

RESEARCHES REGARDING THE ACQUIRING OF STUDENTS' BUSINESS COMMUNICATION SKILLS

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ABSTRACT: This paper presents some research aimed at how students acquire knowledge and skills related to communication techniques in business. There are analyzed oral, written and group communication techniques, before and after the specific teaching activities of the business communication disciplines attended by students from several programs of study of “Lucian Blaga” University of Sibiu. The findings show the importance of training business communication skills for better adaptation of the graduates on the labor market.

KEY WORDS: business communication, student communication skills, engineering education.

1. INTRODUCTION

Academicians and employers widely acknowledge the need for oral and written communication skills. In a study of 409 work-related episodes provided by graduate students, Reinsch and Shelby [5] find that oral episodes requiring the employee to serve in either an advocate or conflict management position prove the most challenging tasks for students. In a study of needed competencies for graduates, 354 managers indicate that the top three requirements are oral communication, problem-solving, and self-motivation abilities [3].

Scholars and practitioners alike have long argued that professional effectiveness is concomitantly linked to communication competence [8]. Consequently, Plutsky [4] observed, “Business school faculty have come to realize that they must equip students with the communication skills employers demand if their programs are to succeed” (p. 69).

Communication is the fundament of success for business. Using it adequately, individuals will work better as a group, enabling businesses to exchange information, set goals,

follow their progress and come up with solutions to solve problems that might occur. Within the context of today’s rapidly-changing economic and technological field, business communication supports the decision-making process, thus enabling restructuring – vital for organizations in order to survive [1,2].

The ubiquitous Internet-based technologies turned globalization into a reality not even the smallest organization can dispel. Furthermore, professional proficiency alone is no longer sufficient for an individual because their professional skills are ineffectively and insufficiently used. Many employees already have effective communication skills that they have learned during school or through their own personal efforts. Others, however, have a long way to go. Employers should develop ways to assess these skills and to provide appropriate training where necessary.

In order to prove the previous assertions and as a result of a fruitful collaboration between the ‘Hermann Oberth’ Engineering Faculty, ‘Lucian Blaga’ University of Sibiu and The University Of Missouri - Colombia, USA (1993-1994; 1994 – 1997), there were taken adequate actions in order to append business communication to the curricula. Therefore,

starting with the 1998-1999 university year, the economic engineering students' syllabus was added the latter subject. It has been taught 4 hours a week – 2 hours of course and 2 hours of seminar during one whole semester (14 weeks). Three years later, original literature in the form of two manuals – one for the course and the other for the seminar – was produced [6,7].

Starting from the 2001 – 2002 university year, business communication has been taught to students belonging to different other specialties: machine-building technologies, machine-tools and technological equipment for textiles throughout an entire semester (1 hour of course and 1 hour of seminar).

2. METHOD

2.1. Participants

In order to assess the impact of the business communication course on the students' communicating skills, the students from five different specializations were asked to participate at this research.

The answers of the respondents will be presented based on their domain of studies: industrial engineering and engineering and management. The students enrolled in the engineering and management domain were from two specializations: Economic Engineering in Mechanical Field and Industrial Economic Engineering, while the students from the Industrial Engineering domain have the following specializations: Machine Building Technology, Transportation Engineering and Machine Tools.

The students who are enrolled in industrial engineering domain have 2 hours of courses per week and 1 hour per week for applications (workshops), whereas their colleagues from the economic engineering domain study 4 hours per week of business communication – 2 hours for the course and 2 hours for the seminars.

2.2. Instrument

The students were asked to take three tests. The first one assesses oral communication

skills, the second one, their behavior during the communication process and the third one assesses the written skills [7]. The latter one, since impossible to determine by means of a survey was based on Gunning's formula also known as the fog index, a formula developed by two leading scientists in the field of written communication [6].

The tests will only be highlighted in this paper, showing the results that were reached, comparing students' communication abilities before and after they studied business communication.

3. RESULTS

There were collected 243 valid answers: 117 from the students enrolled in the economic engineering field and 126 from the students who study industrial engineering. The collected data was analyzed using SPSS and Microsoft Excel.

Table 1. The oral communication skills of the Engineering and Management students before and after the course

	Excellent	Good	Average	Poor	Total
Before	18 (15.5%)	26 (22.22%)	52 (44.44%)	21 (17.78%)	117 (100%)
After	26 (22.22%)	47 (40%)	34 (28.89%)	10 (8.89%)	117 (100%)

Table 2. The oral communication skills of the Industrial Engineering students before and after the course

	Excellent	Good	Average	Poor	Total
Before	16 (12.5%)	30 (23.43%)	51 (40.62%)	29 (23.43%)	126 (100%)
After	32 (25%)	47 (37.5%)	32 (25%)	15 (12.5%)	126 (100%)

The reason for this distinction between profiles resides in the different number of classes of business communication taught. In order to make this piece of information more relevant, two charts showing the before and after status are displayed in figures 1 and 2.

The two figures show a visible improvement of the students' communication skills and in that – in some cases – the percentage of

students experiencing difficulties has halved. We can also note that the best performances were achieved by economic engineering students – who study business communication for four hours a week.

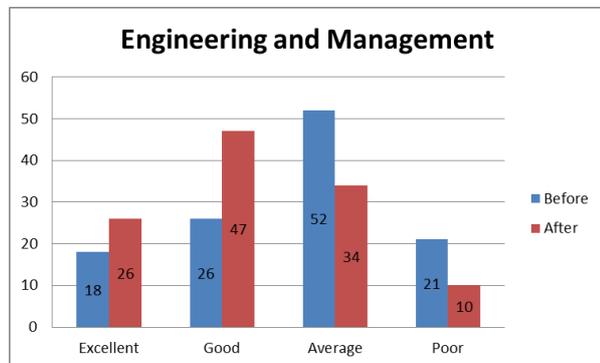


Figure 1. The oral abilities of the Engineering and Management students before and after the course

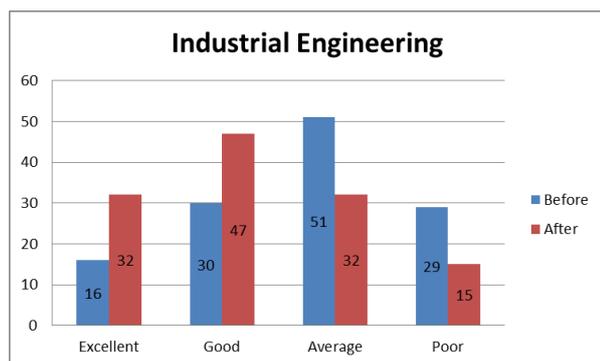


Figure 2. The oral abilities of the Industrial Engineering students before and after the course

Test number two, as previously mentioned pragmatically depicts the students’ behavior during the communication process. In order to do that, the following aspects were considered: group communication, meetings, interpersonal, public and written communication.

Tables 3 and 4 show the before and after situation. We must note that this time there was no differentiation made between the different specialities.

Table 3. The behavior of the engineering and management students during the communication process – before and after the course

		Before	After
Group communication skills	Excellent	10	23
	Good	31	49
	Average	47	31
	Poor	29	13
Communication skills for meetings	Excellent	8	18
	Good	21	42
	Average	34	31
	Poor	55	26
Interpersonal communication skills	Excellent	16	26
	Good	29	47
	Average	34	26
	Poor	39	18
Public communication skills	Excellent	18	23
	Good	31	42
	Average	39	36
	Poor	29	16
Written communication skills	Excellent	21	29
	Good	44	49
	Average	31	26
	Poor	21	13

Table 4. The behavior of the industrial engineering students during the communication process – before and after the course

		Before	After
Group communication skills	Excellent	18	32
	Good	39	57
	Average	39	26
	Poor	30	12
Communication skills for meetings	Excellent	10	20
	Good	24	47
	Average	35	39
	Poor	57	20
Interpersonal communication skills	Excellent	18	26
	Good	30	47
	Average	49	37
	Poor	30	16
Public communication skills	Excellent	16	26
	Good	30	41
	Average	43	37
	Poor	37	22
Written communication	Excellent	30	39
	Good	39	47

skills	Average	41	32
	Poor	16	8

Pair sample charts have been drawn below showing the conspicuous progress economic engineering students have undergone attending this course.

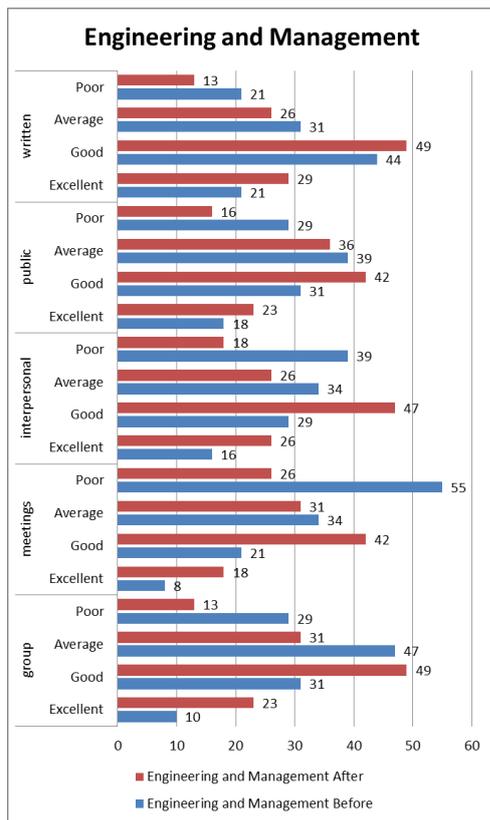


Figure 3. Engineering and Management students' communication skills – before and after the course

Again, the business communication course has proved efficient as it more than halved the number of students with great difficulties in oral communication and doubled the number of brilliant students in this respect, to mention just the extremes. The average situation has become milder after the students took the course, thus turning the engineering managers of tomorrow into more versatile speakers. Since written skills are difficult to evaluate by means of a simple survey, another option had to be thought of. Hence, Gunning's formula was used instead. The fog index tells us that shorter sentences are easiest to understand. Consequently, if the index is 8 – 12, the text

is completely understandable; between 13 – 22 the text is relatively hard to understand, from 23 – 27 'the fog starts to thicken' and if the index is above 28, the text becomes illegible. For this test, students were asked to write a fragment, in this case an application letter and then go through all the steps the fog index entails.

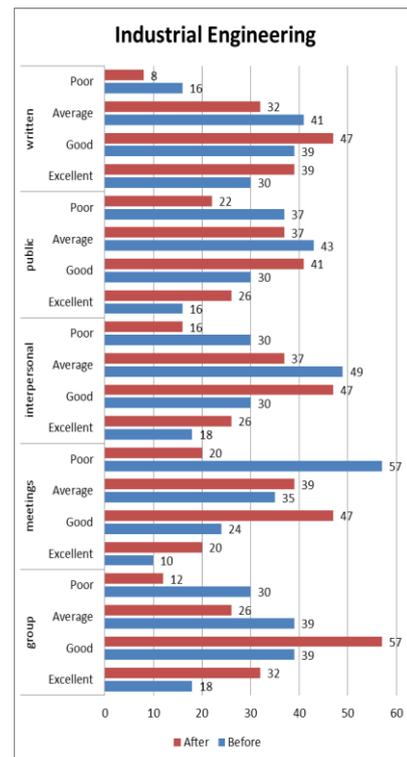


Figure 4. Industrial Engineering students' communication skills – before and after the course

Again, the test was carried out before and after the business communication course in order to appraise the students' capacity to write business letters, memos, e-mails, brochures or other papers, a skill of the utmost importance for today's globalized economic environment. The two tables above and figures 3 and 4 indicate the results of the test taken at the previously-mentioned moments: before and after attending the business communication lecture and seminar, again in order to prove that business communication should be included in all specialties' curricula. Figures have spoken again in favor of business communication, indicating that after the course, students have

learnt to write better, more understandable and more accurate.

4. STUDENTS' RANKING OF BUSINESS COMMUNICATION SKILLS

The survey that is about to be drawn forward is an opportunity students are offered to express their opinion on what communication skills they consider to be important in various situations. The evaluation scale employed is from 1 through 5 where: 1 – not at all important; 2 – of very little importance; 3 – of average importance (neuter), 4 – important; 5 – very important.

Since there were no notable differences between the answers grouped according to gender, since all of the students were of similar ages (only a couple of years difference in a few cases) and since splitting the results according to profiles was irrelevant, the classification questions were eliminated.

The categories of skills that had to be evaluated refer to the following:

5. EMPLOYMENT – JOB SEARCHING

Table 6. Students' opinion on preparing for an interview [%]

<i>Preparing for an interview</i>	1	2	3	4	5
Self analysis	78	9	8	2	3
Workplace analysis	18	12	20	41	9
Identifying an adequate employment strategy	5	8	7	13	67
Producing a good CV and letter of application	1	1	2	8	88

Table 7. Skills students consider helpful in doing their job [%]

<i>Professional skills</i>	1	2	3	4	5
Experience in that field	5	3	13	44	35
Professional proficiency	2	0	8	31	59

Business communication proficiency	10	6	15	32	37
Pursuing results	6	2	19	34	39

Table 8. The most important aspect an employer seeks [%]

<i>What employers seek in their candidates</i>	1	2	3	4	5
Personality	15	9	13	31	32
Verbal capacities	0	5	26	33	36
Capacity to foresee	20	14	24	32	10
Enthusiasm	2	8	23	43	24
Maturity	4	1	39	26	30
Motivation	0	3	19	28	50
Compatibility with the job	0	1	11	19	69
The adequate preparation for the interview (knowing some relevant information)	45	26	13	12	4

CAREER – EXERCISING THE PROFESSION

Table 9. The most relevant traits of an employee [%]

<i>The importance of the following aspects:</i>	1	2	3	4	5
Sincerity	1	4	16	25	54
A friendly/relaxed attitude	3	6	9	11	71
Clothing	5	2	15	17	61
Optimism and enthusiasm	1	10	9	32	48
Active listening	11	3	29	21	36
Well-put and answered questions	6	18	36	15	25

Table 10. The path chosen by students in their career [%]

<i>The itinerary of the career</i>	1	2	3	4	5
Promotion	0	0	1	3	96
More responsibilities	5	13	15	24	43

More preoccupations	18	26	21	22	13
Achieving important results	2	6	14	29	51

Table 11. Relevant aspects of communication in practising the chosen profession [%]

<i>Relevant skills</i>	1	2	3	4	5
Assessing the style of behaviour	11	24	26	24	15
Active listening capacity	3	8	29	19	41
The art of posing questions	1	4	23	42	30
Following reactions	8	13	19	31	29
Solving conflicts	0	1	7	35	57
Creating an image	9	15	51	11	14
Body language	6	10	18	12	54
Paraverbal language	23	5	9	34	19
Elements of proxemics	79	11	3	5	2
Group-communication abilities	4	7	7	14	68
Written communication	2	5	5	23	65

6. CONCLUSIONS

The information presented so far has clearly proved the role of business communication to the engineering students' education in that they can make the most of their professional knowledge by rendering messages (verbal, paraverbal, written etc.) clearly and correctly. Business communication is thus a great aid in finding, exercising, keeping a job and synching promotion.

Within this context, further researches should be carried out. For instance, some of the questions contained by the previous test should be posed to both employers and faculty graduates who hold a job. The better results obtained by economic engineering

students should encourage the better studying of this subject – at least 4 hours per week (2 hours of course and 2 hours of seminar) in order to achieve even better results.

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