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Public speaking and workplace skills. A new domain for global business communication

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Public speaking and workplace skills:

A new domain for global business communication

(University of Brescia – Italy)

The study of public speaking is proposed as a peculiar area of the business communication domain. A diachronic analysis of the inter- and multi-disciplinarian nature of public speaking in business communication is proposed, as a foundation for a new field of theoretical and applied research. Moreover, public speaking is described here as a basic workplace skill in business communication. Entrepreneurs' public speaking is chosen as an interesting case study: empirical data support the thesis of a strict relationship between entrepreneurs' effectiveness in speaking and the social construction of their meanings. Drawing on those considerations, a more focused reflection on the impact of oratorical skills in business communication contexts is explored.

Key words: *public speaking, ESP, business communication, entrepreneur, workplace skills*

Contents

Monotony, the cardinal and most common sin of the public speaker, is not a transgression – it is rather a sin of omission, as it consists in living up to the confession of the Prayer Book: "We have left undone those things we ought to have done"

(Esenwein and Carnegie 1915, p. 10).

1. Introduction

The aim of this paper relates to the implications of introducing public speaking as a specific ESP domain. Background literature on this topic (Basturkmen, 2003; Charnock, 2002; Coopman & Lull, 2008) provides a useful frame for understanding the origins of this subject and the arena in which studies on public speaking in business English then emerged. Oral communication in English in the workplace and in public contexts is an area where there is limited research available.

Professional public speaking has been common topic for conversation in many blogs and websites in recent years, due to the particular relevance of this subject for the growing number of entrepreneurs. Nothing scientifically relevant emerges in these sites, apart from general attention given to the description of emotions and fears in women's and men's approach to public contexts (Bodie, 2010; Egloff, Weck & Schmucke, 2008; Hofmann & Di Bartolo, 2000; Osorio, Crippa & Loureiro, 2013). In spite of the fact that the subject of public speaking has been looked at extensively from a rhetorical point of view as well as from a political and law perspective (Strike, 1994; Lucas, 1998; Coopman & Lull, 2008; Kumar, 2005; Esenwein & Carnegie, 1915), or from the conversation analysis angle (Atkinson, 1984; Hammond, 1993; Nielsen, 2004), this issue has received limited attention in the ESP context (in business contexts Crosling and Ward, 2002; Freihat & Machzoomi, 2012; in legal contexts Charnock, 2002). The contiguous areas which have

been explored in the last decades are related to the 'conference presentation' genre (Webber, 1997; Carter-Thomas & Rowley-Jolivet, 2003) or the 'presidential debate' (Bendinelli, 2011).

This contribution briefly illustrates what existing literature suggests about public speaking, particularly with regard to the influence of language on business communication in English. Entrepreneurs' public speaking is chosen as an emblematic case study: empirical data have shown a strict relationship between entrepreneurs' effectiveness in speaking and the social construction of their meanings. Drawing on those considerations, the review concludes by raising concerns about the developing literature, confirming the significant role of public speaking effectiveness in the business workplace.

2. Background literature on public speaking in English for Business

Modern public speaking draws its origins from the British school of Elocutionists, among which we underline the importance of Sheridan (1762). He theorized the existence of two types of language, namely the 'language of ideas' and the 'language of emotions'. While the former enables speakers to manifest the thoughts which pass in their minds, the latter enables them to communicate to the audience the effects those thoughts have on their minds. By using those two types of language, in Sheridan's view the office of a public speaker is to instruct, to please and to move. The British School used those principles of elocution in investigative treaties, and for writing manuals for technical elocution (e.g. clerical elocution) and illustrative anthologies, often designed for lawyers and negotiators. The power of oratory, eloquence and effective speech became central at the beginning of the twentieth century thanks to the efforts of the American Elocutionary Movement (Barber, 1830; Behnke, 1898; Bell, 1859; Bernstein, 1974; Burgh, 1761; Chapman, 1821; Comstock, 1837; Comstock, 1844; Mason, 1748; Rush, 1893). With the American tradition, the relevance of effective speech expanded to the fields of medicine, entertainment and commerce, or business. Desire for education and the wish to become good mediators contributed to the American

elocutionists' success. Many people, often trained for professions such as medicine or law, became 'teachers of elocution' in response to a growing demand for training in this field.

Some basic references to the importance of public speaking in the training of a business expert have been made since English for Business started to have its own identity. At the beginning of the twentieth century the newly-born Business English specialised domain shows its independent status in some manuals, which were conceived for people (young learners or adults) approaching 'practical business'. We are not considering their contents in details, but we underline here how much public speaking was taken into consideration at the time.

In 1915, in his manual of Business English for University students, MacClintock showed that public speaking had a consistent but limited application in the business communication field, namely, in persuasion.

Luckily, it is only in a rather narrow field of business activity that the theories and methods of technical debating are useful; most business transactions proceed by a much simpler and more natural process. However, while we do not propose to encroach upon the field of public speaking, or of formal debating, we can give the essential practical directions that are needed in the making of a speech; and we can give some practice in the affirmative aspects of argument — the principles of conviction and persuasion.

In our day of business, social, and philanthropic co-operation, everybody has to know how to make a speech — as a matter of fact, every important business transaction is a series of speeches, employing the same tactics as a single speech.

Realize, first of all, that nothing but the habit of saying well what you have to say will equip you for all the contingencies of speech-making. To say this is to utter in a certain sense a paradox. For you may well say, "But it is the making of speeches that gives practice enough to form the habit", and

this is partly true. But there are a few exercises by which you can discipline yourself as a preparation for actual speech-making. (MacClintock, 1915, p.135)

The importance of exercises for the practice of public speaking in professional contexts is often highlighted in some other manuals of Business English of the first decades of the twentieth century (Lewis, 1911; Esenwein, 1902; Esenvein & Carnegie, 1915). While some authors of Business English books give priority to practicing written skills (Hammond & Herzberg, 1918), the great majority devotes pages to oral skills for the workplace, and consider public speaking as a special topic inside them. In Hotchkiss-Drew (1916), the first Chapter of the book, devoted to 'Essential of the Business', is divided into the following sub-chapters: 'Substance and Style, Clearness in Sentences (Through Unity), Clearness in Sentences (Through Coherence), Correctness in Sentence Structure, Correctness of Diction, Force in Sentence Structure, Force in Diction, The Paragraph'.

Sub-chapters 2 to 5 are built on the concepts of *clearness* and *correctness*, which take their roots directly from Quintilian's categories, that is: *correctness, clarity, elegance, and appropriateness.* In the same manual we read:

The aim of business English should be to economize the reader's attention to present ideas so that they may be grasped clearly and quickly with the least expenditure of mental effort. Clearness in sentence structure and correctness of syntax are aids to economy, but no less so is the correct use of words. Good diction is the result of clear and correct thinking, and of unceasing care in the selection of words, the symbols of ideas. Use words that are present, reputable, and national. (Hotchkiss G.-Drew C., 1916, p. 47)

Effectiveness and efficiency in oral performances in business English are a priority for other authors of the same period. Webster (1916, p. 75) writes:

Suggestive power in oral or in written composition appeals to the decision of the ear. The choice of

words, and the arrangement of words and syllables should be euphonious. Because such an order is more pleasing to the sensitive ear, it is on that account more quickly and easily grasped; therefore, more economical, forcible, and suggestive.

The same author devotes one Chapter of his manual to the 'Oral Aspects of Business Communications', with particular attention to: 'The Dictation of Business Letters; The Telephone Message; Parliamentary Debates; After-dinner Speaking; Successful Qualities of an After-Dinner Speech; Planning an After-Dinner Speech; Delivering an After-Dinner Speech'.

Paragraphs 4 to 7 underline one of the most popular commonplaces of contemporary public speaking courses, that is 'Building speaker conference', or 'Fear of Public Speaking', which is a common issue in the most recent studies in the field (Grice and Skinner, 2007, p. 42-49; Osborn and Osborn, 2006, p. 29-47; Egloff, Weck & Schmucke, 2008; Osorio, Crippa & Loureiro, 2013):

When it comes to the delivery of your speech, even though you may feel nervous, you must try to appear at ease. A nervous speaker makes an audience nervous. Practice is the big factor in cultivating ease. Be sure you know the gist of your speech and, above all, be able to relate your anecdote tellingly. Try to appear as if every bit of what you said came spontaneously. (Webster, 1916, p. 319)

Moreover, all these manuals are concerned with preparation for public speaking at different levels, on topics such as: adapting to the audience and the situation (Hatfield, 1921); finding the right topic (Webster, 1916); researching and studying the topic (Webster, 1916); supporting one's ideas (Gallagher & Moulton, 1918); structuring the speech (Hatfield, 1921); outlining the speech (Hotchkiss & Drew, 1916).

The new specialised identity of the business English speaker is considered in these books, which often wonder whether the learner (in this case, only the native speaker of English) is able to

argument in the specific way which his/her profession requires:

What is the difference between description for the sake of its picturing power and description as adapted to the aims of business? Why is careful description essential in business?

How does a story told by a salesman to a customer differ from a story in your selections from literature?

What are the characteristics of argument in business? What is the difference between proof and persuasion?" (Gallagher-Moulton, 1918, p.105)

Answers to the above questions are still under discussion, especially when performance-based language assessment is taken into consideration carefully in professional settings (Jacoby & McNamara, 1999; Taillefer, 2007, 2013). As Osborn and Osborn (2006, p. 4-9) state, studying and practising public speaking in business contexts is fundamental in order to produce personal, professional, and public benefits:

1. personal benefits. Great speaking requires practice, but the efforts bring important personal rewards (building one's confidence, being persuasive, talking effectively, among the most important ones)

2. professional benefits. It has been widely demonstrated that there is a strong relationship between communication competence and career success in the business field (National Association of Colleges and Employers 1999, p. 20, quoted in Grice and Skinner, 2007, p. 5). In the Eighties, a survey made by the American Business Communication Association underlined that "while on-the-job public speaking accounted for only 6 percent of managers' and technical professionals' time, it nevertheless ranked as more important to job performance than did time spent reading mail and other documents, dictating letters and writing reports, and talking on the phone" (Mosvick and Nelson, 1987, p. 224).

3. public benefits. Public speaking is an important part of daily life, as it gives the opportunity of projecting one's personal ideas onto a public domain.

Public speaking builds on the basic communication skills we originally develop as we acquire language and learn how to make conversation. As expanded conversation, it should preserve the natural directness and spontaneity of good conversation. And like conversation, it should be tuned to the reactions of listeners. In a business context, speakers and listeners of this 'conversation' are usually highly motivated business people, looking for oral effectiveness and efficiency. In the following paragraphs the specificity of public speaking as a workplace skill to English native and non-native business experts will be emphasized.

3. Public speaking as a workplace basic skill

The strategic importance of oral communication skills in today's workplace has been amply documented in literature on organizational leadership (Carnevale, Gainer & Meltzer, 1990). In particular, it has been demonstrated that successful oral communication reflects the specific internal and external influences on the particular company. As stated in Crosling and Ward (2002, p. 43):

Internally, communication is underpinned by an understanding of the nature of businesses, their purposes for operating, their structures, and how these affect decision making (…). Graduates may not realize that workplace communication practices are "more censured" than those of the academic environment.

In ESP teaching and learning contexts, business graduates should be equipped with an understanding of the real communicative needs of their future workplace. Van Horn (1995), reporting on a survey of employees in New Jersey, claims that oral communication is seen as vital by employers but, interestingly, it is an area for which graduates lack preparation. Scollon, Wong

Scollon & Jones (2012, p. 78, p. 84) find that most business graduate employees' communication is more informal in nature, which seems to be against the goal-oriented nature of corporate discourse.

Drawing on those considerations, the real challenge is how to define the needs of internal and external corporate oral communication in English. They are integral to the workplace, but they are shaped by factors such as a company's external and internal environments, which in turn influence management approaches and modes of work organization. Within the workplace, oral communication is influenced by the status of the parties, the purpose of communication, and the medium. Furthermore, successful communication depends on the parties sharing background knowledge and assumptions, and from their linguistic and cultural identities.

In spite of all these complex issues, the urgent need of skills in the field of public speaking in business workplace contexts deserves strong consideration on behalf of the ESP researcher. As a consequence, we make here a proposal for some areas of application, and we give evidence of our concern in a special context of English for Business oral production, that is the entrepreneurial sector.

3.1 Business workplace requirements and ESP practice

Disciplinary variation in English for Business teaching has received considerable attention in the theory as well as in the practice of designing, implementing and teaching programmes in English for specific groups of learners (Bhatia & Bremner, 2012). Nevertheless, it is claimed that, in the context of English as a global language of international business, "multinational corporations need ways of ensuring that the workplace English demands of their operations in non-English speaking situations are being met" (Hamp-Lyons and Lockwood, 2009, p.150). Moreover, according to a recent research, Bhatia and Bremner (2012) confirm that dissatisfaction from the side of the student is also signaled, as most learners "needed help in handling generic realizations of professionally

driven discourses, some of which have an academic orientation, others being related to workplace contexts" (2012: 419): the perception of business teachers generally reinforce and complement this statement. These issues clearly support the view that

EBP (English for Business Purposes) needs […]to create appropriate conditions for meeting the interdisciplinary discourse-based demands placed on new students in the academy and to meet the needs of the business community for multidisciplinary communicative expertise. […]

Ignoring the complexities of the real world of discourse, whether academic, professional or institutional, in order to make life easy for applied linguists and ESP practitioners, can be misleading for both teachers and learners. […]This mismatch between the real world of professions and that of the classroom needs to be handled more realistically (Bhatia and Bremner, 2012, p. 419-420).

At a more pedagogical level, the corresponding challenge is to handle the tension between workplace requirements and ESP practice. A survey conducted by Crosling and Ward (2002, p.53) identified public presentations as one of the most common forms of oral communication expected by business graduates: the two authors underline that this should be "a top priority in university business/commerce education" and complain about lack of attention to this issue at the academic level:

[…]more research is needed to determine the optimal balance between the responsibility of the university and that of the employer company. In our view, the university should focus on extending the generic skills acquired at school to skills such as those required by group presentation and discussion, individual presentation, an ability to approach an issue critically and to hold one's ground in discussion, an ability to be assertive when presenting one's views […]. The role of

employers would be to adapt these acquired skills to a more job focused work environment (Crosling & Ward, 2002, p. 54).

These premises have conducted to include formal presentation practice as a requirement for workplace assessment in some university curricula (Kimberley & Crosling, 2012), with excellent results in both natives' and non-natives' oral communication performances during their career as University students beforehand and during their professional experience afterwards (Crosling, 2000). Instruction and experience in formal presentation have at least three benefits: firstly, students learn to prepare a piece, most likely organised along deductive lines; secondly, they experience how to maintain an audience's attention for a certain period and how to elaborate extensively on an issue; and finally, they are obliged to work on clear enunciation, well-modulated speech, appropriate body and facial language, self-confidence and delivery on the whole[1].

Experience in using English for Business in public speaking contexts would undoubtedly be very beneficial for any student of business and for any business expert. A proposal for possible applications of public speaking to the business world is given in the next paragraph.

3.2 Public speaking areas of application in English for Business

For the past decades, as Lucas (1998, p. 75) points out, public speaking has been the bedrock of a variety of undergraduate curricula in the US and for a good reason: according to a survey of nearly

[1] Interestingly, the history of applied linguistics seems to demonstrate that a 'model' for public speaking was once considered possible. As far as the study of oral performance is concerned, examples are scattered throughout the centuries: some sixteenth-century English treatises on punctuation (Hart, 1569; Puttenham, 1589) made the first steps towards the definition of a written 'transcription' of an oral text; in the seventeenth century the study of English intonation and rhythm was improved with the specific aim of demonstrating the 'Excellency' of the English language (Butler, 1634); the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries saw the flourishing of 'delivery' all over Europe, because speaking opportunities were developing rapidly in parliament, at the bar, in the pulpit, in the theatre and in polite conversation, and the demand for expressing ideas in oral English increased. In particular, that was the best period for the studies on intonation and gesture to be developed. In 1775 the first impressive study of English intonation by Joshua Steele appeared (Steele, 1775): this work pioneered a number of important frontiers in the subject of prosodic features as a whole. It was followed by John Walker's *The Melody of Speaking* (1787), a markedly pedagogical treatise aimed at giving a guide to those who wanted to read and speak well. Apart from Sheridan (1762), other eighteenth-century elocutionists kept to the traditions established by early English grammarians and elocutionists. In fact, the great majority of the eighteenth century writings confined the treatment of oral language to inaccurate generalizations on the motivational power of words, but concentrated on the relationship between language and gesture.

500 companies and public organizations, public speaking was ranked as one of the most important personal quality sought by employers (Lucas, 1998, p. 5). Luckily enough, what is required to the employee nowadays, as far as public speaking is concerned, seems to be limited to effectiveness in: delivering persuasive speeches in sales presentations, making proposals, promoting motivational sessions (O'Hair, Dan, & Dixon, 2011). In fact, Beebe and Beebe (2003, p. 289) highlighted also the importance of informative speaking in business communication, that is speeches where a new product is presented, or the manufacturing process is described, or people or ideas are introduced to the audience. Both persuasive and informative speeches seem to be part of the daily routine of some categories of business people, namely the entrepreneurial one, that will be chosen here as research subjects on public speaking in ESP, with the special aim of analyzing the relevance of oral effectiveness in business communication by non-native speakers of English. Our main concern here is that of demonstrating the specificity of the English public speaking domain in a specialized business context, and the need for collaboration between ESP researchers/practitioners and the professional communities, in order to understand how and why they communicate the way they do. Bridging the gap between the academic and professional worlds is the only way to develop better models for effective public speaking in professional contexts, as suggested in the next section.

3.3 The entrepreneurs' point of view

The research on entrepreneurs' public speaking in English offers a limited range of specific contributions. Studies in the field tend to highlight either the technical skills required for successful public speaking in business, or the symbolic aspects that entrepreneurs evoke for their speeches to be persuasive. Studies that reflect the former trend focus on the nature of oratorical skills and on the possibility of transferring those skills from political oratory to the management community, to which entrepreneurs are loosely associated by this tradition. Within this stream, Greatbatch and Clark (2005, p. 12) stated how "oratorical skills are universal regardless of the context within which

a speech is given". Despite acknowledging the importance of studies of this nature for deepening the understanding of public speaking in the management community, we must consider that the figure of the entrepreneur is quite peculiar compared to that of the manager[2]. The definition of their identity is at the basis of the definition of the specific communicative needs in public speaking contexts related to their profession.

A focused reflection on the impact of oratorical skills on entrepreneurs has been provided by Putnam and Fairhurst (2001). These two authors reflect on the institutional legitimacy of entrepreneurs from a sociolinguistic point of view. In particular, they argue that entrepreneurs' speech embeds cultural codes that appeal to the public legitimizing their role. The recurrence to such codes manages the impression that the entrepreneur portrays to the audience. Oratorical skills have also been associated with entrepreneurs' success (e.g. recognition of a successful opportunity, successful exploitation of an opportunity). In particular, in their study on the embodied metaphors in the speech and gestures of entrepreneurs, Cienki, Cornelissen and Clarke (2008) argue that entrepreneurs' speech tends to evoke experiences particular to the life and situation of the speaker. This, in turn, makes arguments persuasive to relevant others (e.g. employees, prospective investors). Drawing on those conclusions, Cornelissen and Clarke (2010) also suggest that "individual entrepreneurs use certain forms of speech – specifically, analogy and metaphor – to induce an opportunity for a novel venture" (Cornelissen & Clarke, 2010, p. 539) and to establish shared understanding, support and legitimacy. These two authors conceptualize how language and thought interpenetrate in context and how the meaning entrepreneurs want to share is a result of interactions with others.

[2] Without intending to expand into entrepreneurship literature, we provide a key definition aimed at illustrating what characterizes entrepreneurs. A distinctive feature of entrepreneurs is that they are part of the "complex process of new venture creation... [the entrepreneur] is viewed in terms of activities undertaken to enable the organization to come into existence" (Gartner, 1988, p. 57). This particular feature can embed risk-taking (Brockhaus, 1980), belief of being in control (Brockhaus , 1982), need for achievement (McClelland, 1965), strong creative tendency (Ward, 2004) and need for autonomy (Hornaday & Aboud, 1971) all aspects that specifically characterize the figure of the entrepreneur.

Notwithstanding the attention paid to the role of public speech when looking at entrepreneurs, extant research does not clarify how entrepreneurs interpret the actual speaking in public and whether, by using this form of communication, they only aim to achieve support and legitimacy or to portray other aspects of their profession. With this in mind, in 2010 we conducted a research aimed to address the following question: what meaning do entrepreneurs attribute to speaking in public within the context of their role, and with what implications? Interdisciplinary reflections on the data corpus demonstrated that the uniqueness of individuals' social context was an influential factor in the creation and development entrepreneurs. The key aspects shown in our data suggested that, for our sample participants, public speaking was about getting a point across, sharing a rhythm, showing a path to others, creating a feeling, persuading, welcoming, and transferring passion for one's profession. At a first glance, these points could be seen as consistent with the general canons associated to the role of a public speaker. Though, we looked at these from a different perspective arguing that, if linked to the entrepreneur, each of those key aspects reflected the passion and the emotional component embedded in this role. Rather than exclusively considering entrepreneurs' use of oratorical skills (Cienki, Cornelissen, & Clarke, 2008; Cornelissen & Clarke, 2010) and the importance they attribute to the normative component of a text - which we still acknowledged as important – we suggested reflecting on how actually just the fact of being an entrepreneur gave a specific pathos to public speaking, which is different from that that any other speaker in a different role would give to this type of communication. The emotion that may drive the entrepreneur as a risk-taker, as a person in control, as a person with a strong creative tendency, and as a person in need for autonomy reflected on his/her interpretation of public speaking, thus, turning this type of communication into a medium for sharing a path, a rhythm and ultimately a passion.

In fact, in addition to the components of public speech (e.g. argumentation, delivery), our research highlighted a second set of elements entrepreneurs illustrated as important in their way of

addressing an audience, namely: sense of welcoming, emotions and emotion transfer, emphasis on people, spontaneity, self-confidence, and the search for audience's confirmation. This view can suggest that for entrepreneurs public speaking may not only be about transferring a message or legitimizing one's position; it can also be about moving into the audience the same feeling that animates them. The latter might not be a mere means to the end of winning the interlocutors' trust and understanding but a way for sharing the entrepreneurial passion 'per se'.

3.4 New challenges and suggestions for future research

There are two implications that emerge from this reflection. The first one is that, within the wide arena of business, the speaker's professional role influences the pathos associated to the performance of public speaking. In turn, this sets the emotional antecedent of the process of construction of meaning between the speaker and his/her audience during a speech. This delicate but relevant aspect should be taken into consideration when the ESP academic or practitioner arranges a public speaking course (Cyphert, 2010). Drawing from the professional role, we believe that this type of antecedent is different from both the actual emotion that the speaker feels right before starting a speech and that may influence the outcome of it (on this matter extant literature has widely explored the issue of public speaking as a fearful social situation, and of emotion regulation behaviours aimed at reducing anxiety and the occurrence of fearful thoughts experienced by the speaker while performing the speech – Pertaub, Slater & Barker, 2002; Hofmann & DiBartolo, 2000; Osorio, Crippa & Loureiro, 2013; Egloff, Weck & Schmucke, 2008; Bodie, 2010) and the traditional rhetorical appeal to emotion that speakers use to win their audience. Particularly we would argue that, whether it is deliberate or not on the side of the speaker, the emotional antecedent we are referring to relates to enduring together with the audience the interpretation of one's professional role.

The second implication that emerges from our reflection has a more pragmatic unfold and is addressed to public speaking trainers. Traditionally, the main aspects for training people in public speaking tend to focus on managing visual contact, managing the speaker's emotions, structuring the message effectively, developing personal charisma, and using gestures and non-verbal behaviour coherently (Osborn S., Osborn M. & Randall Osborn, 2007; Lucas, 1998; Ekman, 2003). Targeting those strategies in light of trainees' professional roles can increase the salience of the training outcomes making the benefits of the training activity fit for purpose (Basturkmen, 2003).

4. Conclusion

Earlier studies on the field of public speaking have already supported us in giving evidence of the strong importance of this domain in the field of business communication. In addition to that, an overview of the business workplace skills required by corporate communities at present demonstrate that public speaking in the teaching and learning of English for Business Purposes cannot be ignored any longer. To sum up, a more focused reflection on the impact of good oratorical skills in business communication in English is needed, in the context of ESP research. Due to the varied and complex nature of business communication, however, public speaking studies and programmes should be targeted for the audience, and not standardized or copied from models which are suitable to non-business context, such as politics or law. The reflections that emerge from our paper may suggest investigating the way the pathos of public speaking varies according to other business roles (e.g. sales person, buyer, consultant, etc.). Moreover, the implications of aspects such as gender, age, family background would require further research to identify.

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