuvassa yliopistopedagogiikassa suositetaan opiskelijoiden aktiiviseen osallistumiseen ja vuorovaikutukseen perustuvien oppimismenetelmien käyttöä. Lisäksi arviointitavat ovat vuorovaikutuksellistuneet. Oppimista arvioidaan kirjallisten tenttien tai tehtävien ohella suullisissa tenteissä, keskusteluissa tai näytöissä. Myös korkeakoulutettujen asiantuntijoiden osaamisvaatimuksissa vuorovaikutus- ja yhteistyötaitojen merkitys on nostettu keskeiseksi. Esiintymistä ja sosiaalisia tilanteita jännittävälle opiskelijoille suullisen viestinnän yleistyminen opetuksessa, oppimisessa ja osaamisvaatimuksissa voi lisätä haitallista stressiä, ja johtaa jopa tiettyjen opintojaksojen välttelyyn ja opintojen viivästymiseen. Tämän tutkimuksen tavoitteena on selvittää esiintymistä jännittävälle opiskelijoille suunnatun Esiintymisvarmuuden kehittäminen -opintojakson vaikuttavuutta. Tutkimuksessa tarkastellaan opiskelijoiden kuvaamia laadullisia muutoksia viestintävarmuudessaan ja oppimista edistäneitä tekijöitä. Lisäksi tutkimuksen tavoitteena on tuottaa näkemystä ja tietoa esiintymisvarmuuden kehittämisen -opintojakson pedagogiseen kehittämiseen sekä tuottaa menetelmiä opintojakson vaikuttavuuden arviointiin. Tutkimusaineisto koostuu opiskelijoiden kirjoittamista yhteensä 38 reflektiivisestä esseestä. Aineisto koottiin yhdeksällä Esiintymisvarmuuden kehittäminen -opintojaksolla, jotka järjestettiin Jyväskylän yliopistossa vuosien 2018–2021 aikana. Tutkimusmenetelmänä käytettiin kvalitatiivista, teoriaohjaavaa sisällönanalyysia. Aineiston analysoinnissa hyödynnettiin [ATLAS.ti 22](#)-ohjelmistoa. Keskeisiksi viestintävarmuuden muutoksiksi kuvattiin (a) orientoitumisen muutos, kuten hyväksyvämpi suhtautuminen jännittämiseen, esiintymisen kriteereiden väljentyminen ja vahvempi vuorovaikutusorientaatio suhteessa yleisöön, (b) vahvistunut viestinnällinen minäpystyvyys, (c) tarkoituksenmukaisemmat valmistautumistaidot ja (d) esiintymistä sisältävien kurssien välttelyn väheneminen ja aktiivisempi osallistuminen viestintätilanteissa. Oppimista tukevista tekijöistä korostuivat vertaisryhmä, videon hyödyntäminen reflektoinnissa sekä tutkimus- ja kokemuspohjainen tieto jännittämisestä. Tutkimuksen tulokset tukevat viestintävarmuutta kehittävien opintojaksojen tarpeellisuutta ja merkityksellisyyttä vahvasti esiintymistä jännittävälle opiskelijoille. Lisäksi tutkimus korostaa kokonaisvaltaisemman lähestymistavan tarpeellisuutta tutkittaessa viestintävarmuutta kehittävien opintojaksojen ja pedagogisten ratkaisujen vaikuttavuutta.

**Asiasanat:** viestintävarmuus, esiintymisjännitys, sosiaalinen jännittäminen, viestintäaarkuus, vuorovaikutusosaaminen, viestintäpystyvyys, yliopisto-opiskelijat

En la pedagogía universitaria basada en el enfoque centrado en el estudiante, se favorece el uso de métodos de aprendizaje que se basen en la participación activa y en la interacción de los estudiantes. Además, hoy en día los métodos de evaluación han evolucionado hasta favorecer metodologías más interactivas. Junto con las evaluaciones escritas en exámenes o tareas, se evalúa el aprendizaje a través de exámenes orales, discusiones o presentaciones. La importancia de las habilidades de interacción y colaboración también se enfatizan en los requisitos de competencia de los expertos educados en instituciones de educación superior. Para los estudiantes que experimentan ansiedad en situaciones de interacción social y de presentación, el aumento de la comunicación oral en la enseñanza, el proceso de aprendizaje y los requisitos de competencia puede aumentar un estrés perjudicial y llevar al estudiante a evitar ciertos cursos y ocasionar retrasos en los estudios. El objetivo de esta investigación es analizar la efectividad del curso titulado “Desarrollo

de la confianza en las presentaciones” dirigido a estudiantes que experimentan ansiedad cuando tienen que hacer una presentación. La investigación examina los cambios cualitativos en la confianza en la comunicación descritos por los estudiantes y los factores que promovieron el aprendizaje. Además, la investigación tiene como objetivo proporcionar perspectivas y conocimientos para el desarrollo pedagógico del curso y desarrollar métodos para evaluar su efectividad. Los datos de la investigación consisten en 38 aprehensión a la comunicación en nueve cursos de “Desarrollo de la confianza en las presentaciones” llevados a cabo en la Universidad de Jyväskylä entre los años 2018 y 2021. El método de investigación utilizado fue un análisis cualitativo de contenido guiado teóricamente. Se utilizó el software [ATLAS.ti 22](#) para el análisis de datos. Los cambios clave en la confianza en la comunicación se describieron como (a) un cambio en la orientación, como una actitud más de aceptación de la ansiedad, una ampliación de los criterios de presentación y una orientación más fuerte hacia la interacción con la audiencia; (b) un aumento en la autoeficacia comunicativa; (c) habilidades de preparación más adecuadas; y (d) una disminución en el hecho de evitar de cursos que incluyen presentaciones y una participación más activa en situaciones de comunicación. Los factores que respaldan el aprendizaje incluyen el grupo de compañeros, el uso de videos en la reflexión, y el conocimiento basado en la investigación y la experiencia sobre la ansiedad. Los resultados de la investigación respaldan la necesidad y relevancia de cursos que desarrollen la confianza en la comunicación para estudiantes que experimentan ansiedad en presentaciones. Además, la investigación destaca la necesidad de un enfoque más integral al examinar la efectividad de estos cursos y soluciones pedagógicas.

**Palabras clave:** confianza en la comunicación, ansiedad de hablar en público, ansiedad social, aprehensión a la comunicación, competencia comunicativa, autoeficacia para la comunicación oral, estudiantes de universidad

## Introduction

Activities and assignments that require interaction with others are an essential part of higher education studies (Almonkari, 2007; Broeckelman-Post & Pyle, 2017; Broeckelman-Post et al., 2023; LeFebvre & al., 2020; Pörhölä et al., 2019). In addition, individual or group presentations, debates, or discussions have become common forms of assessment in higher education (Grieve et al., 2021; Nash et al., 2016). In the Finnish context, the requirements for a bachelor's degree include compulsory communication and language studies leading to adequate communication and language skills in Finnish, Swedish, and English. At the University of Jyväskylä, these studies are offered by the Centre for Multilingual Academic Communication (Movi) and typically include courses focusing on academic literacies, multilingual interaction, and research communication, with intercultural communication being an overarching theme in all courses (see the Introduction of this book by Károly et al., 2024).

Communication competence is widely acknowledged as crucial in achieving success academically and professionally (e.g., Bourke et al., 2021; Riemer, 2007). In descriptions of 21st-century skills<sup>1</sup>, communication and collaboration, alongside creativity and critical thinking, are viewed as key soft competencies or skills needed in the future (Thornhill-Miller et al., 2023). Employers also emphasise the importance of strong individual and group communication skills in new graduates (Broeckelman-Post & Pyle, 2017; Byrne et al., 2012; Grieve et al., 2021; Horila, 2020). In addition, developing students' communication skills is given the highest priority in higher education (OECD, 2019; Hannover Research, 2012; Riemer, 2007) and they have been reported to be highly valued by employers (Clokier & Fourie, 2016).

In the university context, constructivist pedagogical approaches underscore the significance of communication and interaction in learning situations (Biggs & Tang, 2011; Nevgi & Lindholm-Ylänne, 2009). Through oral communication activities, students can construct disciplinary knowledge and engage in critical thinking (Baker & Heron, 2023; Broeckelman-Post et al., 2023). While modern learning theories emphasise active participation in the co-construction of knowledge as well as dialogue, there is a need for rigorous inspection and critique of accomplishing learning outcomes (e.g., Parpala & Lindholm-Ylänne, 2007; Pörhölä et al., 2019). Notably, for students with high communication apprehension, interaction-focused approaches (e.g., student-centred and learning-oriented practices) may increase distress and social anxiety (Almonkari, 2007; Almonkari & Kunttu, 2012; LeFebvre et al., 2020), potentially affecting academic performance (Cavanagh et al., 2019). Public speaking anxiety (PSA) and communication apprehension (CA) experienced during studies can deter students from taking courses that include group discussions and oral presentations, resulting in delays, lower grades, or even dropping out of their studies (Almonkari & Kunttu, 2012; Broeckelman-Post & Pyle, 2017).

Introductory communication and public speaking courses have been shown to decrease PSA and oral communication apprehension (OCA) (Broeckelman-Post & Pyle, 2017;

1. In their article, Thornhill-Miller et al (2023) use the terms “competences” and “skills” interchangeably. They point out that there has been a long-standing ambiguity and confusion between these terms based on the way they have been used in different domains and disciplines. Competence is often conceived as a broader concept comprising skills, knowledge, abilities, and attitudes whereas a skill is usually perceived as a narrower, more goal-oriented behaviour (Ananiadou & Claro, 2009; Rychen & Hersch, 2003).

Gallego, 2022; LeFebvre et al., 2020; Okoro & Cardon, 2024). In addition, there is evidence that various pedagogical methods (e.g., cognitive modification, habituation, performance feedback, systematic desensitisation, communication orientation modification, skills training) successfully lower PSA (Broeckelman-Post & Pyle, 2017).

The effectiveness of certain pedagogical methods in lowering PSA is typically evaluated by measuring the change in students' CA levels during the course (Broeckelman-Post & Pyle, 2017; Hunter et al., 2014). Previous studies mainly employed quantitative, standard measures, such as PRCA-24 and PRCA-PS<sup>2</sup> (see Daly et al., 2009; Gallego, 2021; McCroskey et al., 1985), to assess students' self-reported levels of CA or PSA. However, when measuring effectiveness, research has rarely considered qualitative factors, such as students' experiences, including their understanding of CA or their perceptions of the impact of the communication courses. The need for enriching and deepening research through qualitative approaches has been recognised in recent years (e.g., Byrne et al., 2012; Hunter et al., 2014; Niinivaara & Herkama, 2021).

Our study utilised a qualitative approach to evaluate the effectiveness of the course *Gaining Confidence for Public Speaking*.<sup>3</sup> Through reflective essays written by the students at the end of the course, we explored the qualitative changes in students' perceptions concerning their communication apprehension, their self-assessed communication competence, and their confidence in their own ability to communicate, particularly in the context they experience as public speaking (see Fushino, 2010; Topham et al., 2016). Additionally, we examined pedagogical factors and practices that the students described as supporting and enhancing their learning in the course. Thus, the study addresses the following two research questions:

1. What are the changes in communication confidence described by students at the end of course?
2. What factors do participants describe as supportive in the course?

Our study is teacher-practitioner research, which is based on the idea of teachers being researchers and developers of their own work (Babione, 2015). As such, it is closely linked to research on professional development (e.g., Burton & Bartlett, 2011) because its goal is to generate information and insights for pedagogical development and aid the development of methods for assessing course success.

## Public speaking anxiety, oral communication apprehension, and communication confidence

Several terms are used to refer to the distress and social anxiety experienced in oral communication situations in various contexts and settings, including stage fright (Ayres, 1986; Clevenger, 1959), communication apprehension (CA) (McCroskey et al., 1985), oral communication apprehension (OCA) (Byrne et al., 2012; McCroskey, 1977b), public

2. The PRCA-24 (The Personal Report of Communication Apprehension) assesses trait-like communication apprehension in public speaking, small groups, meetings, and dyads (McCroskey et al., 1985). Meanwhile, the PRCA-PS (Personal Report of Communication Apprehension, Public Speaking Subscale) focuses on public speaking anxiety (see, e.g., Gallego, 2021).
3. The course *Gaining Confidence for Public speaking* [Esiintymisvarmuuden kehittäminen] has been offered at the University of Jyväskylä since 1992. The course is designed to aid the students experiencing heightened levels of communication apprehension. Its primary learning outcomes encompass the recognition and identification of individual's communication apprehension, the acquisition of effective coping methods, and the enhancement of communication confidence (Almonkari, 2000).

speaking apprehension (Almonkari, 2007), and public speaking anxiety (PSA) (e.g., Bodie, 2010).

In his classic definition, McCroskey (1977b, p. 78) defines CA “as an individual’s level of fear or anxiety associated with either real or anticipated communication with another person or persons”. OCA is the most common form of CA, which refers to CA in various situations such as conversation with a single peer or giving a talk on the television (McCroskey, 1977a). Thus, CA is a broader concept comprising the fear of public speaking as a situation-specific variant (e.g., Broeckelman-Post & Pyle, 2017; Byrne et al., 2012; Niinivaara & Herkama, 2021). In medical research, the fear of public speaking, in turn, is considered as a type of social anxiety,<sup>4</sup> which is defined as fear or anxiety related to social interaction or performance situations where a person is exposed to unfamiliar others or their possible judgements or evaluations (e.g., Grieve et al., 2021; Kunttu et al., 2006; Topham et al., 2016). In university pedagogy, social anxiety is considered a negative academic emotion affecting student engagement and wellbeing (Archbell & Coplan, 2022; Nash et al., 2016).

In this study, we adopt a broad view of public speaking, encompassing not just traditional oral presentations in front of an audience but also instances when individuals may perceive themselves as “performing” during activities such as group discussions or speaking on the phone. Consequently, we view the concept of PSA as closely related to that of OCA, and as such, these terms can be used interchangeably. In our qualitative study, we use the term OCA, defined by Byrne et al. (2012, p. 566) as “a fear of speaking or talking to other people in different contexts, such as on a one-to-one basis, in groups, in meetings, or public speaking”.

OCA is a multifaceted phenomenon that can manifest on multiple levels and can include various physiological (e.g., pulse and breathing), cognitive (e.g., concentration), affective (e.g., fear, shame), and behavioural (e.g., speech, avoidance) elements (Almonkari, 2007; Pörhölä, 1995). Previous research has shown that the nature of anxiety may vary considerably from one person to another, and the elements of manifestation can be individually weighted (Almonkari, 2007; Pörhölä, 1995). Thus, there is an acknowledged need to pay attention to one’s own perceptions of anxiety. The importance of individual interpretations is also emphasised by Gallego (2021), who found that students’ self-reported PSA was not related to physiological reactivity. She concluded that individuals who perceive themselves as confident might understand physiological reactivity during public speaking as excitement, while individuals who perceive themselves as insecure or fearful might see the same physiological reactivity as fear or anxiety. Thus, PSA is not induced by physiological activation but by the way an individual interprets physiological activation. Almonkari (2007) stresses that the meanings given to anxiety and how to cope with it are crucial for individual senses of wellbeing.

In pedagogical contexts, OCA is often addressed in relation to communication confidence. Kunttu et al. (2006) define communication confidence as the opposite of PSA, suggesting that positive experiences and orientation toward performing and performing contexts shape an individual’s communication confidence. Almonkari (2007) formed five categories based on students’ level of self-reported anxiety and coping methods. She found that communication-confident students rarely experience anxiety, approach communication situations with trust and ease, and have a positive self-concept as communicators. Conversely, students

4. The American Psychiatric Association (2015, p. 17) defines social anxiety as “marked fear or anxiety about one or more social situations in which the individual is exposed to possible scrutiny by others”, and specifies the definition: “individuals with the performance only type of social anxiety disorder have performance fears that are most impairing in their professional lives...Performance fears may also manifest in work, school, or academic settings in which regular public presentations are required”.

with high CA experience anxiety in most study-related communication situations, worry about interaction, hold a negative self-concept as communicators, and tend to avoid courses involving presentations and group work (Almonkari, 2007; see also Nordin & Broeckelman-Post, 2020).

Finally, communication confidence can be defined as confidence in one's ability to communicate, consisting of communication apprehension and self-perceived communication competence (Fushino, 2010). The course that provided the context for our study aims to enhance communication confidence in oral communication situations, as well as alleviate or decrease OCA to make it more tolerable. In the study, the changes that students relate to their OCA and communication competence are understood as expressions or manifestations of communication confidence.

## **Consequences of oral communication apprehension**

Previous studies have highlighted the prevalence of OCA among students both in the Finnish context and beyond (Almonkari, 2007; Almonkari & Kunttu, 2012; Pörhölä et al., 2019; Russell & Topham, 2012). In the UK, 10% of university and college students reported severe social anxiety (Russel & Shaw, 2009). As much as 80% of the students in two UK universities reported oral presentations to be a source of social anxiety that affected their learning and wellbeing (Russel & Topman, 2012), and 64% of undergraduate students in the US reported a fear of public speaking (Ferreira Marinho et al., 2017). In a survey among Finnish higher education students (Kunttu et al., 2016), approximately 30% reported public speaking to be a notable, stress-inducing problem. Furthermore, the findings of studies with Finnish university students show that social anxiety is most typically related to public speaking situations in academic seminars, speaking in a foreign language, and interacting with teachers and peers (Almonkari, 2007; Almonkari & Kunttu, 2012). Related to the fear of oral communication and public speaking, social anxiety has been found to affect students' ability to study, as well as various dimensions of wellbeing (e.g., Almonkari & Kunttu, 2012; Kunttu & Huttunen, 2009; Russell & Topham, 2012). If social anxiety is experienced as a problem, it tends to be connected to the individual's general state of health and mental health, including social wellbeing (Almonkari & Kunttu, 2012; Archbell & Coplan, 2022). Grieve et al. (2021) found that the fear of public speaking has several negative effects on students' overall experiences in higher education. For instance, it influences fundamental decision-making about participation (e.g., asking questions or participating), reduces confidence in attending university, and impacts progress (Grieve et al. 2021). Likewise, Byrne et al. (2012) pointed out that especially the fear of being perceived or judged negatively by others dominates the thinking of highly apprehensive students to such an extent that it inhibits their ability to complete communication tasks satisfactorily.

The audience is one of the most commonly reported sources of fear in public speaking. For example, Grieve et al. (2021) found that external fears (75%) linked to the audience were clearly more common than internal fears (25%) related to one's own feelings and performance. A fear of negative judgements from the audience, concerns about audience reactions, and the lack of interaction from the audience were found to be the most challenging for the students (Grieve et al., 2021; Tsang, 2020). Thus, the performer-audience relationship is of high importance when addressing individuals' experiences and perceptions of anxiety and developing pedagogical practices for alleviating it (e.g., Gerlander & Uitto, 2021).



Overwhelming anxiety and negative feelings have been shown to increase the avoidance of tasks (Pekrun, 2006; Pekrun et al., 2009). In addition, CA has been seen as a negative academic emotion that can destroy motivation, distract attention from the task, and make information processing superficial (Pekrun et al., 2009). CA has been found to be related to negative perceptions of oneself as a communicator and also to low self-perceived communication competence (Almonkari, 2007; Broeckelman-Post & Pyle, 2017; Fushino, 2010).

As a subset of social cognitive theory, self-efficacy refers to an individual's subjective belief in their ability to successfully achieve a given tasks, such as educational goals (Bandura, 1997; Elias & McDonal, 2007). Through learning, individuals develop their subjective beliefs of having certain competencies, their self-confidence, and a realistic understanding of their abilities (Bandura, 1986; Schunk & Pajares, 2005; Zimmerman, 2000). It has been found that individuals with low self-efficacy focus more on their weaknesses and highly exaggerate the possibility of negative performance in a given situation, which may increase emotional distress (Cavanagh et al., 2019) and lead them to withdraw in the face of new situations and tasks also in the future (Bandura, 1997; Nordin & Broeckelman-Post, 2019). However, individuals with strong self-efficacy are more capable of practicing their skills in demanding tasks and new situations (Bandura, 1997; Sharma, 2023), which contributes to their academic and professional development (Cavanagh et al., 2019).

In particular, oral communication self-efficacy has been investigated in some studies. For example, Cavanagh et al. (2019) found a positive correlation between oral communication self-efficacy and course performance. Hassall et al. (2013), in turn, explored a link between CA and oral communication self-efficacy and found that individuals with high levels of CA tend to exhibit low levels of communication self-efficacy. Similar results have been reported by Daly and Thompson (2017) as well as Tsang (2020). Hence, special communication courses for students with high OCA can be assumed to raise their ability to understand, accept, or manage their fear of communication, which support their self-efficacy (see also LeFebvre et al., 2020; Nordin & Broeckelman-Post, 2020).

## **Gaining Confidence for Public Speaking: A course description**

The course is aimed at students who experience OCA that affects their studies by causing them to delay taking or simply avoiding those courses that include oral presentations and group work. Students from various faculties and academic levels can enrol in the course via a specialised application process. The pedagogical intent of the application procedure is to form a peer group for sharing experiences in a safe space (e.g., D'Eon & Zhao, 2022; Niinivaara & Herkama, 2021; Uitto et al., 2016). A previous study by Cavanagh et al. (2019) suggests that students can affect their peers' communication self-efficacy through vicarious experience: When students see that others who are like themselves can perform oral communication tasks and succeed despite the challenges, they have an opportunity to learn from a positive role model. The three-credit course spans 32 contact teaching hours. It is organised into eight 4-hour sessions over eight weeks, supplemented by 49 hours of homework assignments.

The overall goal of the course is to enhance students' communication confidence by guiding them to enhance their communication competence by recognising their strengths as communicators, irrespective of their OCA. Generally, communication competence is defined as the judgement or interference of the appropriateness and effectiveness of communication behaviour in a given context. It is based on the function of cognitive (knowledge), behavioural

(skills), and affective (motivation, attitude) components encompassing metacognitive knowledge and processes that are requisite for planning, adjusting, guiding, and analysing communication (Horila, 2020; Laajalahti, 2014; Spitzberg, 2015). Communication competence develops in actual communication processes and practices, and as such, it is fundamentally situated, context dependent, and relational in nature (Spitzberg, 2013). Communication competence is used as a general pedagogical framework throughout the course, including course activities and assignments, such as encouraging students to reflect on their communication competence and its development.<sup>5</sup>

The ideas of acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT), as identified by Gallego (2021), significantly shape the instructional strategies of the course. Gallego (2021) focused on university students' PSA and found that two self-as-context interventions, distinction-self and hierarchical-self interventions<sup>6</sup>, based on ACT and combined with exposure, decreased self-reported PSA. When applying the ideas of these interventions in the course, the aim is to guide the students to acknowledge and confront their PSA rather than attempt to control it (Gallego, 2021).

Exposure has been found to be effective in reducing the level of PSA (Finn et al., 2009; Gallego, 2021; Lane et al., 2009). Consequently, the students are exposed to diverse communication exercises during the course. The degree of difficulty of the exercises is gradually increased, moving from brief presentations with a pair to more extensive individual presentations. In post-presentation discussions, the listeners are encouraged to ask and provide comments on the content. At the same time, various spontaneous exercises and group discussions are carried out. Oral communication skills training and knowledge about OCA is integrated with these exercises. Previous studies have shown that exposure combined with skills training that involves practice, reflection, and knowledge about the prevalence of anxiety, can mitigate OCA (LeFebvre et al., 2020; Okoro & Cardon, 2024). For example, the idea of two different cognitive orientations toward public speaking, performance and communication orientation, are presented (Bodie, 2010; Motley, 1991). Students are encouraged to focus on the audience and guided to approach presentations as interaction and knowledge building with the audience (Gerlander & Uitto, 2021).

Constructive feedback, both from peers and the teacher, plays an important role in building communication confidence and practising communication skills at the course. Issues such as the structure of the presentation and interaction with the audience are scrutinised. In addition, watching themselves on videos, combined with documented self-assessments and a reflective essay at the end of the course, is a crucial element of the learning process. Previous research suggests that video reflection guides the students to evaluate more accurately their speaking performances and scientific oral presentations, thereby enhancing their communication self-efficacy (LeFebvre et al., 2020; Oliveira et al., 2021). Reviewing their videotaped presentations also reassures students that despite their perceptions of nervousness and anxiety, they look calm, and the presentation proceeds in a logical manner (Cavanagh et al., 2019).

5. Kokkonen and Natri in this publication present the framework of multilingual and intercultural communication competence (MICC) and discuss its pedagogical applications in a higher education context.

6. In these exercises students are taught to recognise their thoughts, feelings, and physical reactions related to PSA both before and after the intervention. They are guided to detach from or gain distance from these internal experiences. Alternatively, they are encouraged to view themselves as the locus of inner thoughts and feelings, and evaluations, rather than being defined by them. (Gallego, 2021.)

## Methods

### Setting and participants

The study was conducted between the spring term of 2018 and autumn term of 2021 at the University of Jyväskylä. Over this period, nine Gaining Confidence for Public Speaking [Esiintymisvarmuuden kehittäminen] courses with a separate application process were arranged, and a total of 90 students participated. In the application, students described their reasons for applying for the course, their previous courses in communication, and experiences of OCA across various communication situations. The selection of participants for the course aimed at identifying those who would derive maximum benefit, considering both individual needs and group dynamics. All the courses with 10–16 participants were taught in Finnish by the authors of this paper and a teacher of speech communication who contributed data collection.

The students selected for the course were informed about the goals of the study and the procedures of data collection and analysis at the beginning of each course. A total of 38 students voluntarily signed a consent form and gave us the permission to use their applications and reflective essays for research purposes. Participants had an opportunity to decline their participation and to withdraw their permission for using their texts at any time.

All participants of the research had studied at least one year at the university, and they represented diverse disciplines, including mathematical and natural sciences, social and educational sciences, and the humanities. Most participants had no prior communication courses, while some had completed one or two before taking this course. On the basis of their descriptions in the applications, all participants shared a high level of OCA.

### Data and data analysis

The data consist of 38 reflective essays the students wrote at the end of the course. The students were instructed to write an informal reflective essay considering the nature of their OCA, the coping methods they employed and the changes in their communication confidence during the course, including various aspects of communication competence (e.g., knowledge, skills, attitude, and motivation). Furthermore, students were asked to articulate their future plans for sustaining and developing their communication confidence after the course. The reflective essay provided students an opportunity to write freely about their OCA and the changes they recognise at the end of the course.

We employed theory-guided content analysis (Tuomi & Sarajärvi, 2018) to analyse the data, and used specific theories to code and interpret the data. The analysis focused on describing the contents disclosed and evident in the reflective essays, rather than on interpreting latent meanings (Graneheim et al., 2017). The data were processed using the [ATLAS.ti 22](#) software. The authors analysed the data and developed a coding classification through joint discussions. Unclear coding cases were addressed in regularly conducted interpretation sessions.

The first phase of the analysis of the reflective essays was the coding of text passages that could be clearly interpreted as reflection on the course or on the change brought about by the course (i.e., what changed, what was learned). Descriptions of no change were also considered under the general category of change. The key point was that the passage dealt with change. In addition, passages where participants clearly mentioned that something had helped or supported their learning on the course were also coded.

In the second phase of the analysis, the coding that reflected the changes was re-examined and grouped into four thematic areas based on the theoretical framework of communication competence (Laajalahti, 2016; Horila, 2018; Spitzberg, 2015) and the five-level framework of analysis of PSA presented by Vadén (2006). The data coded as supporting learning were analysed and formed into three thematic areas. Overall, the data were coded into the following themes in terms of the research questions:

Changes in communication confidence (research question 1)

- Orientation towards anxiety, public speaking, or the audience
- Perceptions of oral communication self-efficacy
- Communication skills and strategies
- Participation in studies and everyday life

Factors that supported learning (research question 2)

- Peer group and peer relationships
- Feedback during the course
- Knowledge and understanding of anxiety

Furthermore, the distribution of passages among various themes and participants were analysed (see frequencies and percentages in Tables 1 and 2 in Appendix A). Changes in communication confidence were mentioned in 193 passages and factors supporting learning in 81 passages.

## Results

### Changes in communication confidence

#### *Orientation towards anxiety, public speaking, or the audience*

The majority of the changes (71 out of 193 passages) mentioned in the reflective essays related to orientation towards anxiety, public speaking, or audience. Notably, these factors were also identified widely among the participants: 32 out of 38 participants mentioned this theme (see Table 1 in Appendix A). Attitudes towards one's own anxiety were described as having become more neutral, more accepting, and even positive. In addition, in some of the descriptions, the role of anxiety in one's thinking had diminished.

What has definitely developed the most is my own attitude towards anxiety...I don't think of it as just a negative thing anymore and I can put it more into perspective. (RE 8; 1)<sup>7</sup>

Sometimes recognising or understanding a specific aspect of anxiety was unpleasant, such as for this participant:

I found the realisation that my anxiety is not just going to disappear a bit depressing at first. (RE 1; 2)

Many participants identified a change in their perception of the prevalence of anxiety and expressed that this had also led to a change in their perception of others' lack of anxiety:

7. Each quote is followed by an entry (RE No.; No.) where the first part refers to the certain reflective essay and the running number after it to the passage in the text. In Appendix B, all the quotes are presented in Finnish and in English. The translations into English are made by a professional translator.

In the English courses, everyone has seemed to be such energetic and good presenters that I thought others didn't feel anxious at all. However, the same thing happened in this course, that is, mostly the anxiety wasn't externally visible in anyone, so my understanding broadened, and I realised that many people must have felt anxious in the English courses too. (RE 10; 3)

Many reported loosening their own criteria for public speaking. For example the criteria for one's own performance had changed from the pursuit of perfection to aiming for being good enough, and students started questioning the model of the ideal performer:

I finally understand that a presentation doesn't have to be one hundred percent perfect to be good enough. (RE 18; 4)

The course helped me to abandon this myth of the "good presenter", which would not allow for anxiety. (RE 1; 5)

Several participants reflected on changes in their perception of the audience and their understanding of being in relationship with it. The change is manifested by a shift in focus from one's own anxiety to the audience. In many descriptions, the perspective on public speaking seemed to evolve from unidirectional thinking towards a more interactive engagement with the audience:

One of the key insights of the course has been that when performing, it is worth focusing on paying attention to the audience rather than on your own feelings of tension. Watching the performances of other students with performance anxiety, it became clear that the most important thing is not the how relaxed the performer is, but the way the audience is taken into account. (RE 21; 6)

What helps me the most in the presentation situation now is the understanding that public speaking is about interacting with the audience. (RE 17; 7)

The change in attitudes towards the audience was also reflected in how participants described being looked at by others, and how they themselves viewed and understood the audience. For instance, the audience was no longer seen as hostile, judgmental, or expecting failure:

I would say that the course had the biggest impact on my thought patterns related to public speaking. In the past, I saw public speaking situations as a kind of test, in which you had to perform perfectly in order not to be judged by the audience. And even then, they will judge you. Defeat is inevitable and my mind goes down the path towards disaster. Now I understand that the starting point is not inherently skewed. The audience does not inherently hate me and want me to fail. (RE 18; 8)

However, the participants' descriptions of their relationship with the audience also revealed a conflict: They grappled with becoming the centre of attention in an uncomfortable manner, while also expressing a desire for the audience's attention:

I'm not quite sure how I feel about the audience's gaze, because, on the one hand, I don't like being looked at very much, but, on the other hand, I do want the audience to follow my presentation. (RE 18; 9)

### ***Perceptions of oral communication self-efficacy***

More than a third of all changes (63 out of 193 passages) were related to participants' perceptions of themselves as communicators or performers or their expectations of their communication competence, and these were raised by a little more than half of the participants. Many of the descriptions conveyed a positive attitude towards themselves as a communicator or as a performer. As the participants in the following examples, many did not perceive themselves as negatively as previously, or their orientation became more compassionate and merciful:

During the course I have learned to accept myself as the presenter I am. (RE 33; 10)

I used to think I was "defective" because I was anxious about speaking in public. (RE 11; 11)

I have learned to be more merciful towards myself. (RE 15; 12)

The change in self-perception as a communicator was associated with the recognition that it is impossible to entirely eradicate anxiety and one must learn to live with it:

I can't eliminate my anxiety, but I can strive to make its existence meaningless and act in spite of it. (RE 1; 13)

A commonly mentioned change was to view anxiety as a separate entity from the self or as a smaller aspect in relation to the self. Additionally, several descriptions challenged the association between anxiety and being a good performer:

I have also learned that feelings, thoughts and labels are separate from myself and do not define me as a person, and despite them, I am ultimately the person who makes the decisions. So, I'm not just someone who has public speaking anxiety, but I can also be a good presenter. (RE 1; 14)

Another change was an increased self-awareness and the realisation that PSA is not necessarily caused by the act of presenting, but by deeper questions concerning the self, which the course provided concepts and opportunities to reflect on:

I took an even bigger, silent leap in self-awareness in my mind when it struck me that the main reason for my public speaking anxiety was my low self-esteem. I don't like being the centre of attention, because fundamentally I feel that I don't deserve it and that the public is not interested in what I have to say. As I recognised the problem, I became aware that I was not simply going to get rid of my public speaking anxiety. (RE 15; 15)

A more optimistic perceptions of one's communication abilities was reflected in a strengthened confidence in one's potential and willingness to develop in public speaking. For instance, this participant's description indicates a shift from a belief in the impossibility of development to a newfound sense of empowerment and ability:

I've always wanted to study and develop myself, but when it comes to public speaking, I've thought that it's something I can't develop – simply because I thought for a long time that I would never present again. Now I have a desire to develop, if not to become a great speaker, at least to become a better one. (RE 5; 16)

For some participants, changes involved an increase in self-efficacy thinking and improved confidence in their performance. For instance, some participants described themselves as having more courage to face demanding situations, such as presenting individually:

Before the course and even during it, I was absolutely sure that I would not be able to give a presentation of any kind, and I certainly wasn't going to. I had been avoiding public speaking for a long time and I think I made progress, at least in that I had the confidence to dare to go on stage and I was even able to give a solo presentation. It was a big step for me. (RE 3; 17)

### ***Communication skills and strategies***

Changes in presentation-related communication skills and strategies appeared in 43 passages by 27 different participants. Most of the changes described involved the development of one's strategy for preparing for and acting in presentation situations.

The descriptions highlighted how students identified more effective ways of preparing. Some participants described having realised the need to reduce preparation and avoid over-preparation, while others described the need to increase it:

I have learned to challenge myself in a totally new way. Towards the end of the course, I took more and more "risks", I didn't over-prepare for any presentation during the course. (RE 2; 18)

During the course, I have also learned to accept that even if an assignment that involves public speaking appears easy and effortless to many people, I have to spend time preparing for it...

In the past, I have avoided preparing for a presentation and I have downplayed its stressful impact, and I haven't even realised how much time and peace I need before and after a presentation. (RE 21; 19)

The participants also mentioned specific changes in their communication skills. These included unlocking the use of hands to support communication, having the courage to experiment with different postures and positions, speaking in one's own words, and reducing their reliance on notes:

In the pair presentation, I took a big step for myself and freed my hands in order to use hand motions to support what I was saying. (RE 17; 20)

I have particularly progressed in that, while I have my notes, I don't rely on them too much. Instead, I have the confidence to speak in my own words and engage with the audience. (RE 36; 21)

Some of the changes in the communication skills were related to the way in which a relationship could be established with the audience. Participants mentioned making eye contact, focusing on the task and audience instead of feelings of anxiety, and allowing oneself time to establish connection with the audience as in the following example:

In the past, I've tried to say what I've had to say as quickly and briefly as possible, even in normal social situations, to get people's attention away from me. However, I have realised that the audience is in no hurry to go anywhere when I have the floor and that I can put my ideas into words more clearly when I give myself time. (RE 12; 22)

In addition, many participants described learning new ways to relieve and manage anxiety, for example through breathing, relaxation, or mindfulness exercises. Some also provided a

more detailed explanation of how a new method worked, for instance, to help with memory retention and to focus on the presentation rather than anticipating the opinion of the audience, such as the participant below:

I have found that picturing what I am going to present in my head, like a film, makes it easier for me to remember what I am going to say and focus on it, instead of thinking too much about what the audience thinks about me and what I am presenting. (RE 28; 23)

### ***Participation***

About half of the participants mentioned changes in their participation during the course (see Table 1 in Appendix A). In the academic context, these changes included no longer trying to avoid courses that required presenting. In particular, students tended to avoid language courses, which they were encouraged to attend, as shown in the following example:

Throughout my university studies, I've avoided the compulsory Swedish course because it involves giving a presentation in Swedish, and the idea has really disturbed me. However, I am currently in the process of taking the course and it is my turn to give a presentation in a few weeks' time. I don't think I would have been able to attend the Swedish course if it hadn't been for this course on developing confidence. Even though I know that the presentation is coming up, I feel very calm and peaceful about it. (RE 29; 24)

The change in participation was also reflected in more active engagement in academic communication situations. In the following example, the student describes a new kind of agency. In a perceived challenging public situation, the student had demonstrated the courage not only to initiate action but also to publicly express their opinion, which differed from that of the teacher:

Nowadays, I also have more confidence to enter into these situations. A good example of this happened in a lecture this week, where I had the courage to open my mouth and share my view, which was in conflict with the view presented by the lecturer. My heart rate hardly increased at all and I also received positive feedback from the lecturer for a well-argued and presented view. (RE 38; 25)

In addition to communication situations related to studies, more active participation manifested in the willingness to take the initiative in various everyday situations (e.g., starting a conversation in the canteen) or taking part in recreational activities, which were now seen as opportunities to develop confidence in public speaking and even alleviate anxiety in social situations more generally:

The course also inspired me to do more physical activity to relieve anxiety, which I intend to utilise with my fear of social situations. For the past month, I have increased the amount of exercise I do and have found that it has had a positive impact on my anxiety. I started team sports, which I had long dreaded, where first of all I have to deal with larger crowds and also have to "perform", as people's attention is focused on me when I have the ball. (RE 31; 26)

### **Factors that supported learning**

The factors that the participants described as having contributed to learning revolved around three main themes: peer group and peer relationships, feedback during the course,



and knowledge and understanding of anxiety (see frequencies and percentages in Table 2 in Appendix A).

### ***Peer groups and peer relationships***

Peer group and peer relationships were the most common factors that supported learning, highlighted in more than half of the assignments. Peers provided a meaningful learning environment, offering a safe and accepting space for sharing experiences. The descriptions included recurring mentions of the experience of a genuine sense of belonging to a group instead of the familiar feeling of being alone, and the possibility of being oneself in the group. The importance of the group manifested itself in the opportunity to talk about anxiety without shame and increased the sense of belonging.

My own development was very much supported by our wonderful group, where it was really easy to be confident and to be myself. Through peer support, I discovered that being anxious doesn't actually matter, and everyone in the group delivered really good presentations. (RE 2; 27)

As the example illustrates, the experience of belonging to a peer group also helped to change one's attitude towards one's own anxiety. In addition, observing the peers' presentations also gave participants the opportunity to question their beliefs about the link between the visibility of anxiety and the quality of the presentation. The group setup also enabled sharing experiences related to anxiety and identifying similarities, such as being left alone to deal with anxiety:

Like many others, I have previously experienced in life how the individual is often left to deal with their anxiety on their own...It was great to work on the issues in a group, because it meant that you could finally truly experience that you were not alone. (RE 14; 28)

### ***Feedback during the course***

In the descriptions addressing feedback, the significance of reviewing the recorded presentations was emphasised. Although it was also associated with notions of difficulty and dislike, it was considered to be the key factor that contributed to learning on the course:

Watching a video of yourself is probably the most awful thing I know, and at no point did I think that I was going to watch the recordings. However, during the last class of the course, one of the students and the teacher talked me into it... And I'm glad I did. Watching the videos was perhaps the best and most helpful thing about the whole course...I was baffled by the fact that the presentation looked almost natural from the outside. (RE 13; 29)

Combined with peer feedback the video reflection provided an opportunity to challenge preconceptions about oneself as a communicator and was described as a tangible record of a successful presentation. In addition, video reflection helped to identify personal strengths and areas for improvement and was described as providing a more constructive way of looking at oneself also in other social situations:

During the course, I found the videotaped presentations especially instructive, as they allowed me to observe myself as a presenter through the eyes of an outsider. Now I know exactly how I look and sound when I present, what my strengths are and what I could develop in the future... Watching the videos has also helped me with other fears related to social situations. (RE 38; 30)

### ***The knowledge and understanding of anxiety***

When looking at one's own anxiety, the importance of research results as well as the experiences of other students were mentioned as factors that contributed to learning. Although the increase in knowledge and understanding can also be seen as a change in itself, a deeper and research-based knowledge was described as having provided concepts and perspectives for dealing with anxiety. Getting information on anxiety as phenomenon was also described as a valuable tool for coping in itself:

The research data used in the teaching and slides on the course have provided me with a wealth of interesting information and in some ways helped me to rethink the anxiety involved in presentation and interaction situations when viewed from a scientific perspective as research and not just as a silenced marginal problem. (RE 20; 31)

Research also gave a completely new perspective on anxiety, highlighting its positive dimensions and thus helping to understand the multifaceted nature of anxiety.

I remember going through research results on students' attitudes to public speaking situations during the course. That was honestly the first time I realised that there are people who actually enjoy public speaking. (RE 23; 32)

In addition to the research results, the experiential knowledge of participants shared by them in the class discussions was described as important in understanding anxiety. Sharing experiences also contributed to a feeling of belonging, not being the only one who is anxious, as illustrated in the following example:

I had an eye-opening moment in the first session, when we went through the symptoms experienced by the course participants. It was then that I better understood that anxiety has a variety of symptoms, and that I am certainly not the only one who experiences it. (RE 8; 33)

## **Discussion**

The purpose of this qualitative study was to address the effectiveness of the course *Gaining Confidence for Public Speaking* by analysing changes in communication confidence and the factors that supported learning. The analysis was based on data collected through reflective essays written by students at the end of the course.

### **The changes in communication confidence**

The changes in communication confidence described by the students centred around four themes: (1) orientation towards anxiety, public speaking, or the audience; (2) perceptions of oral communication self-efficacy; (3) communication skills and strategies; and (4) participation in communication situations in studies and in everyday life.

Almost all participants described changes in their orientation towards anxiety, public speaking, or the audience. By the end of the course, attitudes towards anxiety had become more "normal" in the sense that it was seen as a related phenomenon, which can be interpreted in various ways. Furthermore, there emerged an understanding that the thoughts and feelings associated with OCA could be considered as mere thoughts and feelings, and that they do

not define oneself as a performer or speaker, but the ideals attached to public speaking and performer were questioned. These findings are supported by Gallego's (2021) study on the effects of ACT interventions on PSA, where she found that the interventions focusing on detaching oneself from one's thoughts (distinction-self intervention) and viewing oneself as the place for inner thoughts and feelings (hierarchical-self intervention) reduced self-assessed PSA. Consequently, these findings suggest that the exercises based on the ideas of ACT have been effective in bringing about attitudinal changes.

The fear of the audience among students with PSA has been widely reported in previous research (e.g., Almonkari, 2007; Grieve et al. 2021; LeFebvre et al. 2018; Tsang, 2020). In this study, the changes in the relationship with the audience highlighted a shift from seeing the audience as hostile or critical to perceiving them as more neutral or even positive, and as a group with which one could also communicate and interact. This finding can be interpreted as a change from performance orientation towards communication orientation (Bodie, 2010; Motley, 1991), including more contact-seeking with the audience instead of fearing it or focusing one's feelings of anxiety. According to Almonkari (2007), building an interaction with the audience may help overcome negative perceptions of the audience. Therefore, external and internal processes no longer define the self as a performer as much, but it is one's agency as a presenter that is essential (e.g., Gallego, 2021; Grieve et al., 2021; Twohig, 2012).

The present study offers evidence that training for students experiencing OCA needs to consider the audience, building a relationship with it and acknowledging the responsibility of the audience. For example, Niinivaara and Herkama (2021) point out that anxiety and its alleviation should not only be examined by focusing on the symptoms of anxiety and the situations that cause it, but also by examining the state of being in a relationship, the relationship between oneself and others, or being in the world. Indeed, the importance of examining audience responsibility in the training of public speaking skills has been highlighted in the pedagogical literature (see, e.g., Gerlander & Uitto, 2021).

Regarding communication self-efficacy, the results of the study reflected a more realistic and, in some cases, more positive perception of oneself as a communicator. The results also showed an increase in confidence in one's communication skills and potential to develop communication competence in general. Previous research suggests that high levels of CA are associated with low levels of communication self-efficacy (Hassall et al., 2013) and reinforcing communicative self-efficacy alleviates or changes the nature of PSA (LeFebvre et al., 2020). In their quantitative study, Nordin and Broeckelman-Post (2020) discovered a connection between PSA, communicative competence, and communicative self-efficacy. They emphasised the importance of addressing students' perceptions of their own communication competence, and increasing their confidence in their competence, in order to reduce students' PSA. Confidence in one's ability to cope also increases the motivation to practice, which in turn develops skills and increases self-efficacy (Sternberg & Williams, 2012).

The results of this study highlight the contradictory changes in preparation strategies: some students found the reduction of the preparation more effective, while others recognised a need to increase it. Generally, preparation is perceived as a tool for alleviating PSA (Almonkari, 2007). Preparation can be seen also as a helpful safety behaviour for individuals who suffer from social anxiety, protecting them against supposed negative evaluation (Pörhölä et al., 2019). Over-preparation may also be linked to the expectations of high performance and striving for perfection that are found to be typical among students who suffer from PSA (Almonkari, 2007; Grieve et al., 2021; Oliveira et al., 2021). However, the impact of preparation on relieving

anxiety is unclear. There is evidence that preparation does not necessarily reduce the level of PSA of individuals who experience high anxiety (Byrne et al., 2012; Grieve et al., 2021). Tsang (2020) suggests that a variety of audience-related factors may affect the performer, potentially rendering the preparation unproductive. Pedagogically, it is essential to develop skills to assess what kind of preparation is appropriate for each task (Vaden, 2006) and for each individual and to adjust to the performance situation (Tsang, 2020).

The most significant change in study-related or academic participation among the students was the shift away from avoiding courses that involve performance or group work and discussion. This finding is noteworthy because research suggests that students who do not participate due to anxiety have a negative university experience (Archbell & Coplan, 2022; Grieve et al., 2021), while active participation leads to a greater interest in and attachment to university studies (Groccia, 2018). In addition, it is important to note that nonparticipation can lead to exclusion from knowledge construction, which can potentially hinder developing and succeeding with expertise (Archbell & Coplan, 2022). Studies have found negative associations between nonparticipation and the progress of studies and the development of expertise (Almonkari & Kunttu, 2012; Grieve et al., 2021; Okoro & Cardon, 2024).

## Factors that supported learning

Based on the findings, the peer group and video reflections had a significant supportive impact on learning in the course. The group was described as helping to adopt of different ways of thinking and to promote a more neutral approach to anxiety. In addition, the peer group allowed many participants to gain an important insight for learning when faced with contradictions: Through vicarious experience (e.g., Cavanagh, 2019) they could be convinced that anxiety is not visible, even if they know that other person is experiencing it, and it does not affect the success of their performance. Thus, the peer group functioned as a tool for exploring the relationship between visibility and one's own experience of anxiety. The peer group also enabled the sharing of experiences of anxiety and the construction of meanings that accept anxiety and its manifestations, thus offering an empowering experience as opposed to being left alone to deal with anxiety in the past. For instance, Niinivaara and Herkama (2021) highlight the pedagogical importance of a peer group by arguing that anxiety, rather than being approached as simply acquiring skills or breaking out of harmful behavioural patterns, should be studied as a shared experience, identifying and acknowledging hidden meanings in interaction, and questioning ideals of public speaking. In line with them, Archbell and Coplan (2022) emphasise the importance of communication with peers for socially anxious individuals. Their research revealed a negative correlation between social anxiety and students' feeling of connectedness, with a notable association between a feeling of connectedness and communication with peers. Paying attention to communication within a peer group can, therefore, support a socially anxious student's connectedness to others, which in turn, is known to have a positive effect on socioemotional wellbeing (Archbell & Coplan, 2022; Van Ryzin et al., 2009). In relation to the feeling of connectedness, many participants found that they formed, with their peers, a group where there was not the feeling of being an outsider that they were used to. The group seemed to provide a space and setting for participation, a sense of belonging, and the freedom to be themselves, even to fail. Niinivaara and Herkama (2021) describe the change in the experience of anxiety as a change in the experience of being an outsider.

The influence of a peer group is, however, also known to be detrimental to learning, particularly for those with severe PSA. The fear of negative peer evaluation and of having these evaluations brought up can even lead to a fear of humiliation (Byrne et al. 2012). Peer feedback, for this reason, should be approached as an interactive, interpersonal, and relational phenomenon that requires pedagogical guidance to ensure its effectiveness in fostering supportive learning environment. A supportive and collaborative atmosphere in a group has been found to reduce perceived PSA (Broeckelman-Post & Pyle, 2017).

Interestingly, the teacher's role as an active leader in the group and the feedback from the teacher were only minimally mentioned in the students' descriptions. This could be explained by the students' experience of the teacher's role in the group as that of a facilitator who plans pedagogical practices beforehand and is considered more a member of the group than a traditional authority (for more about the role of the teacher as a facilitator, see D'Eon & Zhao, 2022; Uitto et al., 2016).

In the beginning, many participants perceived the idea of video reflection uncomfortable, but it proved to be the most meaningful learning experience for many. Video reflection served a supportive function in two ways. Firstly, it provided the participants with an outsider perspective on their own actions and enabled them to identify elements in their presentation that they had not previously been aware of (see, e.g., Oliveira, 2021). Video reflection, combined with reflective essays and constructive feedback from peers and the teacher can help to challenge the familiar chain of thought linking anxiety and success. Secondly, observing one's own actions can reveal the way one perceives oneself, whether it is constructive, accepting or judgmental. Video reflection can mitigate the most self-critical opinions about weaknesses in one's presentations (Oliveira et al., 2021). Reflection on one's own actions and those of peers was therefore seen as supporting self-efficacy (Cavanagh et al., 2019; LeFebvre et al., 2020).

## Limitations and further research

The present study has some limitations. First, the results should be interpreted within a local context: They reflect the experienced impacts of a specific course within one university. In addition, the study period from spring 2020 to autumn 2021 coincided with the COVID-19 pandemic, so its restrictions on face-to-face teaching affected the number of applications for the course. Second, the changes in communication confidence were based on a qualitative analysis of students' reflective essays. Future research could combine quantitative methods (e.g., PRCA-24 scales) with different qualitative methods, such as interviews with participants or observations of video-recorded exercises. A mixed methods research design (Creswell & Plano, 2011) would allow for a more comprehensive examination of the effectiveness of the course. However, by using a qualitative approach, it is possible to examine the meanings and interpretations given to OCA and to better understand the various contextual and relational elements affecting it. In the future, a more holistic approach would provide new insights for research on anxiety (e.g., Niinivaara & Herkama, 2021). The findings of this study focused on changes in communication confidence reported at the end of the course, thus they provide no information on longer-term effects. Third, using a reflective essay as a learning assignment may have influenced the data. The reflective essay guided the students to consider changes in their communication confidence (as well factors that supported their learning) from a certain point of view, but students may also have attempted to make a good impression on

the teachers evaluating the course (e.g., Paulhus & Reid, 1991) by reporting more changes than they actually experienced. However, the reflective essays were not numerically assessed, which may have reduced the students' tendency to exaggerate changes. Furthermore, the essay encouraged students to express themselves freely and provide specific information about the changes relating to their oral communication apprehension.

There are several possibilities for further research on this topic. Expanding the study design to include a follow-up study a few months after the course concludes would offer insights into the longer-term effectiveness of the course, such as impacts on students' study progress and on their communication confidence in fear-inducing communication situations. Furthermore, there is a need for additional research to explore how specific pedagogical practices affect OCA and students' self-efficacy (see, e.g., LeFebvre et al., 2020). Additionally, given the growing number of students participating in multilingual and multicultural contexts, further research is needed on the occurrence and students' experiences of OCA and language anxiety (see, e.g., Lou & Noels, 2020) as well as on strategies to enhance communication confidence in such environments.

Although the findings of this study focus on university students and the higher education context, they could also be applied to other educational contexts, such as primary, secondary, and adult education, to develop pedagogies that support individuals who experience anxiety in communication situations. Rather than simply reducing the manifestations of OCA in communication courses, it is crucial to provide individuals with support to enhance their communication competence and encourage the development of their communication confidence (e.g., Nordin & Broeckelman-Post, 2019) in a supportive pedagogical environment. Therefore, those pedagogical practices that should be given particular attention are those that increase students' communication confidence and self-efficacy, and encourage them to take the floor, participate and contribute to collective knowledge building through discussions.

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# Appendices

## Appendix A

Table 1 Themes describing changes in communication confidence in the reflective essays

Themes of the passages describing change	Distribution of 193 passages by the themes		Distribution of the themes among 38 reflective essays	
	Count of passages	Percentage of passages	Occurrence in different essays*	Percentage of occurrence**
Orientation towards anxiety, public speaking, or the audience	71	37%	32	84%
Perceptions of oral communication self-efficacy	63	32%	21	55%
Communication skills and strategies	43	22%	27	71%
Participation in studies and everyday life	17	9%	16	42%

\*The number of reflective essays in which the theme is mentioned

\*\* The percentage of occurrence relative to the number of reflexive essays.

Table 2 Identified factors supporting learning

Factors that supported learning	Distribution of 81 passages by the factor		Distribution of the factors among 38 reflective essays	
	Count of passages	Percentage of passages	Occurrence in different essays*	Percentage of occurrence**
Peer group and peer relationships	32	40%	23	60%
Feedback during the course	26	32%	20	53%
Knowledge and understanding of anxiety	23	28%	17	45%

\*The number of reflective essays in which the theme is mentioned

\*\* The percentage of occurrence relative to the number of reflexive essays.

## Appendix B

The quotes in Finnish, the original language of the reflective essays, and translations into English made by professional translator.

Number of the quote	Quotes in Finnish	Quotes in English
1	"Eniten ehdottomasti on kehittynyt oma asennoituminen jännitykseen [...]. En ajattele sitä enää pelkästään negatiivisena asiana ja sen osaa suhteuttaa paremmin oikeisiin mittasuhteisiin." (RE 8)	What has definitely developed the most is my own attitude towards anxiety...I don't think of it as just a negative thing anymore and I can put it more into perspective. (RE 8)
2	"Koin alkuun vähän masentavanakin oivalluksen siitä, ettei jännitys noin vain ole katoamassa." (RE 1)	I found the realisation that my anxiety is not just going to disappear a bit depressing at first. (RE 1)
3	"Englannin kursseilla kaikki ovat vaikuttaneet niin reippailta ja hyviltä esiintyjiltä, että kuvittelin, etteivät muut jännitä ollenkaan. Tällä esiintymiskurssilla tapahtui kuitenkin ihan sama asia eli jännitys ei pääasiassa näkynyt kenestäkään päällekkäin, joten ymmärryksen laajeni ja oivalsin, että myös englannin kursseilla monet varmasti jännittävät." (RE 10)	In the English courses, everyone has seemed to be such energetic and good presenters that I thought others didn't feel anxious at all. However, the same thing happened in this presentation course, that is, mostly the anxiety wasn't externally visible in anyone, so my understanding broadened and I realised that many people must have felt anxious in the English courses too. (RE 10)
4	"Olen viimeinkin ymmärtänyt, että esityksen ei tarvitse mennä sataprosenttisen täydelliseksi ollakseen riittävän hyvä." (RE 18)	I finally understand that a presentation doesn't have to be one hundred percent perfect to be good enough. (RE 18)
5	"Kurssi osaltaan helpotti luopumaan tällaisesta "hyvän esiintyjän myytistä", johon jännittäminen ei mahtuisi." (RE 1)	The course helped me to abandon this myth of the "good presenter", which would not allow for anxiety. (RE 1)
6	"Yksi kurssin keskeisimmistä oivalluksista on ollut se, että esiintyessä kannattaa keskittyä omien jännityksestä johtuvien tuntemusten sijaan yleisön huomioimiseen. Muiden esiintymisjännityksestä kärsivien opiskelijoiden esityksiä seurattaessa huomasi selvästi, että oleellista ei ole esiintyjän rentous, vaan se, miten yleisö on otettu huomioon." (RE 21)	One of the key insights of the course has been that when performing, it is worth focusing on paying attention to the audience rather than on your own feelings of tension. Watching the performances of other students with performance anxiety, it became clear that the most important thing is not how relaxed the performer is, but the way the audience is taken into account. (RE 21)
7	"Eniten itse esiintymistilanteessa minua auttaa nyt ymmärrys siitä, että esiintyminen on vuorovaikutusta yleisön kanssa." (RE 17)	What helps me the most in the presentation situation now is the understanding that public speaking is about interacting with the audience. (RE 17)

Number of the quote	Quotes in Finnish	Quotes in English
8	<p>"Sanoisin kurssin tehneen suurimman vaikutuksen esiintymiseen liittyviin ajatusmalleihini. Aiemmin näin esiintymistilanteet eräänlaisina koetilaisuuksina, joista piti suoriutua täydellisesti jottei yleisö tuomitse. Ja silloinkin se tuomitsee. Tappio on vääjäämätön ja mieleni lähtee katastrofijattelun polulle. Nyt ymmärrän, että lähtötilanne ei ole luonnostaan vinoutunut. Yleisö ei lähtökohtaisesti vihaa minua ja halua, että epäonnistun." (RE 18)</p>	<p>I would say that the course had the biggest impact on my thought patterns related to public speaking. In the past, I saw public speaking situations as a kind of test, which you had to perform perfectly in order not to be judged by the audience. And even then, they will judge you. Defeat is inevitable and my mind goes down the path towards a disaster. Now I understand that the starting point is not inherently skewed. The audience does not inherently hate me and want me to fail. (RE 18)</p>
9	<p>"En ole ihan varma miten itse koen yleisön katseen, sillä yhtäältä en pidä kovinkaan paljoa siitä, kun minua katsotaan, mutta toisaalta haluan kyllä että yleisö seuraisi esitystäni." (RE 18)</p>	<p>I'm not quite sure how I feel about the audience's gaze, because, on the one hand, I don't like being looked at very much, but, on the other hand, I do want the audience to follow my presentation. (RE 18)</p>
10	<p>"Olen oppinut kurssin aikana hyväksymään itseni sellaisena esiintyjänä kuin olen" (RE 33)</p>	<p>During the course I have learned to accept myself as the presenter I am. (RE 33)</p>
11	<p>"Olen luullut, että olen "viallinen", koska esiintymiset jännittävät minua." (RE 11)</p>	<p>I used to think I was "defective" because I was anxious about speaking in public. (RE 11)</p>
12	<p>"Olenkin oppinut olemaan armollisempi itseäni kohtaan." (RE 15)</p>	<p>I have learned to be more merciful towards myself. (RE 15)</p>
13	<p>"En voi poistaa jännittämistäni, mutta voin tavoitella sen olemassaolon merkityksettömyyttä ja toimimista siitä huolimatta." (RE 1)</p>	<p>I can't eliminate my anxiety, but I can strive to make its existence meaningless and act in spite of it. (RE 1)</p>
14	<p>"Olen oppinut myös, että tunteet, ajatukset ja leimat ovat itsestäni erillisiä asioita eivätkä määritä minua ihmisenä ja niistä huolimatta olen lopulta itse se ihminen, joka tekee päätökset. En siis ole vain esiintymisjännittäjä, vaan voin olla myös hyvä esiintyjä" (RE 1)</p>	<p>I have also learned that feelings, thoughts and labels are separate from myself and do not define me as a person, and despite them, I am ultimately the person who makes the decisions. So, I'm not just someone who has public speaking anxiety, but I can also be a good presenter. (RE 1)</p>
15	<p>"Otin itsetuntemuksessa vielä isomman, hiljaisen harppauksen mielessäni, kun tietoisuuteeni iski, että suurin syy esiintymisjännitykseeni on huono itsetunto. En pidä huomion keskipisteenä olemisesta, koska pohjimmitaan koen, etten ansaitse sitä ja ettei yleisöä kiinnosta sanottavani. Samalla kun tunnistin ongelman, tiedostin että en ole niin vain pääsemässä esiintymisjännittämisestä eroon." (RE 15)</p>	<p>I took an even bigger, silent leap in self-awareness in my mind when it struck me that the main reason for my public speaking anxiety was my low self-esteem. I don't like being the centre of attention, because fundamentally I feel that I don't deserve it and that the public is not interested in what I have to say. As I recognised the problem, I became aware that I was not simply going to get rid of my public speaking anxiety. (RE 15)</p>



Number of the quote	Quotes in Finnish	Quotes in English
16	"Olen aina halunnut opiskella ja kehittää itseäni, mutta esiintymisen suhteen olen ajatellut, etten siinä voi kehittyä – yksinkertaisesti jo siitäkin syystä, että kuvittelin kauan, etten koskaan enää tule esiintymään. Nyt minulle on tullut halu kehittyä, jos ei nyt aivan loistavaksi, niin ainakin paremmaksi puhujaksi." (RE 5)	I've always wanted to study and develop myself, but when it comes to public speaking, I've thought that it's something I can't develop – simply because I thought for a long time that I would never present again. Now I have a desire to develop, if not to become a great speaker, at least to become a better one. (RE 5)
17	"Ennen kurssia ja kurssin ajanakin vielä olin ihan varma, etten pysty pitämään minkäänlaista esitystä enkä varmasti aio pitääkään. Olin pitkään vältellyt kaikkia esiintymisiä ja kehityin mielestäni ainakin siinä, että olen uskaltanut mennä esiintymään ja pystyin pitämään jopa yksin esityksen. Se oli minulle iso askel." (RE 3)	Before the course and even during it, I was absolutely sure that I would not be able to give a presentation of any kind, and I certainly wasn't going to. I had been avoiding public speaking for a long time and I think I made progress, at least in that I had the confidence to dare to go on stage and I was even able to give a solo presentation. It was a big step for me. (RE 3)
18	"Opin haastamaan itseäni aivan uudella tavalla. Kurssin loppua kohden otin koko ajan enemmän "riskejä", en ylivalmistautunut mihinkään kurssin esitykseen" (RE 2)	I have learned to challenge myself in a totally new way. Towards the end of the course, I took more and more "risks", I didn't over-prepare for any presentation during the course. (RE 2)
19	"Olen kurssin aikana oppinut myös hyväksymään sen, että vaikka jokin esiintymistä sisältävä tehtävä vaikuttaa helpolta ja kevyeltä monien mielestä, minun on käytettävä aikaa valmistautumiseen. [...] Aikaisemmin olen vältellyt esiintymiseen valmistautumista ja vähätellyt sen kuormittavaa vaikutusta, enkä ole edes tiedostanut sitä, miten paljon tarvitsen aikaa ja rauhaa ennen esiintymistä ja sen jälkeen." (RE 21)	During the course, I have also learned to accept that even if an assignment that involves public speaking appears easy and effortless to many people, I have to spend time preparing for it... In the past, I have avoided preparing for a presentation and I have downplayed its stressful impact, and I haven't even realised how much time and peace I need before and after a presentation. (RE 21)
20	"Parin kanssa tehdyssä esityksessä otin itselleni suuren askeleen ja vapautin käteni käyttäkseni käsien liikkeitä sanomani tueksi." (RE 17)	In the pair presentation, I took a big step for myself and freed my hands in order to use hand motions to support what I was saying. (RE 17)
21	"Olen kehittynyt erityisesti siinä, että vaikka minulla on muistiinpanot, en tukeudu niihin paljoakaan vaan uskallan puhua omin sanoin ja ottaa kontaktia yleisöön." (RE 36)	I have particularly progressed in that, while I have my notes, I don't rely on them too much. Instead, I have the confidence to speak in my own words and engage with the audience. (RE 36)
22	"Aiemmin olen ihan normaaleissa sosiaalisissa tilanteissakin pyrkinyt sanomaan asiani mahdollisimman nopeasti ja lyhyesti, jotta saisin muiden huomion pois itsestäni. Olen kuitenkin ymmärtänyt, että kuulijoilla ei ole mihinkään kiire, kun minulla on puheenvuoro ja toisaalta pystyn pukemaan ajatukseni selkeämmin sanoiksi, kun annan itselleni aikaa." (RE 12)	In the past, I've tried to say what I've had to say as quickly and briefly as possible, even in normal social situations, to get people's attention away from me. However, I have realised that the audience is in no hurry to go anywhere when I have the floor and that I can put my ideas into words more clearly when I give myself time. (RE 12)

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23	“Olen huomannut, että esittämäni asian kuvittelemisen päässäni ikään kuin filminä, helpottaa minua muistamaan sanottavani ja keskittymään siihen sen sijaan, että mietitsin liikaa, että mitä kuulijat ajattelevat minusta ja esittämästäni asiasta.” (RE 28)	I have found that picturing what I am going to present in my head, like a film, makes it easier for me to remember what I am going to say and focus on it, instead of thinking too much about what the audience thinks about me and what I am presenting. (RE 28)
24	“Koko yliopisto-opintojeni ajan olen välttellyt pakollista ruotsin kurssia, koska siellä pitää pitää esitys ruotsiksi ja ajatus on ahdistanut minua todella paljon. Nyt olen kuitenkin parasta aikaa suorittamassa kyseistä kurssia ja minun vuoro pitää esitys on muutaman viikon päästä. En usko, että ilman tätä esiintymisvarmuuden kehittämiskurssia olisin vieläkään kyennyt osallistumaan ruotsin kurssille. Vaikka tiedän, että esitelmä lähestyy, suhtaudun siihen hyvin rauhallisesti ja levollisin mielin.” (RE 29)	Throughout my university studies, I've avoided the compulsory Swedish course because it involves giving a presentation in Swedish, and the idea has really disturbed me. However, I am currently in the process of taking the course and it is my turn to give a presentation in a few weeks' time. I don't think I would have been able to attend the Swedish course if it hadn't been for this course on developing confidence. Even though I know that the presentation is coming up, I feel very calm and peaceful about it. (RE 29)
25	“Nykyään uskallan myös hanakammin hakeutua näihin tilanteisiin. Hyvä esimerkinä oli tällä viikolla luennolla, jossa uskaltauduin avaamaan suuni ja kertomaan oman näkemykseni, joka oli ristiriidassa luennoitsijan esittämän näkemyksen kanssa. Sydämeni tahti ei edes kiihtynyt juuri ollenkaan ja sain myös luennoitsijalta positiivista palautetta hyvin argumentoidusta ja esitetystä näkemyksestä.” (RE 38)	Nowadays, I also have more confidence to enter into these situations. A good example of this happened in a lecture this week, where I had the courage to open my mouth and share my view, which was in conflict with the view presented by the lecturer. My heart rate hardly increased at all and I also received positive feedback from the lecturer for a well- argued and presented view. (RE 38)
26	“Kurssi innosti myös lisäämään liikuntaa jännityksen helpottamiseksi, jota aioin hyödyntää myös tuon sosiaalisten tilanteiden pelkoni kanssa. Olenkin tässä kuukauden aikana lisännyt liikkumistani ja todennut positiivisen vaikuttamisen jännitykseeni. Aloitin kauan kammoksumani joukkue liikunnan, jossa ensinnäkin joudun olemaan isompien ihmismassojen kanssa tekemisissä ja joudun myös “esiintymistilanteisiin”, ihmisten katseiden keskittyessä minuun pallon tullessa kohdalleni” (RE 31)	The course also inspired me to do more physical activity to relieve anxiety, which I intend to utilise with my fear of social situations. For the past month, I have increased the amount of exercise I do and have found that it has had a positive impact on my anxiety. I started team sports, which I had long dreaded, where first of all I have to deal with larger crowds and also have to “perform”, as people's attention is focused on me when I am on the ball. (RE 31)
27	“Omaa kehitystäni tuki todella paljon ihana ryhmämme, jossa oli todella helppoa uskaltaa, ja olla oma itsensä. Vertaistuen kautta huomasin, että jännittäminen ei oikeasti haittaa mitään, ja kaikki ryhmäläiset pitivät todella hyviä esityksiä.” (RE 2)	My own development was very much supported by our wonderful group, where it was really easy to be confident and to be myself. Through peer support, I discovered that being anxious doesn't actually matter, and everyone in the group delivered really good presentations. (RE 2)

Number of the quote	Quotes in Finnish	Quotes in English
28	"Olen aiemmin kokenut monien muiden tavoin elämässä sitä, kuinka yksilö jätetään usein käsittelemään jännitystään yksin. [...] Ryhmässä oli hienoa käsitellä asioita, sillä silloin sai vihdoin oikeasti kokea sen, ettei ole asian kanssa yksin." (RE 14)	Like many others, I have previously experienced in life how the individual is often left to deal with their anxiety on their own...It was great to work on the issues in a group, because it meant that you could finally truly experience that you were not alone. (RE 14)
29	"Itsensä katsominen videolta on ehkä kamalinta mitä tiedän, enkä missään vaiheessa ajatellut katsovani tallenteita. Viimeisellä kurssin tunnilla kuitenkin yksi opiskelija ja opettaja kuitenkin puhuivat minut ympäri [...] Ja onneksi katsoin. Videoiden katsominen oli ehkä paras ja eniten auttava asia koko kurssissa [...] Hämmennyin siitä, että esiintyminen näytti ulospäin melkein jopa luonnolliselta." (RE 13)	Watching a video of yourself is probably the most awful thing I know, and at no point did I think that I was going to watch the recordings. However, during the last class of the course, one of the students and the teacher talked me into it... And I'm glad I did. Watching the videos was perhaps the best and most helpful thing about the whole course...I was baffled by the fact that the presentation looked almost natural from the outside. (RE 13)
30	"Kurssin aikana koin erityisesti videoidut esitykset kehittäviksi, sillä niiden avulla pystyin tarkkailemaan itseäni esiintyjänä ikään kuin ulkopuolisen silmin. Nyt tiedän tasan tarkalleen, miltä näytän ja kuulostan esiintyessäni, mitkä ovat vahvuuksiani ja mitä voisin kehittää jatkossa[...] Videoiden näkeminen on auttanut minua myös muissa sosiaalisiiin tilanteisiin liittyvissä peloissa." (RE 38)	During the course, I found the videotaped presentations especially instructive, as they allowed me to observe myself as a presenter through the eyes of an outsider. Now I know exactly how I look and sound when I present, what my strengths are and what I could develop in the future...Watching the videos has also helped me with other fears related to social situations. (RE 38)
31	"Kurssilla opetuksessa ja dioilla hyödynnetty tutkimus on tuonut itselleni runsaasti mielenkiintoista tietoa ja jollain tapaa auttanut ajattelemaan uudelleen esiintymis- ja vuorovaikutustilanteisiin kohdistuvaa jännitystä, kun asiaa tarkastelee tieteellisin lähtökohdin tutkimuksena, eikä ainoastaan vaiettuna marginaalisena ongelmana." (RE 20)	The research data used in the teaching and slides on the course have provided me with a wealth of interesting information and in some ways helped me to rethink the anxiety involved in presentation and interaction situations when viewed from a scientific perspective as research and not just as a silenced marginal problem. (RE 20)
32	"Muistan, kun kurssilla käytiin läpi tutkimustuloksia opiskelijoiden suhtautumisesta esiintymistilanteisiin. Tuolloin mieleeni pälkähti rehellisesti sanottuna ensimmäistä kertaa ajatus siitä, että on olemassa ihmisiä, jotka oikeasti nauttivat esiintymisestä." (RE 23)	I remember going through research results on students' attitudes to public speaking situations during the course. That was honestly the first time I realised that there are people who actually enjoy public speaking. (RE 23)
33	"Ensimmäisellä tunnilla, kun käytiin läpi kurssilaisten kokemia oireita, oli herättävä hetki. Silloin ymmärsi paremmin, että jännityksellä on monenlaisia oireita, eikä todellakaan ole ainoa, joka sitä kokee." (RE 8)	I had an eye-opening moment in the first session, when we went through the symptoms experienced by the course participants. It was then that I better understood that anxiety has a variety of symptoms, and that I am certainly not the only one who experiences it. (RE 8)