

The Perceived Importance of Communication Skills Courses among University Students: The Case of Two Universities in Tanzania

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Abstract

This article is about the perceived importance of communication skills courses among Tanzanian university students. A total of 134 undergraduate students, randomly selected from two Tanzanian universities, were involved in this study. The study adopted a case study design in order to have an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon under investigation. The data were collected through interview schedules and they were analysed using thematic content analysis in which they were coded and classified according to themes generated from the responses. The findings revealed that communication skills courses were perceived by the majority of the respondents as important courses for the acquisition of communication skills needed in academic settings. It is recommended that universities should strive to improve the delivery of the courses by ensuring that both human and material resources are adequately available for the purpose of enabling students to benefit more from the courses.

Introduction

The development of any country depends on how efforts are made to invest more and wisely in education. Education serves as a means by which people acquire knowledge and skills that can be implied in relevant curricula, particularly on how to exploit and utilize resources available for micro and macro-development (Galabawa, 2005). The knowledge and skills include those which are concerned with problem-solving, information and communication technology, administration and management, science and technology, research, and languages (Komba, 2012). Such knowledge and skills can be acquired in schools, institutes, colleges, and universities through a given medium of instruction which facilitates communication among the involved parties.

After independence in 1961, Tanzania adopted a form of education in which Kiswahili was made the medium of instruction in the school career alongside English (Tibategeza, 2009; Neke, 2003). In 1967, Kiswahili was declared a national language and a language of instruction in primary schools while English was declared a co-official language and it was supposed to be taught as a compulsory subject in all primary schools (Mlama & Materu, 1978). In addition, English was also declared a language of instruction at post primary school levels, including the university. However, studies undertaken on language-in-education (Tibategeza, 2009; Swila, 2009; Rugemalira, 2005; Rubagumya, 1991; Mlama & Materu, 1978) have advocated a switch to Kiswahili as a language of instruction at all levels of education in Tanzania, insisting that the current system of education has negatively affected the provision of education. For example, a study by Mlama and Materu (1978) found that students could not express themselves in English and most of them were unable to participate in lessons conducted in English.

In order to minimize communication problems related to English language in academic settings, all Tanzanian universities offer communication skills courses to all undergraduate students (Komba, 2012). In Tanzania, the first communication skills course was introduced at the University of Dar es Salaam in 1978 (Mlacha & Rea, 1985). The course was introduced in order to improve students' abilities to learn efficiently and effectively through the medium of English (Mlacha & Rea, 1985; UDSM, 1983). Since then, the course has been one of the compulsory courses in all other universities in the country.

A good number of studies have been conducted on the teaching and learning of communication skills courses in Tanzania (Komba, 2008; Mwalimu, 1998; & Mbowe, 1994; Mlacha & Rea, 1985). For example, while Komba's study sought to investigate the impact of communication skills courses on students' development of communicative abilities, Mwalimu's study was on the influence of students' attitudes and motivation in learning communication skills courses. Other studies have revealed that students' abilities to communicate in and about their subjects of specialization have not improved despite the fact that all students take communication skills courses (Mohamed, 2006; Komba, 2012). Since perception is one of the drivers for successful performance, including academic performance (Ransom *et al*, 2005), the author was interested to investigate whether or not the university students in Tanzania perceived communication skills courses as important courses within and outside their academic settings. It was assumed that if students had positive perceptions of the importance of communication skills courses, they would be motivated to learn the courses, hence successful acquisition of communication skills needed in their specialties.

Therefore, this study was designed to examine the perceived importance of communication skills courses among Tanzanian university students. The study sought to answer one main research question: "What is the perceived importance of communication skills courses among Tanzanian university students?"

Theoretical reviews

The term 'Communication' has been derived from the Latin word 'communis' that means 'common' (Foulger, 2004). Thus 'to communicate' means 'to make common' or 'to make known'. Communication is essentially a process that involves sharing of information (Komba, 2008). It can be perceived better as a two-way process in which there is an exchange and progression of thoughts, feelings or ideas towards a mutually accepted goal or direction. All forms of communication require a sender, a message, a channel, and a receiver (Sen, 2005). While Mbowe (1994) defines communication as a process involving writing correct language, precise reporting, correspondence and mastering the mechanics of writing and speaking, Anderson (1972) views communication as a dynamic process in which a person consciously or unconsciously affects the cognition of another person through materials or agencies used in symbolic ways. In the same vein, Ndoloi (1998) contends that communication is the transactional process concerned with the creation, transmission, interpretation and use of information. Generally, effective communication involves the choice of the best communication channel for a specific purpose, the technical knowledge to use the channel appropriately, the presentation of information in an appropriate manner for the target audience, and the ability to understand messages and responses received from others.

It is difficult to discuss the process of communication without highlighting the communication models. This is supported by Foulger (2004) who argues that models are not only a fundamental

building block of theory but also a fundamental tool of instruction. There are several models which explain the process of communication in relation to different contexts. In this study, two models namely the Information Theory Model, and the Ecological Model of the Communication Process have been reviewed.

The Information Theory Model, by Shannon (1948), is one of the first designs of information theory. Shannon sought to discover how communication messages could be converted into electronic signals most efficiently, and how those signals could be transmitted with a minimum error. The model includes an information source, the message, a transmitter, a signal, a channel, noise, a receiver, and a destination. The Shannon's model of communication is considered as a common ground of such diverse disciplines as journalism, rhetoric, linguistics, and speech and hearing sciences. According to Foulger (2004), part of its success is due to its structuralist reduction of communication to a set of basic constituents that not only explain how communication happens, but why communication sometimes fails. The model has considered distractors which may distort the communication process, such as noise which may occur somewhere between the transmitter and the receiver. For example, in the teaching and learning situation, learners are better placed to grasp the intended content if the environment is conducive, and they are able to understand the language involved. As pointed out earlier, the medium of instruction at post primary institutions in Tanzania is English language which is a foreign language. For successful interactions to take place during learning, both students and instructors must be conversant with the language used. Literature indicates that most university students lack communication skills in English language which is the medium of instructions at such level of education (Mohamed, 2006; Malekela, 2003; Mwansoko, 1996; Widdowson, 1979). Therefore, interactions between instructors and students become limited as students opt to keep silent because of their inability to express themselves in English (Puja, 2003). This is likely to result in ineffective learning.

Like all other models, Shannon's model of communication has been criticized for some weaknesses. One of the main weaknesses is that communication is presented as a linear, one way process. In view of this, the model is criticized for suggesting a definite start and finish to the communication process which in fact is often endless. For example, for communication to be effective in an academic setting, the process has to be a two-way process. Learning involves interaction which essentially involves communication. When the communication process is unidirectional as suggested by Shannon, feedback, which is an important component in the learning process, will be missing. Consequently, lack of feedback may result into ineffective learning. However, a credit is given to this model as it represents a useful abstraction that identifies the most important components of communication and their general relationship to one another.

On the other hand, the ecological model of the communication process was developed by Foulger (2004). The main assumption of this model is that communication occurs in the intersection of four fundamental constructs: communication between people (creators and consumers) is mediated by messages which are created using language within media; consumed from media and interpreted using language. It is a detailed elaboration of Lasswell's (1948) model of communication who views that a convenient way to describe an act of communication is to answer the following questions: Who? Says what? In which channel? To whom? With what effect? In the ecological model, the "who" are the creators of messages, the "says what" are the messages, the "in which channel" is elaborated into languages (which are the content of channels) and media (which channels are a component of), the "to whom" are the consumers of messages, and the effects are found in various

relationships between the primitives, including relationships, perspectives, attributions, interpretations, and the continuing evolution of languages and media (Foulger, 2004). In this model, communication process is viewed as the product of a set of complex interactions between its primary constituents: messages, people (acting as creators of messages, consumers of messages, and in other roles), languages, and media. This is unlike Shannon's model which views communication as a unidirectional process which begins by sending a message and finishes with receiving the sent message.

The ecological model has many implications in the teaching and learning situations. For example, both lecturers and students at university level are creators and consumers of messages. Lecturers create and send messages as they teach and their students do the same when responding to their lecturers. The messages can be created and sent orally such as during lectures, seminars, and class or group discussions. The same can also be done in a written form as for the case of take home assignments, term papers, tests, and examinations.

As the model suggests that messages are created and consumed using language, this cannot be overlooked in the teaching and learning process. It implies that proficiency in language skills, for this case the language of instruction, is a prerequisite for the effective creation, sending, and consumption of messages, hence effective learning. For example, currently there are ongoing debates in Tanzania on switching the medium of instruction from English to Kiswahili language throughout the education levels. Those who advocate for the changes argue that effective learning (involving creation, sending, and consumption of messages) cannot take place if those who are involved in the process are not proficient in the language used. Therefore, effective learning is highly dependent upon the abilities of those who are involved in the process to communicate, either verbally or in a written form.

Furthermore, the model brings in the issue of relationship building which is also important for effective teaching and learning to take place. It is commonly accepted that learning is most effective if the environment in which communication is taking place is conducive. The conducive environment is one which is characterized by positive interpersonal relationships among all participants whether teachers or learners, by interactions which are comfortable and orderly, and is such that learners feel appreciated and personally acknowledged where possible (Kafanabo, 2006).

The communication process is the interrelationship between several interdependent components. It involves a whole series of related actions and reactions which together can result in the sharing of meaning. Sen (2005) points out that communication is the 'process' because it is an activity which is connected with a series of steps that are deliberately undertaken to reach a goal. The process demands that both the sender and the receiver pay attention to elements of successful communication which include the sender, message, channel, receiver, and feedback (Sen, 2005). Since each of these elements is significant in making effective communication, a brief explanation of each of them in relation to teaching and learning situation is pertinent.

The process of communication begins with the sender who is struck by an idea which he/she wishes to share or convey or exchange with another person. The idea is first converted into a message by using verbal or non verbal medium of communication (Sen, 2005). The message is then conveyed to the target destination for the intended impact.

In the teaching/learning situation, the sender of message may either be a student or a lecturer or both in the form of turn-taking. The message may include subject matters of different courses offered at the university. In order to ensure that the message is well understood, the sender has to use words and non-verbal signals that the receiver is familiar with. This can only be possible if those who are involved in the communication process are proficient in the language used. For example, during teaching and evaluation processes at the university, language is involved in every stage. Lecturers conduct lectures, compose examinations, and organize seminars using English language. Likewise, students ought to answer questions, and participate in seminars and lectures using the same language. Therefore, English language proficiency is connected to their academic achievement because it acts as the engine in the whole process of teaching and learning as well as testing (Wilson & Komba, 2012).

On the other hand, channel is the vehicle through which the message is carried to the receiver (Mafu *et al.*, 1997). In educational settings, instructors have different communication channels which may be used to transmit information to students. For example, the spoken information can use such methods as face-to-face, film, television, or telephone. Therefore, the senses of sight, touch, smell and taste assist in accomplishing the communication process. In relation to this study, the channels of communication used to deliver messages during teaching and learning situation at the university may include lectures, seminars, written assignments, books, and examinations. These are situations in which learning takes place.

The receivers are the people or group that are the target of the message. According to Bojuwon (1998), their interpretations, (decoding), feelings, understandings and total reactions to the message are a function of many factors: their understanding of the symbols used, their perception of the sender and his/her intent, and their limitation of the physical structure of the situation, backgrounds and aspirations that may be significantly different from those of the sender. The implication is that understanding is the key to decoding and that communication effectiveness is greatly determined by the extent to which the receiver's decoding matches the sender's encoding. Therefore, communication is only successful when both the sender and the receiver understand the same information as a result of the communication process. This is essentially facilitated by a language in which the intended communication takes place. In the teaching and learning situations, the receiver of the message may either be a lecturer, or student(s) or both depending on who is sending the message at a given point of time. For example, in interactive lectures, lecturers may be sending messages to and receiving the same from students.

Moreover, feedback is the receiver's response to the sender's message and that the response can be both verbal and nonverbal (Sen, 2005). Feedback is an important factor in the communication process because it helps the sender to determine whether the message has been successfully communicated and understood or not (Shannon and Weaver, 1949). In the teaching and learning situation, the lecturer as a sender of information may for instance deliberately seek feedback by asking students such questions for example "does this example seem relevant in this context?" or "am I making myself clear?" Likewise, feedback can be through written works- that is through assignments and examination responses.

In view of these elements of communication process, it is clear that successful communication is a two-way process. That is to say, both the sender and the receiver are responsible to make an

effective cycle of communication. Since communication involves sharing information, it is therefore a crucial entirety in the teaching and learning situations.

In Tanzanian context, a communication skills course can be perceived as a set of planned lessons which offer skills that enable students to communicate effectively within an academic setting. It is specifically designed to expose students to strategies which aim at improving their efficiency in listening to lectures, reading academic texts, taking notes from speech and writing, and planning and writing essays. The course aims at reducing language problems which may lead to academic under-achievement arising from poor expression and organization in students' essays and examinations (Komba, 2012). Different universities in Tanzania have different designs of communication skills courses, aimed at meeting the needs of students with diverse disciplines.

The evolution of communication skills courses can be traced back to the mid-1970s in England (Carroll, 1980). It was during then when it was found that students from Africa, Arabia, Asia and other non-English speaking countries had poor academic performance in the vocational training centres. The poor performance was attributed to their limited knowledge of English language since they came from non-English speaking countries, hence a poor background in the language. As such, communication skills courses were introduced in order help students improve their academic performance by improving their level of mastery of the medium of instruction, in this case, English language. In Tanzania, communication skills courses were introduced for the first time at the University of Dar es Salaam in 1978 (Mlacha & Rea, 1985). It was meant to improve students' ability to learn efficiently and effectively through the medium of English (Mlacha & Rea, 1985; UDSM, 1983). Since then, some studies have been conducted on the teaching and learning of communication skills in Tanzania (Komba, 2008; Mwalimu, 1998; Mbowe, 1994; Mlacha & Rea, 1985). However, these studies did not go an extra mile to examine the perceived importance of communication skills courses among university students, which was the focus of this study.

Methodology

As pointed out in the introduction section, the purpose of this study was to examine the perceived importance of communication skills courses among Tanzanian university students. The study adopted a case study design because the aim of the study was to have an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon under investigation. A total of 134 undergraduate students (i.e.78 males and 56 females), randomly selected from two universities, were involved in this study. The two universities included Sokoine University of Agriculture and Teofilo Kisanji University. The data were mainly collected through interview schedules and they were analysed using thematic content analysis in which they were coded and classified according to themes generated from the responses. For the purpose of protecting the informants' rights to privacy, private data identifying the participants and their affiliated institutions have not been reported in this article.

Findings and Discussion

The main research question for this particular study was "What is the perceived importance of communication skills courses among Tanzanian university students?" In the analysis of the data collected from 134 students, five categories of respondents' perceived importance of communication skills courses were identified as presented in Table 1:

Table 1: Categories of Respondents' Perceived Importance of Communication Skills Courses

S/N	Category
1	Acquisition of note taking skills
2	Acquisition of academic writing skills
3	Acquisition of oral presentation skills
4	Acquisition of reading skills
5	Acquisition of listening skills

Acquisition of note taking skills

In this aspect, the findings indicated that more than half of the respondents (74/134) considered the communication skills courses as being important because they helped them to gain different techniques on how to take notes during lectures and other academic presentations taking place at the university. In this regard, one respondent had this to report:

Communication skills courses are very important for university students. For example, university students require knowledge of note taking techniques in order to be able to jot down important points during lectures and seminars (INT. R17M).

This quotation shows that the respondent was positive on the utility of the communication skills courses in developing note taking skills. There were many other similar observations from other respondents.

These findings seem logical because in the communication skills courses, students are exposed to different note-taking techniques which are essentially useful in taking notes efficiently during lectures. The techniques include, for example, using acronyms, shortening words by omitting some letters, and shortening sentences by omitting non-content words such as prepositions, articles, and conjunctions in order to keep pace with the speakers (Komba, 2012; Mafu, *et al.*, 1997). Since taking notes is the most effective way of storing the vast amount of information students receive during lectures or seminars (Komba, 2012; Komba, 2008), the importance of note-taking skills cannot be underestimated.

Acquisition of academic writing skills

The other perceived importance of communication skills courses among university students was related to the acquisition of academic writing skills, relevant for university studies. Regarding this aspect, 94/134 of the respondents stated that communication skills courses were instrumental in acquiring academic writing skills needed in their different areas of specialization. Specifically, the respondents reported that the courses enabled them to gain skills needed in writing term papers, special projects, research proposals, laboratory reports, and research reports.

University studies require students to do a lot of writing activities which need students to have relevant academic writing skills. The specific skills of writing which students have to learn include writing introductory paragraphs, topic sentences, developing arguments and propositions, and organizing texts and establishing cohesion (Komba *et al.*, 2012). In view of the findings of this study, it seemed that the respondents considered communication skills courses as being important in the acquisition of such skills.

The importance of writing skills to university students has also been underscored by Ransom, Larcombe and Baik (2005). In their survey study which involved students whose first language was not English, the researchers sought to find out which of the four key language skills (speaking, writing, reading, and listening) were the most important for students. The findings indicated that

writing skills were the most important as 55.6% of all respondents indicated so. The findings that writing was perceived as the most important language skill for academic performance among students is not surprising because much of tertiary assessment is based on written assignments.

Acquisition of oral presentation skills

The acquisition of oral presentation skills was another perceived importance of communication skills courses among students in the two studied universities. With regard to this category, 104/134 respondents stated that the communication skills courses helped them to learn oral presentation skills needed in their studies at the university. For example, one respondent had this to say:

Oral presentation is one of the most challenging tasks for us. While this is the case, most the courses here at the university require us to make oral presentations and one of the criterion for assessing the presentations is related to how better we employ presentation skills. This is where the communication skills courses become important for all of us as the courses enable us to learn presentation skills (INT. R9F).

The respondent's remark shows that the courses were perceived as being important as they enabled them to acquire presentation skills needed for their studies. Specifically, the respondents stated that the course enabled them to learn how to choose proper materials for presentation; how to choose a method of presentation suitable for one's audience; how to handle questions during presentation; and how to use visual media and other resources during presentation.

The findings seem to be logical given the researcher's experience as university lecturer. In the context of Tanzanian universities, oral presentation skills are particularly important to students when they are supposed to make presentations on various topics related to their different courses of study. For instance, at Sokoine university of Agriculture where the researcher is based, all undergraduate students who are in their third year of study are obliged to conduct research and write research reports in partial fulfilment of the award of the registered degree programmes. In some departments, the findings of the conducted research have to be presented orally to the faculty members before submitting the same for assessment and subsequent grading. In this regard, presentation skills play a significant role in determining students' success in the university studies.

Acquisition of reading skills

Reading is one of the four language skills. Others are writing, listening, and speaking. Regarding the acquisition of reading skills as one of the categories of perceived importance of communication skills courses, 88/134 respondents reported that the communication skills courses had enabled them to learn how to read for different purposes. The respondents stated that they had, for example, learnt about different techniques of reading such as skimming, scanning, extensive reading, and intensive reading which are used for different academic reading purposes. Stressing on the importance of reading skills learned in the communication skills courses, one respondent had this to report:

Some people think that learning on how to read is as good as wasting ones time. That is not true. I feel that if a university student does not have reading skills, it is very disadvantageous. For example, one can waste a lot of time reading a text which is irrelevant to him/her while the student would have skimmed the document beforehand to decide whether or not it is worth reading. I learnt reading skills in the communication skills course and I find them useful in my studies (INT1. R7F).

From the extract, it is evident that the respondent appreciated the role of communication skills courses in the acquisition of reading skills. There were many other similar observations.

Since university studies require students to read extensively, reading skills are important because they enable students to comprehend ideas, follow arguments, and detect arguments without difficulties. In addition, the skills are useful in serving time the students use in, for instance, deciding which material to read, the extent to which the material should be read, and probably which parts of the material are worth reading according to the pre-determined purpose. Research findings in applied linguistics and reading research in applied linguistics have consistently shown a strong correlation between reading proficiency and academic success at all ages from the primary school right to university level (Pretorious, 2007). This implies that university students need to be well versed with reading skills in order to have better academic achievement.

Acquisition of listening skills

Another category of the perceived importance of communication skills courses among the studied university students was related to the acquisition of listening skills. The findings, in this aspect, showed that more than half (72/134) of the respondents considered the communication skills courses as being important in enabling them to learn skills needed for effective listening. Specifically, the respondents stated that the course had enabled them to learn how to maintain eye contact with the speaker; how to interact with the speaker; how to concentrate on what is being said as opposed to how it is said; and how to stay active throughout the listening session by asking oneself mental questions, which are useful skills in effective listening.

In the context of university studies, effective listening is a pre-requisite to good note-taking (Wilson & Komba, 2012; Komba, 2008). Listening skills are specifically important to university students because they are often confronted with situations which require them to make notes either from reading texts or listening to oral presentations such as lectures, meetings, symposia, and seminar discussions.

The importance of listening skills to university students has also been reported by Powers (1987), who did a survey study whose purpose was to obtain faculty perceptions of the importance of listening skills to academic success. In this study, the findings indicated that listening skills (particularly those related primarily to various aspects of lecture content) were very important as far as academic success was concerned.

As pointed out earlier, most of the students who are admitted in Tanzanian universities are non-native speakers of English language. In realisation of the significance of listening skills to university students, listening skills are part and parcel of the communication skills course contents taught in Tanzanian universities.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The findings of this study have revealed that the communication skills courses are perceived by the majority of university students in Tanzania as important courses for the acquisition of communication skills needed in academic settings. Therefore, the fact that the majority of students did not seem to improve in communication skills even after taking communication skills courses, as reported by Mohamed (2006) and Komba (2012) could be attributed to other factors, including pedagogical shortfalls. In view of these findings, it is recommended that communication skills courses should be sustained because of their potential benefits to students. However, the universities should strive to revise the courses in terms of contents and delivery approaches and ensure that both

human and materials resources are adequately available for the realization of the anticipated course outcomes.

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