

Learners' Attitudes and Practices towards Learning Communication Skills: The Cases of Mbeya University of Science and Technology and Arusha Technical College

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ABSTRACT

This study investigated learners' attitudes towards learning communication skills as a fundamental module among ordinary diploma students of science programmes. The study involved a sample of 112 students. A cross-sectional research design was employed. Data were collected through questionnaires and interviews. Quantitative data were analysed using SPSS version 20, while qualitative data were analysed thematically. The findings revealed that diploma students have positive attitudes towards learning communication skills. By comparison, female students were revealed to be more positive than male students. Moreover, first- and third-year students showed more positive attitudes than second-year students. It is recommended that students be emphasised about the importance of communication skills as future professional engineers and for the competitive labour market. To make training sessions more interesting and facilitate the smooth acquisition of the necessary skills, efforts must be made to strengthen communication skills training at colleges and universities.

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1.0 Introduction

The study examined learners' attitudes and practices towards learning communication skills. The study was conducted with ordinary diploma students in science programmes at Mbeya University of Science and Technology (MUST) and Arusha Technical College (ATC). In the competitive environment in which organisations operate today, communication skills are not only essential but also imperative for the organisation's sustainable development. This is because communication is required for marketing, interpersonal communication within and outside the organisation, teamwork, and writing reports and minutes of the meeting. Kovac and Sirkovic (2017) reported that employers complained that candidates had sufficient technical knowledge but lacked soft skills, communication in particular. Top successful firms spend 80% of their time in communication (Nellermoe *et al.*, 1999, as cited by Ihmeideh, Al-Omari, & Al-Dababneth, 2010). In an academic setting, communication skills are needed for answering examinations, presentations, scholarly referencing and citation, note-taking and making, and job hunting and correspondences after graduating from colleges.

Experience shows that there is poor attendance during communication skills sessions and less cooperation from students to communication skills instructors. This tendency leads to poor student performance in communication skills examinations, as well as ineffective oral and written communication ability. Al-bizrah, Tarique, & Arain (2016) have reported that attitudes towards learning communication skills are important factors for acquiring communication skills. Attitudes are given special attention due to the assumed power

to influence choices and behaviour (Petty & Brinol, 2010). The students' attitudes towards communication skills may be important determinants of the importance they place upon the module. Students cannot ignore the importance of communication skills in all aspects of life today. Today's job market is very competitive, and in order to win, the candidates must have added potentialities that distinguish them from other candidates with equivalent qualifications (Kovac & Sirkovic, 2017).

The importance of communication skills in Tanzania was introduced at the University of Dar-es-Salaam (UDSM) in 1978 and at the Sokoine University of Agriculture (SUA) in 1987. The goal was to develop students' ability to learn effectively at the university level through the medium of English (Shishiwa & Ong'ondo, 2015). Today, Tanzanian universities and colleges have been offering communication skills courses to address students' language and communication needs (Komba & Mohamed, 2017). Contrary to these facts, experience reveals that most university students do not attach enough importance to communication skills learning. This is evidenced by poor students' classroom attendance during communication skills sessions, which leads to poor performance in examinations and an inability to communicate effectively. As a result, the current study intends to provide knowledge to change the students' attitudes towards communication skills.

Several studies have been undertaken related to students' attitudes towards communication skills. The studies include Cleland, Foster & Moffat, 2005; Neupane, Adhikari & Aryal, 2012; El-Sakaran, 2015; Kovac & Sirkovic, 2017; and Msuya, 2011. However, the majority of the publications

were conducted in Asia and Europe, and they dealt with undergraduate students in health-related programmes. Those in Africa dealt with bachelor degree students. To the best of our knowledge, there is scarcely any literature specifically dedicated to addressing the issue of attitudes towards ordinary diploma students in science programmes. This research was necessary to bridge the existing gap. Therefore, this study aimed to investigate students' attitudes towards learning communication skills as a fundamental module. The target group for this study was the ordinary diploma students of science programmes at MUST and ATC. The purpose of this study was to examine attitudes towards learning communication skills as a fundamental module among ordinary diploma students of science programmes at MUST and ATC. It further examined comparisons between respondents' background characteristics and attitudes.

2.0 Materials and Methods

The study employed a cross-sectional research design involving 112 respondents of first-, second-, and third-year students from MUST and ATC. A mixed approach was employed to capture both quantitative and qualitative data. In addition, triangulation was used to confirm the validity and reliability of the findings. Two methods of data collection were used: a questionnaire and interviews. A stratified random sampling technique was used to obtain a representative sample. Students were grouped according to programmes and years of study and then selected randomly. However, students' sex was monitored to ensure female representation.

With permission from the instructors, 97 students were administered the questionnaires during regular class hours. The questionnaire included the study's purpose and procedures for filling out the questionnaires. Students were also informed that participation was voluntary, and that their responses would be anonymous. The response rate was 100%. Interviews were conducted with 15 participants, in which the principle of saturation applied. The response rate for interviews was also 100%.

The data collected were of two types: quantitative and qualitative. Quantitative data collected using a questionnaire were analysed using Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 20 to obtain descriptive statistics. Qualitative data were analysed in terms of themes related to the objectives. Cross-tabulation statistics were used to compare the respondents' background characteristics and attitudes towards learning communication skills.

3.0 Results and Discussion

Data from questionnaires and interviews were used in presenting the results. To understand the students' attitudes, we presented them with statements and questions, asking them to respond by either agreeing or disagreeing, or by selecting from the provided options. Some of the items were worded negatively, and others were worded positively. Respondents were also allowed to give reasons or explanations for their options. Interviews were used to collect more information and cross-check data from questionnaires. Tables and descriptions were used to present the findings.

3.1 Background Characteristics of the Respondents

This study involved 112 participants from MUST and ATC. The males were 59.8% and females were 40.2%. The majority of participants (58%) ranged from 21 to 40 years. Those below 21 years were 41.1%. Only one participant ((0.9%) was 40+. The mean age was 22.7 years. Most respondents, 78.6% had attended Kiswahili medium primary schools and 21.4% attended English medium schools. The study involved 28.6%, 33.9 and 37.5 from first, second and third year respectively. Most participants 91.1% were pre-service and only 8.9% were in-service. Table 1 summarises the background characteristics of the respondents.

Table 1

Background Characteristics of the Respondents

Characteristics	Frequency	Percent
Sex		
Male	67	59.8
Female	45	40.2
Total	112	100.0
Age Group		
1 - 20	46	41.1
21 - 40	65	58.0
41+	1	0.9
Total	112	100.0
Year of Study		
First Year	32	28.6
Second Year	38	33.9
Third Year	42	37.5
Total	112	100.0
Employment Status		
In-service	10	8.9
Pre-service	102	91.1
Total	112	100.0
Primary School Attended		
Kiswahili Medium	88	78.6
English Medium	24	21.4
Total	112	100.0

Source: Field Data (2018)

3.2 Students' Attitudes towards Learning Communication Skills

In order to examine students' attitudes, respondents were given questionnaires with several statements and questions to respond. They

were required to either agree or disagree with the given statements and questions to show their attitude. More details on attitudes were obtained during interviews. The responses are presented below:

3.2.1 Need for Communication Skills to Scientists

The study aimed to ascertain the students' understanding of the significance of mastering effective communication skills for scientists. The research findings showed that 92.8% of respondents agreed that communication skills are essential to scientists, while only 7.2% of respondents disagreed. This suggests that students understand the importance of having strong communication skills to excel as scientists. This implies that students are aware of the significance of communication skills courses in their respective programs. This finding confirms the relevance and effectiveness of Msuya's (2011) study on communication skills at the University of Dar es Salaam. The study revealed that students exhibited positive attitudes towards acquiring communication skills, emphasizing the importance of these skills for various communicative purposes. Table 2 displays the students' perspectives on the significance of effective communication skills for scientists.

Table 2

Need for Communication Skills to Scientists

Responses	Frequency	Percent
Agree	90	92.8
Disagree	7	7.2
Total	97	100.0

Source: Field Data (2018)

During the interview, one respondent from college A had the following remark:

This module is very important for us scientists. Even instructors of other

modules should teach using English. For the time being, most instructors use Kiswahili when teaching and code mix when they fail to acquire the equivalent word in Kiswahili.

(Respondent from college A)

This respondent's comment clearly shows that students value and consider communication skills to be one of the most important components of their profession, despite the reported challenges.

3.2.2 Communication Skills to Arts and Business Students

The study aimed to understand the students' perspectives on the significance of communication skills for all students. The findings showed that most respondents (76.3%) disagreed that only arts and business students need communication skills and instead proposed that the module should be compulsory in all programmes. Only 23.7% suggested the module be compulsory for only arts and business students. This implied that students perceived the module as one of the important tools towards academic success for students of all programmes. The results are summarised as follows:

Table 3

Communication Skills to Arts and Business Students

Responses	Frequency	Percent
Agree	23	23.7
Disagree	74	76.3
Total	97	100.0

Source: Field Data (2018)

During interviews, stressing on the importance of communication skills to engineers, one respondent from college B had this to report:

This module is important to all students not for arts and business students only. All of us are taught all the modules in English language, and we do examinations in English. Therefore, we a need to learn

communication skills so as it can help us to communicate effectively.

(Respondent from college B)

This respondent's remark shows that engineering students know the importance of the communication skills module for students of all programmes. This is very true, considering that most college and university students in Tanzania are non-native speakers of the English language; therefore, they need the course to strengthen their communication competency.

3.2.3 Communication Skills and the Ability to Communicate is a Lifelong Skill

The study wanted to know if the respondents knew the need for communication skills even outside of the college setting. Responses to this statement showed that 92.8% of respondents agreed that the ability to communicate effectively is needed throughout an individual's life, even after school. This means that students appreciated the role of communication skills in their daily lives in both academic and social settings. Table 4 summarises the responses:

Table 4

Communication Skills and Ability to Communicate is a Lifelong Skill

Responses	Frequency	Percent
Agree	90	92.8
Disagree	7	7.2
Total	97	100.0

Source: Field Data (2018)

Regarding this aspect, the respondents expressed their belief that effective communication is necessary even outside of academic settings. They expressed the need for effective communication skills in interpersonal interactions, particularly in today's world where socialisation has become more prevalent than ever before. One respondent from

college A emphasised the importance of communication skills beyond academic settings.

Communication is useful in daily life, not only in class. It is needed in public meetings, during interviews, and even when you visit an office for any service. In all these contexts, you must have communication skills to deliver the message easily.

(Respondent from college A)

3.2.4 Private Schedules for Communication Skills

The study wanted to know if students have private schedules for studying communication skills after the normal class sessions. The results revealed that 75.3% of the informants stated that they included communication skills in their private timetable, using this time to revise and discuss communication skills-related issues. Conversely, only 24.7% stated they were too busy with other modules to allocate time for communication skills after class sessions. This implied that most students set aside private time to study communication skills. This analysis is presented in Table 5.

From the above table, it is clear that students have positive attitudes towards communication skills, as they were ready to set aside extra time to study them. This means that students have no problem setting aside time for communication skills modules, even though they may have many modules to cover in a single semester.

3.2.5 Communication Skills as a Compulsory Module

The study aimed at checking if the students support communication skills to continue being a compulsory module as it was at the time of study. The findings showed that most students (85.6%) agreed that communication skills should continue to be a compulsory module for all students, while

only 14.4% disagreed. This indicates that the majority of students comprehended the significance of communication skills. The results were as follows:

Table 6

Communication Skills as Compulsory Module

Responses	Frequency	Percent
Agree	83	85.6
Disagree	14	14.4
Total	97	100.0

Source: Field Data (2018)

Although students were revealed to have positive attitudes towards the communication skills module, they complained that it had fewer credits than core modules. This discouraged them from putting in more effort for the module.

3.2.6 Communication Skills as Optional Course

This was included to examine students' willingness to study the course. It was discovered that 61.9% of respondents agreed that they would opt for it if it was not a compulsory module, while 38.1% said they would not opt. This again implies that students were motivated to learn communication skills. The findings are shown in Table 7.

Table 7

Communication Skills to be an Optional Course

Responses	Frequency	Percent
Agree	60	61.9
Disagree	37	38.1
Total	97	100.0

Source: Field Data (2018)

Regarding their willingness to opt for communication skills course, the study revealed that they would opt for the course since it facilitated learning of other modules. During interview, one respondent from college A said:

Even if this module was optional, because of its importance, I would opt for it. There are several skills we learn in communication skills which are useful in all

other modules for example, report writing, presentation skills and note taking and making.

(Respondent from college A)

us to understand better the module and recall the content easily.

(Respondent from college B)

The respondent's remark shows that the module is viewed important for the majority of the students.

3.2.7 Number of Semesters to Learn Communication Skills

The study wanted to know the students' attitudes towards the number of semesters in which they would like to learn communication skills. The results showed that 33.0% suggested communication skills be taught throughout the programme that is, from the first year to the third year. 28.9% suggested two semesters, 22.7% opted for one semester, and 15.5% suggested three semesters. At the time of study, ATC was teaching communication skills for three semesters, while MUST taught for four semesters. The findings revealed that the majority of the students, 77.3%, suggested communication skills be taught for more than one semester. This means that students are not bored with the duration they spend learning communication skills. The findings were as follows:

Table 8

Number of Semesters to Learn Communication Skills

Responses	Frequency	Percent
One Semester	22	22.7
Two Semesters	28	28.9
Three Semesters	15	15.5
Throughout the Programme	32	33.0
Total	97	100.0

Source: Field Data (2018)

During interviews, one respondent from college B put forward the following remark:

It is better we learn communication skills throughout the programme. This will help

The study's findings generally showed that students are motivated to learn communication skills because they gain knowledge applicable to other modules. The usefulness of communication skills has been shown to motivate students' positive attitudes towards learning communication skills. The acquisition of effective communication skills has many benefits for people in a variety of professions. For students, the benefits include doing well in examinations and building confidence to compete in the labor market. Amanat, Yasmin, & Sohail (2016) reported on the importance of communication skills as revealed by medical students. Patients' compliance with medical treatment and a positive doctor-patient relationship are built through proper communication. Most students were reported to be attracted to skills directly related to classroom situations. Komba (2015) did a study on the perceived importance of communication skills among Tanzanian university students. The study revealed that communication skills were perceived by the majority of the respondents as an important course in an academic setting. Note-taking, academic writing, oral presentation, listening, and reading were perceived as five communication skills the most important among students.

3.3 Comparison of Respondents' Attitudes Based on Background Characteristics

The study aimed to compare attitudes to communication skills and respondents' background characteristics. The method used for comparison involved analyzing the respondents' responses

when asked if they would choose to enroll in a communication skills course if it were an optional course. The analysis involved cross-tabulating the item and the respondents' background characteristics. The results are presented and summarized in Table 9.

3.3.1 Sex and Attitudes towards Communication Skills

The study wanted to establish whether there were differences in attitudes towards communication skills courses between male and female students. The study found that there were no significant differences in attitude between male and female students towards the module. Both revealed positive attitudes because the majority agreed that they would opt for the module, as shown in Table 9. However, females seemed to be more positive than males. Sixty-five percent of females agreed that they would opt for the module, while for males the agreement was 59.6%. The results support the Neupane *et al.* (2012) study, which also reported that females showed significantly higher positive attitudes towards communication skills than male students. However, both the current study and the Neupane study differ from Singh, Prabhakaran, and Varma's (2018) study on perceived needs and attitudes towards communication skills training. Singh *et al.* (2018) found no sex-based differences in attitudes.

3.3.2 Age and Attitudes towards Communication Skills

The study also examined the respondents' age and the relationship with their attitudes towards communication skills. It was found that there were differences in attitudes based on age group. The study involved three age groups. The groups

were 1-20 years, 21-40 years, and 41+ years. All three age groups revealed a positive attitude towards learning communication skills because the majority agreed that they would opt for communication skills if it was an optional course. The group of 41+ years had a 100% response rate. This group was represented by only one member. This was followed by the group between 1-20 years, which had 65.9%. The group of 21-40 years had 58.2%, as depicted in Table 9. This implies that attitudes towards learning communication skills vary across the age groups.

3.3.3 Respondents' Year of Study and Attitudes towards Communication Skills

The purpose was to compare respondents' year of study and their attitudes towards learning communication skills. As depicted in Table 9, it was found that first-year students had a more positive attitude by 81.5%, followed by the third year by 59.5%, and the second year by 48.5%. It appeared that the first-year students had a high positive attitude, which decreased in the second year and then increased again in the third year, when they heavily utilised their acquired communication skills for project preparation and presentation. The first year demonstrated a high level of positive attitudes, which could be attributed to their novice status, leading them to assign equal importance to all modules.

These results are confirmed by Cleland *et al.* (2005), who examined differences in attitudes among students of different years of study and sex at the University of Aberdeen in Scotland. Cleland *et al.* (*ibid.*) reported that the degree of positive attitudes decreased as students advanced from one year to another. However, Cleland reported a systematic decrease in positive attitudes from year

to year, whereas in the current study, the positive attitude fell in the second year and shot up again in the third year.

3.3.4 Employment Status and Attitudes towards Communication Skills

The study wanted to know the relationship between respondents' employment status and their attitude towards studying communication skills. The study found that pre-service students showed more positive attitudes towards communication skills than in-service students. The pre-service response was 62.2% while the in-service reaction was 57.1%. This means that pre-service students were more eager to learn communication skills than in-service students. This may be because pre-service students projected their attitudes towards the competition they would face in the labour market, where mastery of communication skills is one of the most important qualifications. The responses are illustrated in Table 9.

3.3.5 Primary School Attended and Attitudes towards Communication Skills

The study's prior assumption was that those who attended English-medium primary school would not value communication skills because they had a strong foundation in the English language. In contrast, it was found that those who attended English-medium schools had a more positive attitude by 68.4%, while those from Kiswahili-medium schools had 60.3%. During interviews, it was revealed that students appreciated new skills they gained from communication skills that were partially covered or not taught at all in lower levels. These findings match with research done in Pakistan among medical students. It was discovered that students with an English medium

of instruction background had more positive attitudes towards learning communication skills than those with an Urdu background (Amanat et al., 2016).

Table 9

Comparison of Respondents' Attitudes Based on Background Characteristics

Respondents' Characteristics	Agree	Disagree	
Sex			
Male	59.6%	40.4%	100.0%
Female	65.0%	35.0%	100.0%
Total	61.9%	38.1%	100.0%
Age			
1 - 20	65.9%	34.1%	100.0%
21 - 40	58.2%	41.8%	100.0%
41+	100.0%	-	100.0%
Total	61.9%	38.1%	100.0%
Year of Study			
First year	81.5%	18.5%	100.0%
Second year	48.5%	51.5%	100.0%
Third year	59.5%	40.5%	100.0%
Total	61.9%	38.1%	100.0%
Employment Status			
In-service	57.1%	42.9%	100.0%
Pre-service	62.2%	37.8%	100.0%
Total	61.9%	38.1%	100.0%
Primary School background			
Kiswahili medium	60.3%	39.7%	100.0%
English medium	68.4%	31.6%	100.0%
Total	61.9%	38.1%	100.0%

Source: Field Data (2018)

4.0 Conclusion and Recommendations

The study examined learners' attitudes and practices towards learning communication skills. Particularly, the target population was diploma students of science programmes at MUST and ATC. The study revealed that most students have positive attitudes towards learning communication skills, and they understand its importance. The

students are motivated to learn the module as an instrument for academic success and for excelling in today's competitive labour market. Background characteristics of the respondents, such as sex, year of study, employment status, and medium of instruction in primary schools attended, appear to influence attitudes. Female students were revealed to be more optimistic than male students, and first- and third-year students were more positive than second-year students. Additionally, pre-service students were more positive than in-service students. Those who passed through English medium were also more positive than students from Swahili medium schools.

The study recommends actions to improve the course's teaching and learning in the future. Students should be emphasised about the importance of communication skills, both as future professional engineers and for the competitive labour market. To make training sessions more interesting and facilitate the smooth acquisition of the necessary skills, efforts must be made to strengthen communication skills training at colleges and universities. Seminars where students interact more closely and demonstrate what they learn in class are needed. Activities in seminars and workshops include practical sessions such as role-playing meetings, debates, presentations, and simulated job interviews. These will make the course more practical, lively, and interesting.

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