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Communication aptitude and academic success

Malissa Maria Mahmud*

Sunway University, No. 5, Jalan Universiti, Bandar Sunway, 46150 Petaling Jaya, Selangor Darul Ehsan, Malaysia

Abstract

This research is a fundamental study that aims to gain an insight into the correlations of oral communication proficiency of students with their overall academic performance by scrutinizing the different aspects on how oral communication influences the academic performance of a group of transfer students at the tertiary stage in the American Degree Transfer Program in Sunway University. An analysis of the direct correlations between the two variables will provide an overview relationship between communication and academic behavior; whether student’s oral communication influences their academic achievements or otherwise, incongruent. The proficiency in oral communication was measured via the students’ perceived oral communication rather than the actual oral communication proficiency since the students participated in answering perception-type survey questions. Subsequently, analysis of data in the signified confirmatory retorts were gathered from the students concerning the study and the results indicate that accomplishing competency in oral communications is imperative in ensuring that students perform well academically.

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Keywords: correlations; academic performance; communication proficiency

1. Introduction

The field of communication changes all segments of society and the importance of communication studies is a necessary and an essential component. In the communication process, a sender (encoder) encodes a message and sends it through a channel to a receiver (decoder) who later processes the information, sends appropriate feedback through the channel once more and, the process repeats itself (Adler, Rosenfeld & Proctor, 2010). Since communication is said to be beneficial in all aspects and is used every day, the study of this research will contribute

* Corresponding author: Malissa Maria Mahmud. Tel.: +60(3)74918622 Ext.8393; fax: +60(3)56358633.
E-mail address: malissam@sunway.edu.my
to the repercussions of verbal communication towards the American Degree Transfer Program students’ academic performance.

2. Background of the study

The variations in the level of proficiency of communication skills can improve academic performance in different ways. Oral communication can exist in many forms, including informal conversations which occur spontaneously, and, in most cases, the content cannot be planned in a structured environment (Rahman, 2010). Different types of coursework, such as class presentation, participating in group discussions and meetings, constitute one of the main factors leading to good academic performance, and they are commonly covered by oral communication. Through effective communication, students can learn to acquire the right skills, and their ideas, concepts, and initiatives can be shaped by communicating effectively. Students’ prowess in verbal communication can also increase their presentation skills. By performing as an effective communicator, a student will be able to interact confidently in a variety of coursework requiring personal and academic performance. According to Forsman-Johnson (1996), as students enter a classroom for the first time, even if they can understand what the lecturer says, they are still afraid of their own speech ability because of their weak communication skills. Hence, the hypothesis of this research is that oral communication proficiency affects students’ academic performance and subsequently, those who have better oral communication proficiency are more likely to earn a higher GPA and CGPA.

3. Statement of the problem

This research is a fundamental study that aims to gain an insight into the correlations of students’ oral communication proficiency and their overall academic performance. Numerous studies have been conducted regarding topics that are similar but many of these studies do not specify the type of communication (verbal or nonverbal) used. However, this research examines the different aspects on how oral communication impacts the academic performance of the American Degree Transfer Program students specifically. Subsequently, an analysis of the direct correlations between the two variables provides an overview of the relationship between communication and academic standing and whether student’s oral communication influences their academic achievements. For this research, only one type of communication skill (oral/verbal) was chosen as the independent variable to be quantified against the students’ academic performance. This proficiency in oral communication was to be measured by the students’ perceived oral communication rather than their actual oral communication proficiency since students would be participating in perceivable-type surveys.

4. Research questions

This research attempts to answer the following questions:
1. What is the impact of perceived oral communication skills on students’ academic performance?
2. In what ways does oral communication affect academic performance?

5. Significance of the study

The findings from this research will help to fill the gaps of the study which exist between communications and academic performance. The subjects for this study consist only of the students from the American Degree Transfer Program (ADTP). Due to the nature of the program, the overall grade achievements of the students (CGPAs) not only depend on their final examinations, since the coursework marks are taken into the consideration and it contributes 60% for each subject registered. The nature of the program gives students exposure to other acquired skills besides examination-based evaluation such as those related to communication skills. Therefore, students at some point are required to attain other skills which benefit them for the hands-on tasks. Classes under the Arts courses such as Public Speaking, English, History, and Theatre Studies require the ability to present, discuss, and
generate ideas based on their individual capabilities. The findings of this research will be able to predict the basic communication skills needed in order to achieve a high performance academically.

6. Literature review

6.1. Communication and its varieties

Communication in its very basic form is the transmission of messages between two parties or more. Communication is said to be a natural occurrence in the daily life of each individual. As said by Adler et al. (2010), we communicate even without any intentions since a simple blush is considered a form of non-verbal communication. Communication skills are the ability to use language (repressively) and express information (expressively), and these skills include lip reading, finger spelling, sign language, and interpersonal relations. There are four types of communication: verbal, written, non-verbal, and mediated communication, but the two most important areas are verbal and nonverbal communication since they represent the main branch, in a sense that some categories tend to overlap under other categories. Oral communication is a type of communication process through the mouth using words, language and tone. It involves conversing with one another and can be done through direct communication, face-to-face, or indirect communication such as telephonic conversations. There are different types of oral communication: speeches, presentations and, discussions. Non-verbal communication consists of three types: audience awareness, personal presentation and body language. Commonly, cues which include gestures, facial expressions and eye contact become part of the communication process. Since written communication is a subset of non-verbal communication, it is often not categorized on its own. On the other hand, written communication reports on what writing is, how writing gets done, and what writing does in the world, consistently providing readers with new research findings, new theoretical concepts and new ways of understanding how writing is practised in schools, workplaces and communities.

Formal or media communication, also known as Computer Mediated Communication (CMC), is defined as the type of communication transaction that occurs via two or more computer networks (McQuail, 2005). Examples are email, chat rooms, instant messaging and text-based interactions, such as text messaging. Scholars have studied the usage and functions of CMC, and found that humans use social networking to manage interpersonal interaction, form impressions of public self, and maintain relationships (Walters, 1996). In the context of this research which focuses on verbal communication skills, both speaking and listening are at the very basis of literacy. Classroom interactions help students to learn, reflect on what they are learning and have learned, and to communicate their knowledge and understanding. Whatever is taught, these tools can help a student acquire more accurate information about what they know and are able to do. This, in turn, can help a teacher to provide better feedback and guidance through communication. However, there have been concerns raised bordering partial resentment against the theory that communication proficiency is pivotal for good academic performance. Frenz (2006) argued that the fluency of communication creates familiarity leading to the bonding of relationship between students. Such bonding in turn gives way to fraternization or cliques, with students who are less adept at communication being left out from the process. Meanwhile, Pereira (2008) stated that excessive communication in a studious environment may lead to conflict, in which students tend to go against each other at the cost of self-redemption during communication apprehension building up to the tension. As a rebuttal, due to its immediacy, David (2009) suggested that communication’s advantage comes in play when it is applied in context. Communication in general is bent on exchanging information. Surely, effective communication could only mean that the exchange of information is being done smoothly for the benefits of all parties. Hence, it goes without saying that fluent communicators are natural diplomats who are able to avoid any form of misinformation. At school, such skills can come in handy during a conflict of ideas or open arguments. Additionally, Morello (2007) counter-argued that good communication enables long-lasting relationships, proving the fallacy that communication may bring harm towards social relationships as obsolete.
6.2. Perceived oral communication skills vs. actual oral communication skills

Perceived oral communication skills are the acknowledged skills an individual is assumed to use or possess in their day-to-day communication with other people. The ‘actual’ oral communication skills are the results of numerous tests and experiments conducted on individuals concerning their communication skills (Ramirez, 2010). Perceived communication skills is said to be part of a student’s self-esteem, whether they are confident with themselves when it comes to interacting verbally or whether they find themselves facing trouble communicating with one another. This self-confidence will affect the way they communicate, and hence compromising the effort they put in order to perform well in their studies since communication skills are needed in classroom discussions and presentations. This process is called self-fulfilling prophecy in which what they perceive will affect the way they act (Adler et al., 2010). An actual communication skill, on the other hand, is seen through the eyes of others according to their ratings and comparisons. Actual communication competence is measured by how well and to what degree the goals of interactions are achieved (Lane, 2000). Students with good actual communication skills perform better in academics. Thus, this form of measurement is hard to research on as students are unable to judge their own competence effectively. In comparison, perceived communication skills are highly likely to influence a student’s academic performance since confidence can be adjusted and differs according to situation compared to actual skills which are permanent and is harder to alter once it is acquired. For example, a student who perceives their oral communication as high would be confident in interactions whether in discussions or presentations. They would presume and predict all their interactions would go smoothly. However, a student who naturally possesses good oral communication might not have the knowledge of it, thus he/she would still be facing communication errors or problems during interactions. This is why perceived oral communication is taken as the measurement of independent variable affecting academic performance.

6.3. Aspects of academic performance

Academic performance is generally viewed as the overall excellence of students in their studies. The structure of in which this progress is being measured varies according to the different stages of education provided: pre-school, primary, secondary, and college/university. According to Zimmerman (2000), students’ performances depend on a number of different factors. He continued to clarify that weaker peers generally have lower grades, and stronger peers have higher grades. What are the characteristics of a successful student? This view of definition has certainly changed over time as the era of modern time youths differ from olden days. According to Brockman and Russell (2012), students of the 21st century who have a goal of achieving academic success need to focus not only on reading, writing, and arithmetic but to learn how to balance social skills together with aspects of academics, intrinsically motivated, goal oriented or rather described as socially communicatively proficient in all aspects. These factors can be in many forms and one of them is the calculated way of measuring grades or marks. At the university level, a student’s academic performance is calculated using the Cumulative Grade Point (CGPA), which is normally measured on the scale of four. In this case, students who are active in their studies, meaning they perform well throughout, will gradually score high CGPAs. The reason is that grades of students are cumulated per credit hours taken, giving an average grade score at every end of semester/year. Success, to most of the Asian societies, is portrayed as the achievement of an individual in their studies, particularly in examinations or evaluations (Ahmad, Yahya & Buniyamin, 2010). Certainly this does not mean other factors do not contribute to academic success. The calculated marks required to achieve the CGPA differs according to the different standards set by the variety of programs or faculties which contribute to the distinct academic fulfillment. For a sample of students from the American Degree Program (ADP), the percentage distribution for coursework to final examination marks is for most parts 60-40. 60% of the overall marks of a subject is given to the allocated assignments, presentations, quizzes, and other projects or field trips if available, while the remaining 40% is based on the final exam itself. This may have a high impact on the different communication skills needed in order to achieve an excellent performance since the program is not examination-based only. Students’ learning styles are known to affect their performance especially at the university level (Marriott & Marriott, 2003). A student’s learning style reflects his or her own preferences and skills in relation to the desired academic goals. These varieties of learning abilities include the ability to pay
attention, communicate, writing based work, and many more. Possessions of the different skills such as oral communication skills have great impacts on the learning process itself, thus affecting their academic performance.

6.4. Impacts of oral communication competence

The oral channels of communication are prompt and valuable in obtaining and exchanging information. Its immediacy promotes the understanding of relevant information and simplifies the transmission of information between two people or more (Adler et. al, 2010). The proper usage of communication also facilitates good relationship. Contrary to popular beliefs, there are several important aspects that contribute to academic excellence. With that being said, no other self-building aspects have been so significantly predominant than oral communication competence. Not only can language and speech difficulties affect one’s learning abilities, it also affects the social abilities such as making friends, developing healthy relationships, and achieving a high self-confidence. This self-confidence may aid students in putting more effort in order to perform well. In support of McCroskey et al. (1989), who stated that students with poor communication skills are often expected to have lower grade point averages and higher tendency to drop out, Goldfinch and Hughes (2007) suggest that the lack of confidence in communication skills has been found to be correlated with poor performance. This can be transposed into how oral communication skills are seen as significant contributors towards academic excellence. Next, the inability to properly communicate among classmates might also lead to dysfunctions in the exchanging of ideas and opinions during lessons. This may turn into the misinformation of course outlines, which in turn disrupts the learning process. Such setbacks might make remembering class contexts less efficient since learning styles are known to affect students’ performance. Moreover, competence in oral communication also aids in interpersonal relationships (Adler et. al, 2010). Students with a good repertoire of oral communication skills become an upper hand for them since this is perceived as a bonus onto others. Confidence in oral communication allows students to have a high self-concept which benefits them socially (Yahaya & Ramli, 2009). To sum up, a communication cycle or oral communication refers to not only spoken words, but also the employment of graphic and non-verbal elements to further facilitate the transmission of a message and its meaning. Perhaps the most effective way of communicating, indeed the most immediate, the spectrum of oral communication includes public speeches, presentation skills, group discussions, class participations, all of which are characteristics related to relative interpersonal communication, which plays a significant role during the exchange of ideas and informational contents, thus improving self-expression along the way.

7. Research methodology

7.1. Questionnaire

The questionnaires were distributed to about 20% of the overall students from the American Degree Transfer Program. They were circulated to roughly 80 students. By using 20 statements aimed at knowing the effects of communication skills on academic performance which are marked by a 5 point agree-disagree Likert-scale. For this study, the respondents were asked to fill up a three-part questionnaire. The first part (Part A) consists of the respondents’ biographical information such as age, gender, major, nationality, current semester and CGPA. The second part (Part B) was aimed at knowing about the impact of oral communication proficiency on academic performance. In this section, respondents were asked to rate on a scale of 1-5 in the order of strongly agree, agree, uncertain, disagree, and strongly disagree respectively. The third and final part (Part C) is to probe how oral communication affects academic performance. This section is also similar to the second part where participants rated the statement from 1-5. The survey was posted on the ADTP Facebook group whereby a link was posted on the wall which directed the respondents to the survey questions. For this particular study, a two part subjective question paper was distributed among the American Degree Transfer Program students in Sunway University. The first section was aimed at getting feedbacks on the correlations of verbal and non-verbal communication skills that a student must have in order to achieve good academic grades. For the second section, respondents were asked to give feedbacks whether they agree that by having good oral communication skills, they were “guaranteed” to achieve good
academic performance. For both sections, participants were asked questions, which were related to communication skills and academic performance. The subjective questions that were asked were structured in a simple and clear manner so that the respondents could easily understand the objective. The answers from the subjective questions were noted down to be further analyzed.

7.2. Respondents

The responses were gathered from students of Sunway University as it was timesaving for the researcher to conduct the process with an age range from 16 to 21 and above. The course program chosen for this study was the American Degree Transfer Program (ADTP). This is due to the nature of the program that was not entirely based on examination. Questionnaires were distributed in November to the mentioned group of national and international students randomly. There were a total of 83 students who were both male and female with the percentages of 49% and 51% respectively with different course majors. The respondents had to fill up the survey questions in four parts; part A consisting of their biographical information, part B and C were scale rated statement questions, and two interview questions were given to different sample of respondents from the first three parts.

7.3. Procedure

Surveys were created on Google document which allows easy distribution of surveys online as the link is given and analyzing of data becomes easier since it provides the calculated analysis. Below is the given link to the online survey: https://docs.google.com/spreadsheet/viewform?fromEmail=true&formkey=dEVCNHh6M0ZzRUNOUEJWRlN4TzRvaXc6MQ. The link to the survey was posted on the ADTP Facebook group for easy access of the participants since it is a very powerful social networking site that has the most users especially among the students of ADTP. The link was uploaded on the ADTP group because the main focus of this paper is on American Degree Transfer Program students only. The remaining number of surveys required were printed out and distributed to the rest of the ADTP students in Sunway University. A total of 83 responses were taken into account, and all data was collected and further analyzed.

8. Results

8.1. Demographic

A total of 83 respondents answered the questionnaire, which comprised of three sections. The total of 46 Malaysian and 37 International respondents consisted of 42 females and 41 males with ages ranging from 16 to above 20 years old. This is consistent with the goal of obtaining a target group of college students from the Sunway University American Degree Transfer Program. None of the students who took this survey have a CGPA of 0 to 1, while the majority of them (52%) have an average CGPA of 3.0 to 4.0.

8.2. Oral communication proficiency and academic performance

It is assumed a student with proficient oral communication skills achieves a high academic performance. The table below shows the overall ratings of perceived oral communication proficiency of students categorized according to their CGPAs.
Table 1. Overall analysis of perceived oral communication against CGPA.

| CGPA 1-2 (%) | CGPA 2-3 (%) | CGPA 3-4 (%) |
|--------------|--------------|--------------|
| Total Respondents: 3 (n) | 28 (n) | 35 (n) |

| Agreement | Neutral | Disagree |
|-----------|---------|----------|
| 41 (72%) | 12 (21%) | 4 (7%) |
| 374 (70%) | 105 (20%) | 53 (10%) |
| 453 (68%) | 118 (18%) | 94 (14%) |

Table 1 above shows students with higher CGPAs perceive their oral communication as lower than those with lower CGPAs. 68% of the students with CGPAs of 3-4 perceived their oral communication as high, whilst 72% of students with CGPA of 1-2 perceived their oral communication as high. It can be concluded that good academic achievers do not necessarily perceive their oral communication skills as good due to other factors that may contribute to having such perceptions.

8.3. Ratings of perceived oral communication against CGPA achievements

The ratings of 1-5 (‘strongly agree’ to ‘strongly disagree’ respectively) were taken into account as points. Analysis of data was done by calculating the average points for each representative according to their CGPA levels. The lower the points, the higher were the students’ perceived oral communication skills. Subsequently, the higher the points, the lower were the students’ perceived oral communication skills, and their perceived impact towards academic performance, from the perspective of ADTP students. The range of determination in which the average points of students by CGPA levels show either they agree or disagree to the statement about oral communication is beneficial towards academic performance is calculated as follows:

Max. points for disagreement : 5 (strongly disagree) x 19 questions = 95
Min. points for disagreement : 4 (disagree) x 19 questions = 76
Range for disagreement : 76 to 95 points

Range for agreement is calculated the same way, thus obtaining a range of 19 to 38 points. The remaining 39 to 75 points is the neutral/uncertainty remarks.

Table 2. Ratings of perceived oral communication against CGPA.

| CGPA | Average Points |
|------|----------------|
| 0-1  | 0              |
| 1-2  | 38.33          |
| 2-3  | 40.86          |
| 3-4  | 32.6           |

Table 2 indicates the ratings of perceived oral communication against CGPA achievements. The responses from the first semester students were not taken into consideration on purpose, since their CGPAs were unavailable during the period of the study.

9. Discussion and Conclusion

Fundamentally, the aim of this study, as the hypothesis suggests, is to objectively distinguish the influence of oral communication proficiency on academic performance. It has been established that it takes more than mental aptitude to achieve an excellent academic performance, and as such, there is a need for extra-curricular involvement to ensure an all-rounded student as advocated by Patel (2010). These extra-curricular activities more often not just expose
students to a repertoire of oral communication skills, but also help them hone these skills in the process. It is prevalent that the results correlate with previous findings since most reviews agree that oral communication proficiency contributes greatly to academic performance. The theory that communication in general alters society for good, in which the study of communication is seen as an important aspect in a wholesome education for students, especially in the current context of rapid globalization and a world with no barriers. Since communication of any type benefits society for good, surely oral communication should do the same with students and their academic performance. From this study, however, it can be pointed out that there is a difference between actual oral communication skills that students have and the ones that they perceive they have, as justified by Johnson (1997).

Unexpectedly, students with CGPAs of 3-4 perceive their oral communication the lowest compared to students of lower CGPA achievements. This is in contradiction to the statement that self-evaluation is an assessment that is shown to raise students’ academic achievements (Chappuis & Stiggins, 2002; Rolheiser & Ross, 2001). When students possess self-confidence, it is a norm for them to put in effort that would meet up to their expectation to perform well. This process is called a self-fulfilling prophecy. For this research, students who perceived their competence in oral communication as high showed high self-confidence but in this case this sense of over-confidence may be taken in the wrong way, thus resulting in less effort being put in towards achieving high standards. A study conducted by Cole, Balcetis & Dunning (2013) showed that there is a tendency for people to feature their successes to internal factors but attribute their failures to external factors. However, in general, results calculated for the average points of students on how they perceive oral communication against their academic performance showed that all of the students’ points fell into the category of agreement which ranged from 19 to 36 points. Results obtained from students with higher CGPAs appeared to support the hypothesis that competence in oral communication is important in helping them perform well academically. Thus, oral communication correlates with academic achievement in general.

The most confounding variable to be tabulated (as they might have affected the results for this study) is the responses from the first semester students. This variable, if not dealt with, would manifest an overwhelming majority in the statistics, interrupting the data analysis even further. To overcome this, responses from the first semester students are left out of consideration on purpose, as their CGPAs are currently unavailable to begin with, although this did not stop them from expressing their opinions during the subjective question section. Other than that, students honesty in answering the surveys may also be a confounding variable since most of them may not have given their actual CGPA achievements, and as such, analysis of data is unreliable when comparing perceived oral communication competency on academic performance according to respective CGPAs of students. In retrospect, even though there are limitations to this study, it is relevant to deduce that students with better oral communication skills have better academic performance. Consequently, oral communication proficiency indeed influences academic performance significantly.

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