

An Assessment of Communicative Competence in Polytechnic Students

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Abstract

Communication is the integral part of any individual. It is also the foundation for sharing information. We spend more time in communicating than doing anything else: talking, listening and interacting with others. Irrespective of caste, creed, gender and age, communication is essential to our personal, professional and civic lives. Polytechnic students require communicative competence to enhance their technological knowledge and thereby excel in their career. A study was carried out to find out communicative competence of polytechnic students. It is essential to design appropriate model that includes phonologic, semantic, syntactic, and pragmatic aspects of communication to foster the development of communication competence. Students and experts are partners in the endeavor to improve communication and students play an active role in establishing and evaluating goals, activities, and expectations. The aim of this paper is to explain and contextualize the emergence of the notion of communicative competence in polytechnic students and its assessment.

KEYWORDS: Communicative competence, Discourse Competence, Linguistic Competence, Actional Competence, Sociocultural Competence, Strategic Competence.

1. Introduction

Communication is an essential tool to interact and connect with other individuals. In the case of human beings, the communication by means of language is probably one of the most frequent and relevant actions of the daily life. However, not all linguistic communication is based on language itself, speakers make use of body language and other segmental features to complete or modify their message. The researcher has observed many polytechnic students while delivering their seminars on different topics. Some students believed that they were better at communication than they actually are, some believe they were worse. Students who suffer from high levels of communication anxiety tend to report that they are poor communicators. Students' abilities to communicate effectively vary a great deal, and sometimes the same person is more competent to communicate in one situation than in another.

2. Review of the literature

Marc J. Riemer [1] has reported on soft skills for the 21st Century engineers and discussed on various important soft skills required of modern engineers, such as foreign language skills. He proposed that the engineering curriculum still needs to incorporate additional competences, notably workplace and international / intercultural skills. Anne Keane, Ivan S. Gibson [2] have reported the results of a recent survey of communication trends in Irish engineering firms, and assessed their implications for the content and teaching methods of undergraduate communication courses for engineering students. Overall, the survey was a useful and informative instrument for the improvement of communication course offerings for undergraduate engineers. Marc J. Riemer [3] has

reported with comprehensive information concerning the status and quality of English and soft skills courses for engineers. The incorporation of language and communication improvement courses is an important element of continuous learning, and will ultimately contribute to the process of lifelong learning. Albert P'Rayan and Ramakrishna T. Shetty [4] have discussed the results of the personal report on communication apprehension instrument, speaking tests and listed the suggestions given by the students themselves to overcome their communication apprehension. This approach demands a lot from the teacher. A. Wayne Bennett, Dan Mc Auliff, Elham Makram, Adly A. Girgis [5] have provided an overview of the Effective Technical Communication programme and its expansion to the power curriculum. The impact of university/industry cooperation on improving the technical soft skills of power system graduates was summarized. More than 800 students in 22 technical courses in five engineering departments were involved in the programme at Clemson University. LIU Ping [6] has examined Chinese university English communication performance of students and the relationships among social needs, system inefficiencies, learning objectives, learning strategies, and effort according to a constructed model. The research was conducted based on analyzing the statistical data from the questionnaire. A.S.Patil, M.J. Riemer [12] have listed the key features of the communication subject for undergraduate engineering students in the Indian State of Maharashtra. Author has highlighted that integrating the skills within subject modules can achieve the right skills combination. Bernd Schulz [18] has made a survey of the importance of soft skills in students both at college and after college. He has discussed on soft skills requirements of a job.

3. Aspects of written and oral communication skills

Effective written communication skills start with using the proper format for the type of correspondence you want to send. There is no excuse for sending communications that contain spelling errors and poor grammar. For a good oral presentation, the quality of text and the way it is presented are equally important. Presenting relevant information through a presentation is an important point to be kept in mind. The audience shouldn't feel that the presentation being made is just an activity of reading out a piece of dry, textual information. Interpersonal communication is one of the best ways of developing communication skills. Through interpersonal communication, a person learns how to phrase his/her ideas clearly and also listen to others carefully. Group discussion exercises play an important role in developing the communication skills. Group discussion exercises can be used both at school/college level and professional level. Speaking in front of a large audience is quite difficult. This form of oral communication is very different from interpersonal communication. Here, we must speak precisely and present the topic in a concise manner. Holding the attention of listeners is the key to become a proficient public speaker. It is necessary to develop oral communication skills in order to survive in today's information-oriented world. Individual and business relations can be developed and maintained with the use of these skills.

4. Communicative Competencies

Communicative competence is the ability to choose a communication behavior that is both appropriate and effective for a given situation. Interpersonal competency allows one to achieve their communication goals without causing the other party to lose face. Knowledge, skill and motivation are the important components of communicative competence. Knowledge simply means knowing what behavior is best suited for a given

situation. Skill is having the ability to apply that behavior in the given context. Motivation is having the desire to communicate in a competent manner [3]. The different communicative competencies are:

Discourse Competence: Discourse competence concerns the selection, sequencing, and arrangement of words, structures, sentences and utterances to achieve a unified spoken or written text. This is where the bottom-up lexico-grammatical micro level intersects with the top-down signals of the macro level of communicative intent and sociocultural context to express attitudes and messages, and to create texts.

Linguistic Competence: Linguistic competence comprises the basic elements of communication, the sentence patterns and types, the constituent structure, the morphological inflections, and the lexical resources, as well as the phonological and orthographic systems needed to realize communication as speech or writing.

Actional Competence: Actional competence is defined as competence in conveying and understanding communicative intent, that is, matching actional intent with linguistic form based on the knowledge of an inventory of verbal schemata that carry illocutionary force (speech acts and speech act sets). Actional competence is mainly restricted to oral communication.

Sociocultural Competence: Sociocultural competence refers to the speaker's knowledge of how to express messages appropriately within the overall social and cultural context of communication, in accordance with the pragmatic factors related to variation in language use. These factors are complex and interrelated which stems from the fact that language is not simply a communication coding system but also an integral part of the individual's identity and the most important channel of social organization, embedded in the culture of the communities where it is used.

Strategic Competence: Strategic competence is knowledge of communication strategies and how to use them. The different perspectives used in strategic competence are:

(a) Psycholinguistic perspective: Communication strategies are verbal plans used by speakers to overcome problems in the planning and execution stages of reaching a communicative goal.

(b) Interactional perspective: Communication strategies involve appeals for help as well as other cooperative problem-solving behaviors which occur after some problem has surfaced during the course of communication, that is, various types of negotiation of meaning and repair mechanisms.

(c) Communication continuity/maintenance perspective: Communication strategies are means of keeping the communication channel open in the face of communication difficulties, and playing for time to think and to make (alternative) speech plans.

Organizational competence: Organisational knowledge is composed of abilities engaged in a control over formal language structures. Grammatical knowledge includes several independent areas of knowledge such as knowledge of vocabulary, morphology, syntax, phonology, and graphology. Textual knowledge enables comprehension and production of (spoken or written) texts. It covers the knowledge of marking semantic relationships among two or more sentences in a written text or utterances in a conversation and knowledge of developing narrative texts, descriptions, comparisons, classifications etc. or conversational organization (conventions for initiating, maintaining and closing conversations).

Pragmatic competence: Pragmatic knowledge refers to abilities for creating and interpreting discourse. It includes two areas of knowledge: knowledge of pragmatic conventions for expressing acceptable language functions and for interpreting the functional knowledge and knowledge of sociolinguistic conventions for creating and interpreting language utterances which are appropriate in a particular context of language use (sociolinguistic knowledge). Strategic knowledge is conceived in the model as a set of metacognitive components which enable language user involvement in goal setting, assessment of communicative sources, and planning. Goal setting includes identifying a setting of possible tasks, choosing one or more of them and deciding whether or not to attempt to complete them. Planning involves deciding how to make use of language knowledge and other components involved in the process of language use to complete the chosen task successfully.

5. Criteria for Assessing Communicative Competence

Communicative competence is measured by determining to what degree, the goals of interaction are achieved. The function of communication is to maximize the achievement of shared meaning. Criteria for assessing competence include,

- **Adaptability:** The ability to change behaviour and goals to meet the needs of interaction.
- **Conversational involvement:** It includes behavioural and cognitive activity, cognitive involvement demonstrated through interaction behaviours, assessed according to responsiveness, perceptiveness and attentiveness.
- **Conversational management:** It includes how communicators regulate their interactions, adaptation and control of social situations and how smoothly the interaction proceeds, how topics proceed and change.
- **Empathy:** It is the ability to demonstrate understanding and share emotional reactions to the situation.
- **Effectiveness:** Includes achieving the objectives of the conversation, achieving personal goals, fundamental criteria for determining competence.
- **Appropriateness:** Includes upholding the expectations for a given situation and fundamental criteria for determining competence.

6. Problems in Assessing Communicative Competence

Most assessments of basic communication courses include evaluating students' communication competence as a measure of course effectiveness. The problem with all this is the belief that we can teach communication competence in one course [18]. Focusing on only one element of the communication context in isolation provides a distorted picture of the complexities of communication. Separation of competence into separate behaviors suggests that one person's behavior can be judged apart from another person's reaction. These approaches lead to three common, but problematic, methods for assessing competence: as skills, as goal attainment, and as appropriateness. The competence can be determined by measuring the person's performance of specific communication skills. The skills approach may actually limit our abilities to teach and research communication competence.

The competence can also be viewed in terms of "effectiveness" or achievement of goals. Defining competence as the achievement of goals provides little constructive help in determining communication competence. The reaction view suggests that competence is judged by the receiver of the message. The appropriateness criteria places competence in the receiver's skills and knowledge rather than speaker's communicative ability.

7. Opinions of Experts

Students find great difficulty in adequately expressing themselves in the classroom environment. Students experience difficulties in interpersonal competence such as assertiveness, expressiveness, immediacy, self-esteem, and self confidence. Students also lack skills in critical thinking, language, and oral communication. As a result, many students tend to avoid classroom situations in which they would be called upon to share their thoughts or argue a given point. It is questionable whether students are able to benefit fully from these higher education courses. Additionally, poor communication competency will influence the students' professional lives. If the regular classroom experience is supplemented with, and supported by, communication instruction, then significant positive gains in willingness to communicate may occur. Therefore, to get the maximum benefits from the higher education experience, instruction in communication skills should be an integral part of the college curriculum [18].

Nearly, 90% of the students in rural areas lack the proper knowledge of English language. The main difficulty arises when they have to communicate in English. Even though students are good in written communication they lack in oral communication. To improve their English, students should read English newspapers, books written by English authors, literature with making use of dictionary for the meaning of difficult words, pronunciation and spelling. They should not lose their confidence or worry for the mistakes while talking. Speaking can only be improved by practice. Students should try to speak in English with their friends and professors. They should listen to English news, conversions, watch English movies with concentration to learn pronunciation and structure of sentences. Institutes must also make compulsory for professors to use English while teaching. Students must try to improve their written formal communication which will be helpful in the corporate world. They can make use of English grammar books for the formal communication. As we know that "Practice makes the man perfect" practice of speaking English with the person who is fluent in English is going to improve communicative competence day by day.

The common strengths: Includes the communication courses focused on a wide range of communication topics such as intrapersonal communication, verbal and nonverbal communication, listening, interpersonal communication, interviewing, small-group communication, and public speaking. Assessment instruments were direct, inexpensive, reliable, and simple, with relatively minimal measurement error.

The common weaknesses: Includes the increase in willingness to communicate may occur as a result of the college experience itself, or due to maturation, and not as a result of the course. There is a need for studies which assess the differential impact of a variety of courses on students' communication competencies in diverse contexts. Measurement scales used may be further limiting factors.

8. Conclusion

The research consistently finds that students participating in basic communication courses demonstrate improved communication competence. When the regular classroom experience is supplemented with and supported by communication instruction, then significant positive gains in willingness to communicate may occur. There is a need to question assumptions about how to teach communication and assess communication competence in the classroom. This calls for improved methods for assessing student learning in communication programs. Assessment programs are needed to improve both

faculty effectiveness as well as student learning. Important communication competencies that should be assessed are: Interpersonal, critical thinking, language, leadership, reading, research, oral communication, writing, and decision making. Students will therefore graduate with an understanding of what they have learned rather than simply listing the courses they have taken.

9. References

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