

ORAL COMMUNICATION DIMENSIONS: THE CASE OF IRANIAN COLLEGE STUDENTS

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ABSTRACT

Oral communication is a highly important skill area for business organizations working in open-system environment where relationship of supplier-costumer is the key factor to sustain competitiveness. This study looks into the three dimensions to characterize oral communication capability of business students in six (6) classes at two different universities in Isfahan province of Iran. The results of cluster analysis indicate that these universities should promote a communication competencies learning process in order to prepare business students to the global marketplace.

BACKGROUND

Today's business organizations are in need of managers capable of meeting expectations of all stakeholders. In this context, these managers need to communicate through a range of channels with different communication patterns. As a result, higher business education is being called upon to meet new challenges stemming from the realities of the innovative open-system business model [6].

In response to the open-system performance demands of business organizations, institutions of higher business learning are finding it necessary to re-orient their own educational systems, programs of study and approaches to become more open in nature. As such, business education must equip its graduates with the tools, skills and attitudes needed and demanded by the business community. As a response, most of these institutions are reengineering their graduate and undergraduate programs to make them more in tune with the requirements of the new job market [15]. These programs are being modified to stress cross disciplinary knowledge, which is based on innovative problem solving, entrepreneurship initiatives, and creative systematic thinking [3]. In the process, they are focusing on a performance-oriented education, which emphasizes both the technical and the human aspects of organizational performance [5]

The spite of the recent efforts of business education to reengineer its educational model, gaps between traditional educational preparation and recent organizational performance expectations have been subjects of concern among scholars and practitioners [1][2][4][10][11]. The extents to which these gaps have been reduced in recent times are yet to be determined.

Literature underlines oral communication as a highly important skill area for organizations working in open-system environment where relationship supplier-costumer is the key factor to sustain

competitiveness [7]. In this context, it is important to meet the expectations on business organizations through the development of communication skills on the business students.

R. Large and C. Gimenez [12] identified the following three dimensions to characterize oral communication capability:

- Ability to pass on information – Answer questions; recognize misunderstanding; describe another's view point; summarize facts.
- Ability to persuade – Articulate clearly; speak persuasively; defend a point of view.
- Ability to listen and understand – Distinguish fact from opinion; Understand suggestions.

These three dimensions were used to identify the communication profile of European and U.S. managers [12][13]. These dimensions can be used to identify strengths and weaknesses of students' communication profiles in order to redirect them to business organizations' needs.

In this context, the objective of this study is to assess the communication patterns of business students based on the profile required by business organizations.

METHODOLOGY

Instrument

In this research project, a questionnaire composed of nineteen (19) items reflecting the skills associated with communication competency was used. This questionnaire is based on the works of [12][13][14].

For each item (skill) included in the research instrument, Iranian business students were asked to classify on a five-point Likert-type scale between 1 (strongly disagree) and 5 (strongly agree).

Sample and data analysis

The research instrument was distributed by one of the coauthors to business students in six (6) undergraduate classes at two different universities in Isfahan province of Iran. The students were at different stages of their respective programs. All of the one hundred and twenty four (124) participants in the six (6) classes completed the research instrument.

The data analysis was focused on investigating the existence of groups of students with similar patterns of communication. A cluster analysis was used to group students with similar communication profiles. For this purpose, the hierarchical agglomerative technique (Wards's method) was used. This technique is designed to recognize outliers and to determine the appropriate number of clusters [9]. As a result of applying this technique, the sample was reduced one hundred and twenty two (122) responses. The number of clusters was set to four. The non-hierarchical (K-means) cluster analysis was then used to identify the strategic groups.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Based on the cluster analysis procedure, a four-cluster solution with significant differences between all communications dimensions was obtained (Table 1).

Table 1 – Communicator profiles

	Group A	Group B	Group C	Group D	F	Duncan grouping ($\alpha=0.05$)
Number of cases:	49	17	35	21		
API - Ability to pass on information	2.225 (-)	3.074 (+)	2.593 (+)	1.619 (-)	27.49*	A, B,C,D
AP - Ability to persuade	3.150 (+)	1.941 (-)	3.438 (+)	1.778 (-)	86.24*	A,C, B-D
ALU - Ability to listen and understand	1.847 (-)	1.824 (-)	3.200 (+)	1.524 (-)	59.77*	A-B,B-D, C
F:	86.12*	24.55*	24.15	1.63	Rank	
Strategy dimensions grouped according Duncan test ($\alpha=0.05$) and ranked within each Group	AP API ALU	API AP-ALU ----	AP-ALU API ----	API-AP-ALU ---- ----	1 2 3	

Notes: Numbers in parentheses are ranks of scores of strategic dimensions in descending order along the groups

(-) - lower scores than average of all students

(+) - higher scores than average of all students

Group A - This group includes 49 students (40.2% of the sample), which tended to enhance the ability to persuade the counterparts. Students in this group are neglecting the importance of listen and understand. They also have more difficulties than the average of all the students to pass on information.

Group B - This group includes 17 students (13.9% of the sample). They are differentiating based on ability to pass on information. They show difficulties to persuade, and to listen and understand their counterparts. In these two dimensions they show scores below the average of all students.

Group C - This group includes 35 students (28.7% of the sample), which tended to utilize all communications skills above the average of their colleagues. They tend to enhance the ability to listen and understand, persuade their counterparts, and pass on information.

Group D - This group includes 21 students (17.2% of the sample), which tended to assign the lowest scores to all three-communication dimensions. Based on these results, they can be labeled as poor communicators.

CONCLUSIONS

Using a sample of 122 Iranian business students, this research sought to identify their communication profiles. In the process, three dimensions of oral communication capability are examined. Based on the results of the cluster analyses procedures, the following conclusions and implications are highlighted.

First, all the students present low level of communication skills. This is not a surprise due to their lack of experience and their lack of specific communication learning process.

Second, most of the students are only stressing one of communication dimensions.

Overall, it seems that business schools are in need of implementing specific communication courses in order to answer to the needs of managers working in a global marketplace.

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