

Students' Perceptions of Basic Communication Skills Training at a Selected State University in Zimbabwe

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ABSTRACT

The study was a qualitative case study which sought to establish the perceptions of students in the Faculty of Agribusiness and Commerce on Basic Communication Skills training at Victoria State University. Twenty-seven students from the faculty of Agribusiness and Commerce were purposively sampled to participate in the study. Observation and focus group discussions were the major data gathering tools. A thematic analysis of the data was done. The major findings showed that a majority of the students perceived the module as indispensable in their learning as it enhanced their listening, speaking, reading and writing skills. Participants mentioned that their academic writing, reading, research and listening skills had greatly improved due to the communication skills training they had undergone. However, there were a few students who felt that the module was a waste of their time as it focussed on aspects of communication that they had already covered at 'O' and 'A' Level. The major recommendation from this study was that the university extends the Basic Communication Skills Module to other level 1:1 students in other faculties to facilitate their day to day communication in an educational environment.

1. INTRODUCTION

Communication is part of human existence. Taylor (2005) defines communication as the ability to give and receive or exchange information, opinions or ideas through writing, speech or visual means. This means that communication can only be said to have taken place if there has been a meaningful exchange of information between the sender and the receiver. Dalcol, Garanhani, Fonseca and Carvalho (2018) note that, communication is recursive since it involves exchange and reciprocity. Scholars such as Scot and Newman, (2013) and Taylor, (2005) have noted that good communication is actually a skill, implying that it should be learnt. Scot and Newman (2013) observe that in a 2010 study, communication was ranked at the top of a list of skills that employers sought in job candidates. This underscores the need for universities and colleges to offer communication skills training to students for them to fit easily in the job market.

An individual with good communication skills in a particular language can speak, read and write well in that language. Scot and Newman (2013) observe that, competence in writing and speaking will help one to get hired, perform well and earn promotions. This means that, communication skills training is

important as it actually determines the employability of an individual in the job market. Taylor (2005:4) highlights the need for practice in the critical language skills when he notes that, "The more we write and the more we speak, the more we improve our communication skills." Hence, universities and colleges offering various programmes have embraced the teaching of Communication Skills to facilitate the improvement of communication skills in their students.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Communication skills training has been part of different curricula in universities. For example, Wright et al (2006) note that medical students undergo communication skills training and in recent years, many medical schools have supported the increased emphasis on communication skills as an important part of medical education. In the same vein, Ihmeideh, Al-Omari and Al-Dababneh (2010) point out that for teachers to succeed in their profession, excellent communication skills are indispensable. The main reason for the growing support for communication skills training is on the utility of good communication skills when doctors are communicating with their patients or when teachers are communicating with pupils and the general public.

Wright et al (2006) observe that medical students held both negative and positive attitudes towards communication skills training courses. However, they note that,

...a medical student who has internalised positive values associated with communication skills training would likely behave in ways that are consistent with those values, such as listening to patients more, explaining treatments in ways that the patient will understand... (2006:2)

This suggests that those undergoing the communication skills training course should have positive attitudes towards it for them to meaningfully benefit from the training. The benefits include improved listening skills and ability to express oneself in a way their interlocutors would understand. This shows the importance of having positive attitudes towards communication skills training.

Those with negative attitudes towards communication skills training are likely not to fully benefit from the training. Wright et al (2006) report that medical students who had negative attitudes in communication skills training felt that the courses took a soft social science approach and that the content of the courses was just common sense knowledge. This implies that some medical students felt that undergoing a communication skills training course is actually a waste of time since they were subjected to material that was simple and common sense. But the question is: Does communication skills training mean subjecting students to common sense material which is not even necessary? To answer this question, it requires a critical look into what communication skills aims at achieving and this is discussed in the subsequent discussion.

3. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Good communication skills mean one's ability to listen, speak, read and write in a particular language. In basic communication skills training at university level in Zimbabwe, students are taught the four basic language skills i.e. listening, speaking, reading and writing in the English Language. This is so because the English Language is the official language of business communication in Zimbabwe. The ultimate aim of the communication skills course is to develop in students what Hymes (1972) has termed Communicative Competence. Brown (1987:199) states that having communicative competence means possessing an ability to "...convey and interpret

messages and to negotiate meanings interpersonally within specific contexts."

Communicative competence comprises four major aspects. The first one is linguistic competence. Brown (1987) notes that, linguistic competence (which is also called grammatical competence), entails the knowledge of language rules and other forms of knowledge that enables a person to be functional and interactive in communication. It also encompasses the knowledge of lexical items, semantics, rules of word formation (morphology), rules of constructing sentences (syntax) and the sound system of a language (phonology). Therefore, at the end of the communication skills training course, students should be able to correctly apply the English Language rules in their conversation or in writing. In the case of students in the Faculty of Agribusiness and Commerce at Victoria State University, they are expected to have developed linguistic competence at the end of their communication skills training course. This skill is necessary for meaningful communication to take place in their different fields of study.

Another aspect of Communicative Competence is discourse competence. Brown (1987) opines that discourse competence is a complement of grammatical competence. It encompasses the ability to connect words in sentences and create meaning out of utterances. Its main focus is on inter-sentential relationships. This is an important skill that needs to be nurtured in students if they are to meaningfully express themselves in spoken and written discourse in their fields of study. There is also sociolinguistic competence which entails the knowledge of the importance of acceptable and non-acceptable language in a particular social setting. Equally important is strategic competence (Brown, 1987), which enables the speakers to employ techniques that will help them to keep their conversation going without their listeners noticing that they had run out of words. Celce-Murcia, Deryei and Thurrell (1995) give a total of five competences that make up Communicative Competence, where actional competence is added to the list of four that have been discussed earlier in this discussion. The different components of the Basic Communication Skills module aim at making students acquire these competences, to ensure that they achieve better marks in academic writing and improve their communicative abilities in their day to day communication transactions. The question is: Do the students perceive the module as envisaged in its objectives?

Students in the Faculty of Agribusiness and Commerce at Victoria State University do several introductory modules in their first semester, Basic Communication Skills being one of them. However, students in other faculties in the university are made to do the Business Communication module only, while those in the faculty of Agri-business and Commerce are made to register for both the Basic Communication Skills and Business Communication modules. This can make those undergoing basic communication skills training have varied perceptions on its importance given that other students in the other faculties at the university are not doing it, hence, the need to carry out a study to establish their perceptions of the module.

4. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

During the first semester of their degree programmes, students in the Faculty of Agri-business and Commerce at Victoria State University do several introductory modules among which is Basic Communication Skills is one of them. Apparently, level one Engineering students are exempted from doing the module, maybe with the assumption that they already possess the basic communication skills. This can cause those undergoing basic communication skills training to have varied perceptions on its importance given that other students in the other faculties at the university are not doing it. Thus, it is necessary to carry out a study to establish their perceptions.

5. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The research aimed at answering the following questions:

1. How do level one students in the Faculty of Agri-business and Commerce perceive the Basic Communication Skills module?
2. Why do they perceive the module the way they do?

6. METHODOLOGY

The study adopted a qualitative approach which, according to Trochim, Donnelly and Arora (2016), is a huge and multifaceted methodological area that is concerned with analysing the way people construe their experiences and the world in which they live. Qualitative research is a broad approach which studies social phenomena and its diverse types are interpretive, naturalistic, ethnographic and largely critical (Marshall and Rossman, 2006). Its main focus is two-fold: to develop comprehensive descriptions of a phenomenon and to reach an understanding of issues (Trochim et al, 2016). Thus, the aim of this study was to dig deeper into the students' perceptions of the Basic Communication Skills module so as to gain an understanding of their experiences in a

context where their counterparts in other faculties are exempted from doing the module.

The current study was a case study. Trochim et al (2016) define a case study as an intensive study of a specific individual or specific context. Because it is anchored in actual life conditions, it results in a rich and holistic account of a phenomenon (Merriam, 2009). Victoria State University is the context within which the study was conducted.

6.1 Population and sample

The targeted population for this study was all level 1:1 students in the Faculty of Agribusiness and Commerce at Victoria State University. Purposive sampling technique was used to select the twenty-seven students in the faculty of Agribusiness and Commerce. Of the twenty-seven, 15 were female and 12 were male. Their age range was nineteen to twenty-two years. McBurney and White (2010) observe that a purposive sample is chosen for some characteristics it possesses. This sampling technique has the advantage that the researchers choose a sample that has their desired characteristics (Maxwell, 2013). Thus, the twenty-seven students were chosen on the basis that they were the ones who did the Basic Communication Skills module yet the rest of the level 1:1 in other faculties were exempted from doing the module. Despite the fact that they may not be representative and their statements may not be generalisable, this is not the major concern in such sampling, but to acquire in-depth information from those who are in a position to give it (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2007).

6.2 Data collection procedures

Data were collected from the twenty-seven participants through observation and focus group discussions to allow the researchers to gather as much qualitative data as possible to establish the participants' perceptions of the Basic Communication Skills module. The focus group discussions presented a more normal communication environment as compared to a one on one interview because participants are "influenced and get influenced by others" (Kruger and Casey, 2009:7), just like what happens in real life situations. The twenty-seven participants were divided into five groups; where three groups had five participants each and two had six participants. This implies that, a total of five focus group discussions were conducted. The researchers, as the moderators, facilitated group discussions, at the same time encouraging all the group members to interact (Silverman, 2013) so that the issue at hand could be fully explored. The time taken in conducting the focus group discussions

ranged from a minimum of thirty-five minutes to one hour fifteen minutes. The researchers used a video recorder to record proceedings at each of the focus group discussions and the data were transcribed and later coded into themes for further analysis.

A total of six lesson observations were conducted by the researchers to establish how seriously the students took the Basic Communication Skills module; specific focus being on their punctuality for lectures, participation and preparedness for individual and group presentations. An observation checklist was used to record what the researchers observed. The data gave useful insights on the way these students perceived the module.

7. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The data from both the focus group discussions and observations were qualitatively analysed through categorising them into themes.

From the findings, it emerged that out of the 27 participants, 25 perceived the module as an important one, just like the rest of the modules they do in their respective programmes. In fact, some of them felt that it was actually more important than the rest of the modules as the skills they learnt in the module helped them improve their performance in the rest of the modules. From the observations and focus group discussions conducted by the researchers, the twenty-five participants concurred that they had realised benefits that they never imagined by undergoing the basic communication skills course. Their overall perception of the module was a result of the benefits they had realised and these would be discussed in the subsequent discussion.

Enhancement of listening skills

It emerged from the focus group discussions that students in the Faculty of Agribusiness and Commerce appreciate undergoing the Basic Communication Skills Course. They indicated that they had developed various skills that have impacted positively on their studies. One of the key aspects of communication that the students acknowledged was that they had become better listeners which made them grasp more from lectures. In focus group discussion three, one participant said, "It has taught me as a student to know the difference between listening and hearing," (Student 1). She further explained that she could now engage her mind to analyse the sounds she hears for her to get the full meaning embedded in them. Another participant (Student 4) said that he could now avoid those barriers to effective listening such as stress, physical noise and prejudice among others. He said, "I am now able to be selective to what I listen to and I can

now pay attention to only those messages that are important to me without having to succumb to any distractions." The participants generally indicated that without having undergone the Basic Communication Skills Course they would not know that they needed to develop their listening skills for them to be able to get the most out of lectures and avoid unnecessary conflicts with lecturers and colleagues. Student 2 in focus group discussion one said, "I am now a better listener because the module has helped me on how I can be an effective listener. I can now focus on what is being said without allowing physical and mental barriers to distract my attention during lectures." In focus group discussion four (FGD 4), participants indicated that good listening skills enabled them to comprehend messages sent during lectures and in their day to day conversations with colleagues and this means that they will be better people in the communities that they will live in after graduation. The following are excerpts from the focus group discussion: Student 1, "I have become a better listener and as a result cases of misunderstandings with my colleagues and lecturers are now very minimal. I used to quarrel a lot with my siblings before I came to university. I now realise that it was my problem and not theirs because I was a very bad listener." Student 3: "My understanding of concepts presented during lectures has greatly improved." In focus group discussion five, one participant (Student 6) stated that he had been transformed by the Basic Communication Skills module. He said, "I feel that those not doing the module are missing out a lot as they may never be able to develop good listening skills that are requisite in the life of a university student." These results show that the participants perceived the module as a very important one as it had changed the way they used to listen before coming to university. They were now better listeners and could easily comprehend spoken words during lectures and general conversations because of the critical knowledge that they had gained from the Basic Communication Skills module. In other words, they would not be better listeners if they had not been trained to be such. This is in contrast to the view by some participants in Wright et al's (2006) study that the content of the courses in communication skills training was just common sense knowledge. The current study revealed that participants viewed the module as critical in developing their listening skills which are indispensable in effective interpersonal communication.

The researchers also observed that, after the lectures on how the students could improve their listening skills, there were fewer instances where students would ask the lecturer to repeat what she would have

said. It was also noted that students were able to correctly answer questions that the lecturer would have asked and this was seen as sign that they were paying attention when the lecture was being delivered. Thus, it is meaningful to conclude that, the students had benefitted from communication skills training, hence their perception of the module as an important cog in university education.

Knowledge of reading strategies

In addition to the development of their listening skills as discussed above, participants stated that they had become better readers through the knowledge that they had gained from the Basic Communication Skills module. As a direct result of the Basic Communication Skills module, the participants said that they were now armed with the knowledge on the different reading strategies that they should employ in different circumstances. Student 3 in focus group discussion 4 said, "I now appreciate the Basic Communication Skills module. The knowledge of different reading strategies helps me to know when a certain type of reading should be employed in order to suit the occasion." Student 4 in the third focus group discussion went on to state some of the reading strategies he had learnt in the Basic Communication Skills module and when these can be employed. He said,

"When reading for assignments I would engage in intensive and extensive reading for me to get meaningful points for the assignments. When looking for specific information from a text, I would not waste time reading the whole text, word for word, but I would employ the scanning reading strategy."

Student 2 in the first focus group discussion said,

The module has exposed us to different reading types for different situations such as reading for assignments, for examination and to spot specific information.

What these responses imply is that, through basic communication skills training, the participants had been developed into better readers and that is why they perceived the module as an important one as it comes along with several benefits to them as

university students. The module had equipped them with reading skills which they could employ in different situations in their academic life. For these reasons, the participants showed much appreciation for the Basic Communication Skills Module.

Development of research skills

The participants also acknowledged that they had become better researchers through the knowledge they gained from the Basic Communication Skills module. For example, student 6 in the fifth Focus Group Discussion (FGD 5) said, "The module has greatly helped me on how to research and come up with solid and well researched assignments, hence improving my overall course marks." Student 4 in the third focus group discussion said, "I now know how to do my research through the internet. I now know how to search for information and effectively use it in my assignment." Another participant (Student 1, FGD 4) said, "Through the training I got from the module I am now able to make good use of book blurbs, indices and contents pages to search for relevant information from texts as I research for the assignments that I am given in the different modules in my specific area of specialisation." Several benefits of communication skills training have been highlighted from the above excerpts, among them being that the module has helped students to become better researchers from both print and electronic media. As a result, they indicated that their performance in assignments has significantly improved. The fact that they highlighted these benefits is an indication of their appreciation of the module. This confirms Taylor's (2005) view that the more they practice, the better people they become in communication.

Enhancement of academic writing skills

In addition to the above, participants highlighted that they really appreciated doing the Basic Communication Skills module because it had helped them to be good academic essay writers. One participant (Student 3 in the second focus group discussion) said, "Communication Skills is an important course because it equips me with knowledge on how to write good assignments." Student 5 (Focus group discussion 5) stated that, "The training I got in basic communication skills helped me to write meaningful assignments that score very high marks. Through communication skills training, I have been equipped with the knowledge of things to avoid in academic writing such as use of informal language, contraction of words and use of shorthand among others." Student 2 (FGD 1) said, "I feel that the skills learnt in the Basic Communication

Skills module are so important that every student at the university should undergo this training.” The responses above indicate the benefits that the participants got from communication skills training. They had improved on the way they presented arguments in academic writing and as a result they now scored high marks in their assignments. The responses also point to the fact that there should be no exemptions in as far as basic communication skills training for level one semester one students is concerned. Therefore, the participants perceive basic communication skills training as an important cog in university education as it helps them improve their academic writing skills, which ultimately makes them score higher marks in assignments and examinations.

Participants also raised the point that they had learnt how to present convincing arguments because they had been taught the major components of an academic paragraph, that is , topic sentence, developers and concluding sentence. This knowledge, from the participants’ point of view, enabled them to be good academic writers. In FGD 5, Student 3 made the following remarks, “I feel we are better writers than those who do not do the Basic Communication Skills module.” According to this participant, this was because it was only in that module where the characteristics of a good academic essay were taught and it would be difficult for those that did not do the module to come up with essays with such characteristics as they lacked the knowledge on how to go about it. These views are an indication that by and large, students in the faculty of Agri-business and Commerce appreciate the Basic Communication Skills module as they have enjoyed the benefits discussed above.

In one of the focus group discussions (FGD 3), Student 4 stated that, “Issues of referencing that we have learnt in Communication Skills helps us to avoid plagiarism.” This means that the Basic Communication Skills module had developed the students into real scholars who knew the importance of acknowledging the works of other academics. Student 3 in FGD 4 said, “I am now a totally different person as the Basic Communication Skills module has facilitated my transition from high school to university. I now read what scholars say about a specific subject and acknowledge them both in-text and on the terminal reference page.” From these findings, it can be noted that the participants acknowledged the benefits of undergoing basic communication skills training despite the fact that their level one counterparts in the Faculty of Engineering were not doing it. In fact, most of the participants (as noted in some of their responses discussed earlier) felt that their Engineering

counterparts should be made to do it for them to also enjoy the benefits of the module. These findings therefore, show that the participants valued the Basic Communication Skills module as they had benefitted a lot from it as evidenced by their responses above.

Oral presentation skills enhanced

The participants also showed that they valued basic communication skills training because they had greatly improved on their oral presentation skills. Student 1 (FGD 3) said, “I used to be shy but communication skills training has bolstered my confidence. I now know how to make my oral presentations effective. Now I can present in front of my colleagues without any fear.” Participants also indicated that they were now aware of the advantages and disadvantages of oral communication. Student 5 (FGD 1) had this to say,

I have been equipped with the advantages and disadvantages of oral communication. The advantages include the following: oral communication allows instant feedback, there can be negotiation of meaning between the speaker and his/her audience and that the speaker can use non-verbal communication signals to enhance the quality of his/her oral presentation. This means that I will be able to meaningfully use oral communication in relevant situations.

Another participant, (student 4 in FGD 4) said, “I now know that non-verbal communication has several functions. It can be used to compliment the verbal message, to reinforce verbal messages and to contradict them. This knowledge has helped me to meaningfully make sense to non-verbal cues that are used by individuals during oral communication.” Non-verbal communication is part of oral communication and the response above indicates that communication skills training had enabled Student 4 in FGD 4 to observe non-verbal cues when somebody is making an oral presentation and that facilitated his decoding of oral messages. This, therefore, means that these students had no regrets in doing the module despite the fact that other students in the Engineering Faculty were not doing it.

To assess how seriously the students took the module, the researchers also made observations on their punctuality for the Basic Communication Skills

lectures, level of preparedness for group and individual tasks as well as levels of participation during lectures. During the first three weeks of their semester, the researchers observed that some students would come ten to fifteen minutes into the lecture. However, as time went on, most of them became more punctual. Some students had to 'confess' to these researchers during the focus group discussions that, at the beginning they never took the module seriously because they thought it was a repetition of what they had covered at Advanced Level but they now viewed it differently owing to the numerous benefits they had realised. However, in FGD 5, two participants still felt that the module was a repetition of the content covered at Advanced Level Communication Skills so it was a waste of their valuable time. Interestingly, the other participants in the same FGD refuted the idea saying that those who felt that the module was a waste of time did not attend all lectures and if they did, they were late on almost all occasions. Student 1 (FGD 5) said, "For one to fully enjoy the benefits of the Basic Communication Skills module, they should be committed and be serious. If one is not serious like some of us here, it will be difficult for them to realise the benefits that come along with the module." This seems to suggest that, amongst the participants there were some who did not value the Basic Communication Skills module and that could be the reason why they deliberately chose not to attend all lectures or to be late for the lectures. However, those who attended all lectures had come to realise that it was a worthwhile endeavour as they had fully benefitted from undergoing the course. These findings, therefore, show that the basic communication skills training helps students to develop communicative competence in the English Language (Hymes, 1972) which is indispensable for university students in an ESL setting like Zimbabwe.

On the level of preparedness for group and individual tasks, the researchers observed that twelve out of a total of thirteen groups had thoroughly prepared for their group tasks. They did not make any excuses when they were asked to present their specific tasks to the class. It was only one group which kept postponing its presentation dates because they were either not ready or they had 'forgotten' the presentation paper at home. This was a reflection of lack of preparedness due to lack of interest in the module because their colleagues confirmed that they were serious in other modules. Serve for these two, the rest of the class presented on their allocated dates and there were meaningful discussions after each presentation. The researchers also noted that, overall, participation was high during lectures. In their last

lecture, the group representative requested for time to thank their lecturer for teaching the basic things which mattered in their day to day operations as university students. She indicated that, the Basic Communication Skills module was one of the most important modules that the students do in their first semester of their studies as it prepared them for a meaningful academic journey. This shows that, the participants perceived basic communication skills training was indispensable in the life of a university student and this seems to suggest that those who did not undergo the same training were at a loss.

8. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The research has shown that basic communication skills training plays a critical role in preparing students for university life and beyond, and those doing it at Victoria State University perceived it as such. Through the training they got from the module, participants had developed in all the facets of communicative competence as propounded by Hymes (1972). Those in the Faculty of Engineering equally need the basic communication skills training to facilitate their academic and professional growth. Thus, it can be concluded that, if handled properly, the Basic Communication Skills module can offer meaningful benefits to both the students doing it and the lecturers in different subject areas as the students would write well researched, well punctuated and coherent assignments. These findings add to existing literature from scholars such as ...who have emphasised the need to offer communication skills training to tertiary education students so that they can become better communicators at university and ultimately, in the world of work. However, the study was only limited to one state university in Zimbabwe and it is our proposal that further research looks at more institutions so that the results could be generalisable.

Basing on these findings, the researchers recommend that Victoria State University considers offering the Basic Communication Skills module to all students across its faculties so that they too can achieve communicative competence which is useful in their day to day communications during and after university. It is also recommended that proper orientation of level one students be done so that they could perceive all modules in the same light and not to view other modules as less important. In addition to that, Basic Communication Skills lecturers should make their lectures interesting and they should use a variety of methods so that students can fully benefit from the invaluable contribution that the module offers for those undertaking their university studies.

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