Effectiveness of University Students' Communication Skills

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Abstract

1. One of the components of generic skills that are crucial for university students is communication. Students will have encountered circumstances requiring communication skills both inside and outside of lecture halls throughout their time in college, such as group projects and oral presentations in class. As a result, this paper's goal is to look into how well university students can communicate. A self-administered questionnaire was used to measure communication abilities. It evaluated eleven aspects of communication skills, including oral, written, and social conduct. With a $r > 0.08$ in each sub component, the questionnaire had a high degree of reliability. According to the study's findings, college students have developed strong communication abilities.

Introduction

In order to meet market demands for graduates in a variety of sectors, universities play a crucial role in developing these graduates' general or "soft" abilities in addition to their academic performance. Also, employers now give personality and general abilities a high priority when selecting new hires. As a result, local institutions have been explicitly stating the need for generic skills in programme outcomes since 2008, in line with the introduction of "performance-based curriculum" in that same year.

The general skills that have been highlighted as a focus at the universities include components of communication skills (Kementerian Pengajian Tinggi Malaysia, 2006). Although there are various components to generic skills, communication skills will be the focus of this study.

Literature Review

Generally, communication can be defined as a process of exchanging information, from the person giving the information through verbal and non-verbal methods, to the person receiving the information. The most common method of communication is verbal, using a specific language where it is a two-way process, with feedback on the message received. Communication also involves the exchange of ideas, opinions and information with a specific objective. Apart from oral communication, information can also be exchanged using symbols or signage. Communication has also been defined as sharing and giving meaning occurring at the same time through symbolic interactions (Seiler & Beall, 2005). Communication has been said to start when a message or information is transferred from the sender (the speaker, writer) to the receiver (listener, reader) through an instrument or channel, and followed by the receiver giving feedback (coding and interpreting the information; Sulaiman Masri, 1997). Based on these definitions, elements of communication include the person giving the information, the information and feedback by the receiver, and the repetition of these processes creates knowledge development.

Previous research on communication skills among university students have been reported by Ihmeideh, Ahmad and Dababneh (2010) and Cleland, Foster and Moffat (2005). They found that a positive communication environment provides opportunities to students to learn how to communicate, and thus, have better communication skills. Therefore, university students need to be given opportunities to communicate in order to be better prepared for the job market after their studies. Communication is more effective if the receiver (of the information) can understand and practice the skills. Further, communication will be more meaningful if the physical, spiritual and social factors are taken into account during the communication process.

As a university student who is getting ready to start on their chosen career, he or she should take the opportunity in any activities that developed communication skills in a wider and complete aspect so that communication skills can be fully developed. Students need to put in effort to develop their communication skills to be able to succeed in

their chosen profession (Ihmeideh, et al. 2010). There are many types of communication skills, but generally it involves oral and written skills. Mohd Helmi (2005) proposes that there are essentially three types of communication, which are interpersonal communication, management communication (communication in a group), and public communication (speech making).

The process of communication generally involves four elements, which are the speaker, the receiver, communication channel and feedback. A few researchers have defined communication as verbal communication, written communication, non-verbal communication, listening and giving feedback (Nur'ashiqin Najmuddin, 2010).

At the same time, Rodiah Idris (2010) proposes that communication as a non-verbal skill, giving feedback, presenting ideas verbally and in written form, doing presentations and negotiating to achieve a goal and getting support/agreement. In our globalized world, university students need to master communication skills in different cultural contexts (Penbek, Yurdakul, & Cerit, 2009). Harlak et al. (2008) proposes that university students be exposed to activities that can develop their communication skills starting from their first year at university. Hence, universities must provide many more activities to develop the students' communication skills in order to meet the challenges of the globalized world. Therefore, the aim of this study was to investigate the level of communication skills (oral, written and social skills) among local university students.

2. Methodology

The questionnaire was developed based on the available literature on communication skills and discussions among researchers in the team. The constructs of communication skills (oral skills, written skills and social skills) in this paper was determined based on the definitions of communication discussed earlier. Every construct was measured based on a few sub-construct that was intern measured by a number of items. Participants responded a five-point likert scale: strongly disagree, disagree, slightly disagree, agree and strongly agree. The completed questionnaire was then sent to three experts in the field of communication for validation. The validated questionnaire was then pilot tested among students which not in the final year, and the Alpha Cronbach of each construct and its corresponding sub-construct, is shown in Table 1.

Table 1. The Alpha Cronbach for each construct

Construct	Sub-Construct	Number of items	Alpha
Verbal Communication Skills (V)	-presenting ideas verbally	3	0.87
	-understands what was heard	4	0.82
	-giving feedback	4	0.87
	-presentation	5	0.89
Written Communication Skills (W)	-presenting ideas in written form	4	0.91
	-giving feedback in written form	5	0.85
Social Communication Skills (S)	-negotiating to get agreement	4	0.88
	-Communicating to people from different cultures	4	0.90
	-Communicating in different languages	4	0.81
	-Communicating humbly	6	0.90
Total		43	

The Alpha Cronbach of each sub-constructs is between 0.81 – 0.91. This shows good internal reliability. The questionnaire was distributed to a total of 533 final year students at Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM) who were randomly selected. Data from the questionnaire was analyzed using SPSS (Version 11.5). Frequencies, percentages and means were reported for each sub-construct. (Mean range 0-1.67 was categorized as low skill; mean range 1.68-3.34 was categorized as having average skills and mean range 2.25-5.00 was categorized as having good skills.

3. Findings and Discussion

A total of 533 final year students from UKM were recruited in this study. The demographic details of the respondents are shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Demographic details of respondents

Demographic		Frequency	Percent (%)
Sex	Male	186	34.90
	Female	347	65.10
Age	20-25 years	395	74.10
	> 26 Years	138	25.89
Education Level	Undergraduate	484	91.15
	Post graduate	47	8.85
Discipline	Social Science	254	47.65
	Science	144	27.02
	Medicine	135	25.33

Generally, all respondents have studied at UKM for three to four years. They have completed various activities and assignments that contributed to the development of their communication skills, which was explicitly or implicitly planned by the university and the individual lecturers. Therefore, students should demonstrate good skills in all sub-constructs of communication skills. Figure 1 shows the level of skills in each sub-construct of communication skills.
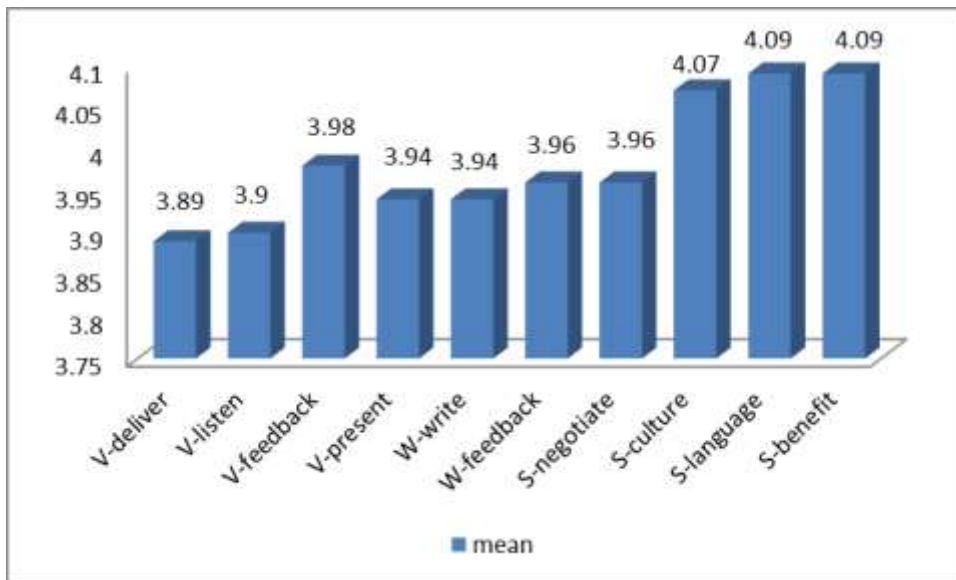
Figure 1. Level of communication skills for each sub-category

Verbal Communication

This research focuses on verbal communication skills, written skills and social skills. Based on Figure 1, it can be concluded that final year students from UKM have good communication skills, with the mean ranging from 3.89 to 4.09. Looking at the sub-constructs, the social skills have the highest score, followed by verbal communication skills, and written skills. Around 20.0 – 27.3% of the respondents were found to have low listening skills, written skills, and presentation skills and make conclusions while communicating with others.

Verbal communication skills can be developed and nurtured through activities such as presentations, open discussions in a class or group. Further, verbal communication skills can also be practised outside of the classroom through interviews. The sub-construct "*presenting ideas verbally*" have the lowest mean (3.89) compared to other sub-constructs although it should be the skill most used by students during tutorials, group discussions and presentations.

Verbal communication needs two parties to work at the same time, while one is presenting his/her ideas, the other must listen and give feedback. This skill also did not have a very high mean score (3.90). Listening skills can be presented as showing interest and attention to what is being said although not necessarily showing agreement. Students need to show a readiness to listen and give attention while other people are talking and giving presentations. With that, they will be able to remember what has been presented, identify the key issues and give meaning to what was presented. The listener must also be able to appreciate the thoughts and feeling of the one giving the information.

Presentation is an academic activity that is used often in class. The results showed that students can do presentations confidently using current technologies. Apart from that, the presenter needs to have public speaking skills.

Written Communication

Written communication skills have a high mean score (3.94). This aspect of communication skills was developed through completing written assignments and reports through their academic program at the university. Good written communication skills are measured through the clarity of the writing, the flow of the arguments, using simple and easy to understand sentences, and written using academic writing style. A written communication also involved two parties, with the receiver giving feedback, but they do not necessarily have to communicate at the same time. Giving

written feedback can be measured through the ability to translate an idea and give meaning through written work. At the university level, written information should be in multiple languages, specifically English and Bahasa Melayu (BM). This study found that the level of competency to communicate (verbally and written form) in English was lower compared to the competency to communicate in BM [BI (85.10%): BM (92.05%)]. This result is consistent with the findings of Masita Misdi et al. (2010), where she reported that the level of competency in the English Language among students at institutions of higher learning in Malaysia is not satisfactory.

Social Communication

The third construct of communication skills is social communication. There are four sub-constructs for social communication, which are negotiating, language, culture and be politeness. The sub-construct *negotiates* need the students to be able to discuss in various languages and cultural settings. This type of communication must be carried out humbly and politely. This can be practised during group discussion for a group project or assignment that consists of group members from different social and cultural background. Students need to discuss and negotiate the course of the project where everyone agrees upon. Another skill that is important in being able to communicate is to be able to initiate a discussion, able to take criticism, giving cooperation and able to make concise conclusions on the discussions. This study found that negotiating skills still need to be improved among university students, compared to the sub-construct culture, language and be politeness. Social communication also involves interpersonal communication, which is the ability to conduct face-to-face interactions. This type of communication involves the ability to cooperate and negotiate with people from different background (Ihmeideh et al. 2010). This type of communication also involves social management skills.

Although the overall communication skills among university students are good, there are still certain aspects that are not up to the expectations of potential employers (Masitah Misdi, et al. 2010). Therefore, skills under a few sub-constructs that need to be improved. Communication skills should be cultivated in every course and lecturers must play a more significant. Lecturers must give constructive feedback on students' presentations and communication skills wherever possible. On the other hand, students must actively participate in every activity that develops their communication skills.

Ilmeideh et al. (2010) reported that the attitudes towards communication skills among university students are high. This means that it is easier for universities to develop their communication skills through appropriate activities. Positive environments for communication provide opportunities for students to practise their communication skills and participate in active learning. With this, lecturers should create as many learning activities as possible to stimulate the provide opportunity for students to practice and horn their communication skills.

4. Conclusion

The constructs and sub-constructs of communication skills are skills that students should equip themselves with before they venture into the working world. These three skills can be combined and incorporated into the learning process. Students not only get to develop their communication skills through discussions and presentations in class, but also get to familiarize with communication situations in the real world. Therefore, we must all keep pushing and improving ourselves to help our university students to develop and horn their communication skills that is essential towards their future career development.

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