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The Importance of Oral Communications Among UPM Business Students

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ABSTRAK

Kajian ini berdasarkan maklum balas pelajar bidang perniagaan dari Universiti Putra Malaysia tentang soalan yang berkaitan dengan kepentingan komunikasi percakapan. Juga persoalan tentang tahap penggunaan kemahiran ini di dalam perhubungan dan cara mana kemahiran ini didapati. Keputusan kajian menunjukkan yang pelajar prihatin tentang kepentingan kemahiran perhubungan dan menggunakannya semasa berkomunikasi. Juga didapati mereka mendapat kemahiran ini melalui televisyen, video, mendengar ucapan, buku komunikasi dan teguran dari kawan.

ABSTRACT

In this short study, business students in Universiti Putra Malaysia were requested to respond to a set of questionnaires pertaining to their awareness of the importance of oral communication. Also, there were questions on their use of these skills when conveying messages and other information on how they acquired these skills. Results of the study show that business students in Universiti Putra Malaysia are aware of the importance of these skills and in fact, they use these skills when communicating. The study also revealed that they had acquired the skills from watching television, videos, real life speeches; communication books and, comments from friends.

INTRODUCTION

To compete well in the job market today, graduates must be equipped with the skills and knowledge required by the employers, a role typically entrusted to educators. It is therefore important that institutions understand the relative importance of specific knowledge which the employers place on different recruitment criteria when hiring graduates (Floyd and Gordon 1998). A number of earlier studies have identified communication skills as one of the employers' skill preferences when recruiting an employee for business positions (Beamish and Calof 1989; Deckinger *et al.* 1990; Ducoffe and Ducoffe 1990; Gifford and Maggard 1975; Hafer and Hoth 1981; Joby and Needel 1989; Kelley and Gaedeke 1990; Kim *et al.* 1993; McKendrick 1986; Neelankavil 1994; Scott and Frontczak 1996).

As more 'soft' skills are needed in keeping organizations going and producing, employers are now looking for recruits who can effectively manage people, work with people and communicate with people. This is because in the workplace, managers spend 75% of their time communicating some messages to an other. When conveying messages, people prefer oral communication channels compared to written ones. The reason is because talking takes less time and needs no computing, keyboarding, rewriting, duplicating or distributing. More importantly, it provides the opportunity for feedback. When people communicate orally, they can ask questions, share ideas and clarify doubts and work together to solve problems. It is also the best channel if there is an emotional component in the message.

It is the authors' interest to find out whether business students are aware of the importance of oral communication skills during a recruitment process and in the workplace. This paper reports preliminary findings on students' awareness of the importance of oral communication and the sources of these skills. A look at their background could spur some ideas as to what could be the contributing factor to these skills. It is hoped that from the findings in this study, further research would be done to reveal the factors that contribute to these skills and thus provide to organizations an important input to develop communication-training modules for their employees.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Many studies were done to identify the skills required in managerial positions. Fayol (1949) identified the five management functions; planning, organizing, commanding, controlling and coordinating as the basic roles of managers. Katz (1974) classified managerial skills as technical, human and conceptual. Stewart (1967) reported that people skills are needed as managers spend the majority of their time interacting with other people. Then, Mintzberg (1973) proposed ten managerial roles, five of which clearly represent communication capabilities: liasion, monitor, disseminator, spokesperson and negotiator. The other five roles (figurehead, leadership, entrepreneur, disturbance handler and resource allocator) are extricably dependant upon communication skills as suggested by Penley *et al.* (1991).

A typical day for a manager includes doing desk work, attending scheduled and unscheduled meetings, placing and receiving telephone calls, reading and answering correspondence, and tours (Griffin 2000). Most of these activities involve communication. In fact, managers spend more than half of their time on some form of communication.

What then is communication? There are several communication theories that intrinsically yield their own definition of communication. For example, by using semiotic linguistic theory, Liska and Cronkhite (1995: 22) defined communication as "the exchange of certain types of signs". There are six other general communication theories defined respectively as information, argument, chaining fantasies, question-asking and disclosing, story-telling and the talk of diffusing novel ideas (Cragan and Shields 1998). However, for the purpose of this study, we will use the general definition used in most Business Communication books which is, "a process of sending and receiving messages (Bovee and Thill 2000)".

Communication is generally either oral or written. Oral communication takes place face-to-face, in group discussions, during telephone calls, and other circumstances in which the spoken words are used to express meaning. Written communication on the other hand is done through letters, memos, reports and proposals.

Buckley *et al.* (1989) compared the results of two studies conducted in 1975 and 1983 that investigated the importance of specific applicant qualification in hiring decisions. Results illustrated how the importance of certain qualifications changed between 1975 and 1983. In 1975, oral and written communication were not among the five most important qualifications but, eight years later, communication was the top ranking qualifier, followed by work habits, which moved from the fifth ranked qualification to second. The authors anticipated that as the economy moved toward service-oriented businesses the importance of communication is likely to increase.

In a study on oral communication competency, Maes *et al.* (1997) found that competency in oral communication was ranked in the top five by 231 out of 354 managers (number 1 by 65, and in the top 3 by 163) and received the largest weight score (ws=2237). A study by Bednar and Olney (1987) discovered that oral communication skills are mandatory and 64% of the time are spend in oral communication in today's organizations. They recommended that educators continually update the business communication curriculum to focus on these skills.

Mintzberg (1973) discovered that most managers spend between 50 and 90 percent of their time talking to people. In another survey, 55% of the executives sampled believed that their own written communication skills were fair or poor, so they chose oral communication to avoid embarrassment (Griffin 2000). A similar survey indicated that the written communication managers received were of fair or poor quality. A survey on a sample of managers revealed that only 13% of the mail they received was of

immediate use to them (Mintzberg 1973) while more than 80% of the managers who responded to another survey indicated that the written communication they received were of fair or poor quality.

Recognizing the importance of effective communication, many companies today recruit people who have communication skills and train those who are already in the workplace. Various studies done on employer criteria for new recruitment place emphasis are the importance of oral communication skills. Are students aware of this? Do they realise that sending messages using appropriate gestures and words may give a more positive outcome compared to not using these skills? With these questions in mind we have the statement of the problem.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

Many studies have been done to discover the most important skills employers look for in their recruitment process. Are the ten managerial skills, as proposed by Mintzberg (1973), still the priority in employee selection in today's world of global information technology? Recent research indicates a shift from technical competence to the more 'soft' skills such as interpersonal and communication skills. In fact, Maes *et al.* (1997) found that competency in oral communication was ranked the top five by 231 out of 354 managers.

Considering this development, a few questions are highlighted:

- Are graduates seeking employment aware that oral communication is an important skill to acquire?
- Are there any differences in awareness of oral communication between gender and between ethnic groups?
- How do they acquire these skills? What are the sources?

This paper attempts to find answers to these questions by investigating business students of Universiti Putra Malaysia.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The main purpose of this study is to discover students' awareness of the importance of oral communication and the use of these skills in their communication. Other research objectives are:

1) To find out whether students have effective communication skills.
2) To investigate the sources of acquiring these skills.
3) To determine the relationship between awareness of the importance of oral communication and the sources of skills.
4) To determine any significant difference in terms of awareness between the two categories of gender.
5) To determine any significant difference in terms of awareness between the ethnic groups.

METHODOLOGY

Instrumentation

A questionnaire was developed to solicit information for the current study. It was divided into three sections: Section A is on awareness of the importance of oral communication. In this section respondents had to answer questions that relate to the elements of oral communication like gestures, voice qualities and body language. Some general questions such as respondents' perception on the use of oral communication skills were also given. Section B refers to the sources of skills. This section investigates how and where students acquire their oral communication skills. And finally, the last section, asked for respondents' demographic profile and some information on childhood back-ground.

Validity and Reliability of the Instruments

A pilot study was conducted to test the adequacy of the instrument and based on the responses from 30 students, the questionnaire was revised to discard confusing questions and to replace them with two new items. Students who participated in the pilot study were eliminated from participation in the subsequent study. A reliability analysis was run for each section and the Cronbach alpha coefficient was .82 for awareness, .83 for source of skills and .90 for overall reliability.

The questionnaire was administrated to thirty Bachelor of Economics students, sixty Bachelor of Accounting students and four Bachelor of Business Administration students all of whom are in their second or final year. Of the 100 questionnaires distributed, 5 were discarded due to missing information resulting in a response rate of 95%. Out of the 95 respondents, 13 were male and 82 female with 48 Malays, 40 Chinese, six Indians and one Others (Table 1).

TABLE 1
Demographic profile of respondents

Variables	Frequency (y)
Program	**N = 95**
Bachelor of Economics	30
Bachelor of Accounting (or Accounting with Education)	61
Bachelor of Business Administration	4
Pre-School Years	
Kindergarten	53
Nursery	2
Home	35
With grandparents	1
Missing value	4
Brought up in	
Town area only	25
Village area only	19
Both town and village areas	37
Mostly town area	10
Mostly village area	2
Missing value	12
Ethnic Group	
Malay	48
Chinese	40
Indian	6
Others	1
Gender	
Male	13
Female	82

Statistical Analysis

A *t*-test of two independent samples was carried out to see whether there exists any significant difference for awareness between male and female students. On the other hand, the one-way ANOVA was used to see if there exists any significant differences for awareness between the three major ethnic groups : the Malay, Chinese and Indian business students of Universiti Putra Malaysia. The Pearson correlation was to determine the relationship between awareness and sources of skills.

FINDINGS

Two statistical analysis were run for awareness of importance of oral communication and sources of skills, and awareness of importance and use of oral communication (Table 2). The results

TABLE 2
Statistical analysis

Descriptive Statistics	Maximum Score	Mean	Standard Deviation
Awareness of Importance of Oral Communication and Source of Skill			
Awareness	90	59.33	8.50
Source of skill	40	28.61	5.35
Awareness of Importance and Use of Oral Communication			
Importance	45	31.61	4.88
Use	50	27.72	4.29

show that 68% of the responses had a score between 51 and 67 for awareness of the importance of oral communication and between 24 and 34 for sources of skills. This indicates respondents are aware of the use and importance of oral communication symbols when conveying messages and many acquired their skills through the courses they took in campus, teachers and lectures, books, listening to renowned speakers, watching television from videos and practicing.

Results show that 68% of respondents who are aware of the importance of oral communication had a score between 27 and 37 while those using the skill had a score between 24 and 32 respectively. This indicates that when the questionnaires were run for statistical testing on groups of questions for awareness on the importance and the use of oral communication skills, more than 68% are aware of the importance of oral communication when conveying messages and they use these skills when communicating.

Two sources of skills (Table 3) were ranked highest: watching television, video and real life speeches (79%) and, practice (73%). Courses in campus were the lowest (49%) probably because these are elective courses and students have the option whether or not to take it. Also, listening to speeches by renowned speakers (52%) was low. This could be due to the lack of opportunities students have in attending seminars or conferences during their college days.

TABLE 3
Respondents' response on sources of skills

Sources of Skills	Number of Responses	%
Courses in campus	47	49
Books	58	61
Renowned speakers	49	52
Teachers and lecturers	54	57
Friends	57	60
Television, video and real life speeches	75	79
Practices	69	73

INFERENTIAL ANALYSIS

Correlation between Awareness and Sources of Skills

Result in Table 4 shows that there is a significant relationship between students' awareness of the importance of oral communication and the sources of skills [r (94) = .823, $p < 0.01$]. This indicates that students who are aware of the importance of oral communication are likely to acquire their skills through practising, watching presentations on television and videos, reading books and training from their lecturers.

TABLE 4
Correlation between awareness and sources of skills

Mean Awareness	Mean Sources of Skill	df	r	Sig r	r^2
61.46 58.98	6.11 8.79	94	.823	.000*	.677

*** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level of significance*

Difference of Awareness between Male and Female

As for awareness between male and female, there is no significant difference [t (93) = 0.976, p> 0.05] as can be seen from Table 5. Both male and female know the importance of these skills, in the same manner.

Table 5
Awareness of importance of oral communication skill between male and female

Gender	Mean	SD	df	t value	Sig. t
Male	61.46	6.11	93	0.976	.332
Female	58.98	8.79			

Note: not significant at .05 level of significance

Difference of Awareness between Ethnic Groups

There is no significant difference of awareness between ethnic groups [F(3, 91) =1.063, p>0.05) as can be seen in Table 6. This shows that business students of Universiti Putra Malaysia from all ethnic groups – Malay, Chinese, Indian and others – are aware of the importance of oral communication.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study were stimulating. We can conclude that most of the business students of Universiti Putra Malaysia, regardless of gender. and ethnic group, are aware of the importance of oral communication. This indicates that instructors of communication at Universiti Putra Malaysia would be one step ahead when teaching these courses. They can now concentrate on motivating students rather than creating

TABLE 6
Difference between awareness and respondents' ethnic groups

Variable	Source	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig. F
Awareness	Between groups	229.597	3	76.532	1.063	369
	Within groups	6549.287	91	71.970		
	Total	6778.884				

Note: not significant at .05 level of significance

awareness for communication courses.

Also, the results on sources of skills could be used when developing such courses. Televisions, videos, books, communication classes and practices would enhance the teaching of oral communication courses so instructors have to consider incorporating them into the teaching modules. Some researchers like Wardrope and Bayless (1994) have attempted to investigate how instructors of business communication teach oral communication skills in their classes. They discovered that the degree to which oral communication skills are taught in the business classroom is contingent upon class time constraints, instructor preparation, and readiness to discuss various aspects of oral communication.

IMPLICATIONS

Findings from this study are consistent with the studies that have been done concerning the importance of oral communication. Business students of Universiti Putra Malaysia are aware that oral communication is important and they apply these skills when they communicate. Gender and ethnic groups show no significant differences in terms of their awareness of the importance of these skills because they believe that oral communication is an important tool in getting work done. As Williams (1978) says, "There is a strong connection between communication effectiveness and organizational effectiveness."

The results of this study give a positive indication that business students at Universiti Putra Malaysia are ready for oral communication training. Teachers of communication courses such as Business Communication could use this information to investigate further as to how and where students acquire these skills. Then by using these findings, they can promote and enhance the teaching of Business Communication in their classes.

CONCLUSION

The findings in this study show that business students of Universiti Putra Malaysia are aware that they should have oral communication skills before going into the job market. Although this is a preliminary study on investigating students' awareness on the importance of oral communication, the results obtained give a good indication on the area for future research. It is found that students are aware that oral communication is important, so researchers could now focus their future studies on finding out what other sources students use to acquire these skills, and the availability of these sources to students. When these sources are uncovered, instructors of communication courses could then design teaching methods that suit the characteristics and limitations of the sources. This study could also be extended to other higher learning institutions. Future studies could also focus on investigating factors that relate to awareness of oral communication, such as family background, and how this knowledge could be used to enhance the teaching of oral communication.

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