

An Assessment of Students' Performance in Communication Skills

A Case Study of the University of Education Winneba

Abena Abokoma Asemanyi

Department of Communication and Media Studies, University of Education, Winneba, P.O. Box 25, Winneba, Central Region, Ghana

Abstract

This study was done to find out the factors that account for the poor performances of students and to find out ways of improving the teaching and learning of the Communication Skills course at the University of Education, Winneba. The research also had an aim of bringing to light suggestions and recommendations on how to improve the teaching and learning of the Communication Skills course. In order to do this, the researcher used interviews, observation and documents to collect data in order to answer the questions that this research seeks to answer. The study targeted all second year students of the university and lecturers of Communication Skills as its total population but used the purposive sampling technique to select thirty five (35) respondents which included thirty (30) students and five (5) lecturers. The main findings were that students have negative perceptions towards the course even though they try to exhibit positive attitudes towards it. Again, some of the students admitted into the first year have weak language backgrounds which reflected in their communicative competence and thus they do not perform well. Other issues like large class size coupled with lack of modern lecture halls and facilities do not help in the teaching and learning process. The study also revealed that there are not enough lecturers currently teaching the course. The study recommended that students, lecturers and administrators of the Communication Skills Unit should play their various roles to make the course a success. It was also recommended that all those involved should have regular meetings to overcome the problems that have been mentioned above in order to improve on performances and the teaching and learning process.

Keywords: Communication Skills, Performance, Ghana

1. Introduction

According to Sikiti (1998:1), "Communication is a purposeful process of expressing, receiving and understanding messages containing factual information, feelings, ideas and needs by two or more individuals through common symbols". Communication Skills is one of the general courses taught in most tertiary institutions in Ghana, including the University Of Education, Winneba. The Communication Skills course is a course that enables students to have knowledge or the ability to use the requisite skills to communicate properly. Like all other courses run in tertiary institutions, it is very relevant and has an added importance of equipping students with proper language skills to assist them in their studies. Since 1994, Lecturers at the University of Education, Winneba have been teaching the Communication Skills course to all first-year regular students admitted to the University. The objective of the course is to equip first-year students with writing; reading and note taking skills to enable them pursue their studies effectively (Yemeh, 2007). English, together with Mathematics and Science, remains a major requirement for entry into UEW as in other Ghanaian public universities. In addition, prospective university students in Ghana are expected to have been exposed to twelve years of English from the primary school level to the secondary school level. In addition, on entry into Ghanaian universities, students are required to take Communication Skills (CS). In the University of Education, Winneba, there is a Communication Skills unit with a Coordinator who at the time of this research coordinates eight lecturers to teach the course to about 2000 regular first-year students. The curriculum for the CS program is briefly outlined below:

- Note-taking and note-making (from lectures, textbooks; outlining)
- Reading (skimming, scanning, summarizing, etc.)
- Conventions of Usage (spelling, grammar, punctuation, documentation, etc.)
- Writing (sentence patterns, clause patterns, paragraphs, types of essays, introduction, body and conclusion).

A study of first-year students' writings at the University of Education, Winneba based on class assignments and end of semester examinations revealed that most first year university students taking the Communication Skills course are unable to write effectively (Yemeh, 2007). For example, at a post-examination meeting in August 2014, lecturers in Communication Skills compared and analysed their findings regarding students' performance and summarized the following problems confronting first year university students:

1. Evidence of inadequate knowledge of grammar resulting in rudimentary grammatical mistakes.
2. Boring expressions reflecting a weak foundation in sentence construction.

3. Inability to comprehend the spoken word and the written text due to poor listening and reading skills.
4. Inability to summarize.
5. Inability to write for a specific audience.
6. Inability to write scholarly papers.
7. Inability to answer examination questions in an orderly fashion.

From the above, it is obvious that there is the need to help students overcome these problems and improve the communicative competence of students at the University of Education, Winneba. It is therefore, the aim of this research to identify the factors that affect the performance of students in Communication Skills and what can be done to improve on students' performance.

1.1 Problem Statement

In recent years many people have complained that the standard of English in Ghana is falling at all levels of education. Darko (1997: 261) for example, states that "our students might not be as comfortable with the English language as they were a couple of decades ago". Owusu-Ansah (1997: 23) also observes that "there is some evidence that the standard of usage, measured in terms of the ability to communicate meaningfully and to observe common grammatical rules, is falling. Darko (1997: 53) indicates that his work is motivated by the products of "a steady decline in the English competence of the products of our schools and universities". Furthermore, a 1996 report of the Education Commission on the topic "On Addressing Problems in Language and Communication Skills in Education" states: "This Report has established that the standard of language and communication skills within the education system has been deteriorating over a period of time and has now reached alarming proportions as attested to by various examination results." The idea is that after taking the Communication Skills course after at least a semester, students' writing should reflect on the skills acquired from the course. Several reasons could account for this inability of students to write effectively and exhibit the knowledge acquired from the CS program. This may include the academic background of the students admitted, knowledge of lecturers in the communication skills course, qualification of communication skills lecturers, attitudes of students, perception of students, learning environment and the teaching methods adopted. However, the exact causes of the poor performance of students in the Communication Skills course and how to improve on it have not been established through research. It is against this background that the researcher seeks to do a comprehensive research into the teaching of communication skills in tertiary institutions to assess the factors that influence or affect students' performance and what can be done to improve on the teaching and learning of the course.

1.2 Objectives of the study

The study has an objective of examining the factors that affect undergraduate students' performance in the Communication Skills course at the University of Education, Winneba.

The research also has an aim of bringing out suggestions and recommendations on how to improve the teaching and learning of communication skills.

1.3 Research questions

The following questions guided the research:

1. What accounts for the poor performance of students in the Communication Skills course at the University Of Education, Winneba?
2. What can be done to improve the teaching and learning of the Communication Skills course that will result in good student's performance?

2.0 Literature Review

2.1 The nature and scope of the Communication Skills course

The nature of the Communication Skills course appears quite unique from other subjects. Communication Skills is the foundation of language learning from which effective speaking, writing and reading emerge and it is the bedrock of human language learning (Tortor, 2006). One distinctive aspect of communication skills is that, it is integrated in nature. This is so because Communication Skills as a course is one of the prime factors of human expression. It is a practical course and students are expected to practice the skills of communication. The concept of Communication Skills is technical and students need certain attitudes to grasp these concepts (Tortor, 2006). Communication Skills as a course exposes students to conceptual skills like sentence pattern, concord, ambiguity and many others. These skills demand more than just attending lectures and being a passive member of the class. The culture of reading which students need so much for the communication skills course has totally waned and the situation is so alarming. Ninety percent (90%) of students would rather choose to watch movies rather than read the books related to their respective courses. This shows how reading as an attitude has suffered over the

years (Acquah, 2006). According to Acquah (2006) and Tortor (2006), students hardly practice English language by speaking it. The issue of students not speaking the language is as a result of the frequency with which students' lapse into "Pidgin English" whenever they are compelled by conditions to speak English. This supports the view that the communication skills course is practical and only those who practice it succeed. There is therefore difficulty or failure for such a student who is only addicted to watching movies instead of reading, the reason being that there is no proper use of concord or sentence analysis in most movies. This is largely because movie language is full of slangs, jargons and informal constructions. This re-enforces the fact that to such "students of movies", the study of communication skills becomes complex and they just go through the routine of studies instead of extracting the benefit of the course. Due to the lapses in student's performance and competence in the use and knowledge of English language, some writers in communication skills like Acquah and Nyantameh (2006) have even advocated that the Communication Skills should be made a two year course as a means of promoting thoughtful and positive attitude for effective communication. The Communication Skills course includes a range of skills. It includes both oral and written skills. The written skills are note taking, outlining, subject-verb agreement (concord), spelling, effective paragraph and essay writing and so on. The oral skills on the other hand include listening skills, reading skills-skimming, scanning and close reading though these are not the only topics in the Communication Skills course. Gogovi, Gborsong, Yankah and Essel (2006) agree that the study of communication skills would not only be useful to students by enhancing their academic performance but would be of immense help in the job market.

2.2 A brief history of the teaching of the Communication Skills course in Ghanaian Universities. Communication Skills was first started in the country by University of Ghana and then University of Cape Coast before Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology (KNUST) also introduced it. It was started in the University of Education, Winneba in 1994. It was a course for the Department of English under the Faculty of languages and was designed for the purpose of helping students to find certain skills such as listening, notes taking, reading, outlining, and collecting information from lecturers, seminars and so on. The course is taken for only a semester in the University of Education, Winneba, and two semesters in the University of Cape Coast but for two years in the case of KNUST. Again all the universities have different names for the course. The programme was put into practice for a year to check whether it was feasible. Later, after it had proved to be important in the study life of students, it was adopted by the university as a general course for every first year student. Gradually, other student's communicative problems cropped up into the course such as spelling, concord error, and ambiguity and there was the need to treat them in addition to the initial study skills it targeted. Thus, the purpose advanced towards proficiency in communication and the programme then became known as Communication Skills (CS Unit, UEW).

2.3 The significance of the Communication Skills course

The significance of Communication Skills cannot be over emphasized. The learning of English Language has increased because people have come to the realization that English is as important as the very breath we take in. Many employers actually measure the competence of job application in many of these skills before making offers of employment. Companies naturally want to put their best face forward by using good communication. The purpose is to create a positive impression about themselves. Gogovi, Gborsong, Yankah and Essel (2006) agree that the study of communication skills would not only be useful to students by enhancing their academic performance but would be of immense help in the job market. At the pre-university levels, it is a compulsory subject and this buttress the point that Communication Skills as a course is very important. One's ability to speak good English is a proof of competence and this is a belief held not only in Ghana but in the world as a whole. Speakers' performance and competence entail a lot of "excellent skills", intonation, the use of idiomatic expressions and many more. This means no matter how capable an individual may be in his profession, it is the use of good communication skills that highlights this strength.

2.5 Factors affecting students' performance in the Communication Skills course

In seeking to find out about the factors affecting students' performances in the Communication Skills course, the following factors were revealed by the literature reviewed for this study.

2.5.1 The method of delivery of the Communication Skills course

The researcher sought to find out whether the performance of students in the Communication Skills course is influenced by methods of teaching. This is to find out whether teacher-methods generated interest in students and whether that interest has helped students so far in their studies. The methods used in the presentation of information play a major role in determining whether or not the recipient would enjoy the course. If lecturers see teaching as a delivery of information only, then such a course would not be effective in students' real life situations. In this case, the method becomes the intermediate instrument between teachers and students for a feedback, and this yields good result. For instance, if students' performance in a particular course is that good,

the interest sticks forever likewise if this interest in Communication Skills is harnessed; it is developed for future use. The Communication Skills course is a new course all together because, rules and skills in the course are ingredients that were never mentioned in Senior Secondary Schools. Topics like ambiguity outline, editing and dangling modifiers are new academic terms in the university curriculum. If lecturers assume that students already have knowledge of these ingredients it eventually affect their performance, because of a practical truth, these skills are new to the students. This assumption gives lecturers the delusion that the competency level is present, while in actual case students know very little. When these assumptions are made and there is not much effort into the delivery of the course it will result in poor performance on the part of the students.

2.5.2 Availability of textbooks

Textbooks serve as materials as well as sources of knowledge. It supplements the classroom knowledge given by lecture notes to students. The fact is that, no student can learn effectively without textbooks serving as sources of reference. Lack of textbooks may also limit the learner's scope of knowledge. Unfortunately, there are few Communication Skills books and other related materials in the university. Even though the university has a good library, there is relatively small quantity of books on the shelves that deals with communication skills. This creates pressure on the few books available. Textbooks help in the teaching and learning process and so what can be done is that individual lecturers or the Communication Skills Unit can coordinate the writing of textbooks that have the specific topics in the Communication skills course content. These books could also have more realistic examples that students can easily relate with, when this is done students will benefit the more and will not have reasons not to perform well in the course.

2.5.3 Students' proficiency in the English Language

On the issue of students' performance, Darko, et al (1997) as well as Gyasi (1994) point to inadequate knowledge in the principles of English grammar on the part of teachers and the neglect of grammar instruction in the schools as some of the factors. The Education Commission also mentions the use of pidgin and the near demise of the reading habit among students, the addition to modern entertainment gadgets, inadequate teacher preparation insufficient teaching and learning materials, overcrowded classrooms, and poor implementation of the language policy as contributory factors. In spite of all these observations, there are two questions that demand answers: Is communication skills in English really a problem in Ghanaian schools and colleges? Was proficiency in English among pupils and students in some time past higher than it is now? The relevance of these questions to the concerns expressed in the preceding paragraphs cannot be underestimated; otherwise, the observations might be interpreted as mere witch-hunting. For the answers to be useful to educators and policy makers, they must be based on systematic investigations rather than on casual observation. Without such evidence, some people may rightly argue that the so-called "falling standard" in English exists in the imaginations of the older generations of Ghanaians, who, in any case, always view their own performance in every aspect of human endeavour to be better than that of the succeeding generation. Other people might also say that the increase in school enrolment, the result of the increase in the population (from 4 million some decades ago to 18 million in 1999) has led to a corresponding but equal increase in both strong and weak students in English. Such people might therefore say that there is no justification in the assertion that students' attainment in English is lower now than it used to be. All these point to the need for rigorous research to look into the factors affecting students' performance in Communication Skills at the University of Education, Winneba. To them, one approach in doing such an investigation is a comparison of the performance of different batches of students, who took a common examination such as the West African Examination Council examinations, over a decade or two to see whether there has been any deterioration over the years. Sound as this method might be, it is a daunting task in terms of the resources and time needed for its execution. This may be one of the reasons for the Education Commission's reliance on the Chief Examiners' reports instead of analysis and comparison of students' performance.

Also, such an investigation might not reveal the true picture for various reasons. First, examiners tend to adjust their marking schemes based on the overall performance of students. For example, when many students score high grades in a particular year, the pass mark might be pushed higher than in a year when the general performance is low. Second, it is known that the difficulty level of examinations is never the same every year despite test writer's attempt at standardization. There, one cannot assume that a student who obtained Grade A in Communication Skills in the year 2000 has the same proficiency level as another who got a similar grade in 2010. This alternative method of investigation was chosen for two main reasons. First, in addition to its cost effectiveness and efficient control of the variables involved, small-scale classroom research offers the opportunity of identifying the specific problems that a particular group of learners have. Second, this method makes it possible for teachers to provide interventions that may help the students concerned to overcome the problems identified in their own language production. I would like to reiterate that the long term objective of the study is to find out the factors affecting students' performance in Communication Skills. However, this presentation, which covers only the second year of the study, is a discussion on the factors affecting students' performance in Communication Skills as has been done in similar researches by Egblewogbe (1992) and

Odamtten (1994).

3.0 Population and sample/ Sampling technique

The targeted population for this study was level two hundred undergraduate students of the University of Education, Winneba (Winneba campus). This population was chosen by the researcher because the undergraduate students at this level had just gone through the Communication Skills programme. As such they will be in the best position to give authentic information about the course which will be needed for the research. The total population targeted for the study was level two hundred undergraduates of the University of Education, Winneba (Winneba campus). The sample was selected from ten departments, and every department was represented by three people. This was possible because the researcher wanted to have a fair representation from all the departments chosen. The ten departments included those at the Central, North and South campus of the Winneba campus of the University of Education. The study should have had a larger sample but because of time constraints and the research design chosen, the sample was reduced to thirty (30) second year students and five (5) lecturers of Communication skills including the Coordinator of the Communication Skills Unit. In all, thirty five (35) respondents were purposively selected for the study. This was done on the assumption that the sampling units were considered to be homogeneous in that the students have similar characteristics and that the students are in the same level and so will be able to respond accurately based on their experiences and perceptions about the course. Again this selection was done based on the fact that the researcher wants an in depth information and this can be done effectively with a smaller sample size.

3.1 Data Collection Strategies

The researcher employed interview, observation and review of documents as the main instrument for data collection. The interviews and observation were used as data collection strategies so that the researcher could understand the situation better by listening to the participants and observing them in their actual setting. To gain further insight into the situation, documents were analysed and described to know what students' performances really are. The documents provided information that the interviews and observations are not able to give. This meant a triangulation of the data collection strategies using interviews, observation and the analysis of documents.

3.2 Data Analysis

The three step model by Miles & Huberman (1999) was employed in this research in order to analyse the qualitative data that was gathered from the interviews, documents and the observations made. The collected data went through the three steps; in order to draw conclusions out of it. The documents were analysed using content analysis approach and guided by the purpose of this research which is to find out the factors that affect students' performance and how to improve the teaching and learning of the course.

4.0 Summary of research findings

The study which sought to answer the following research questions arrived at the following major findings.

4.1 Research question one

What accounts for the poor performance of students in the communication skills course at the University of Education, Winneba?

The main research findings were as follows:

- The study revealed that students' performance have not been very bad as the various reports have asserted. As was said by the lecturers interviewed, students' performance gets better over the years as situations and the conditions in the university keeps getting better.
- There were however some factors that were identified to affect students' performance. These are large class size, duration of course, students' use of Pidgin English, qualification of lecturers, unavailability of textbooks, teaching methods, among others.
- It also came to light that currently, there are only four (4) lecturers who teach over two thousand first year students who are admitted into the university every year. This is quite a situation which is worth researching into, the question is how effectively will these lecturers teach and assess all the number of first year student that are admitted into the university every year.
- Other factors like students' learning habits, complacency on the part of students as well as negative attitudes and perceptions towards the learning of the Communication Skills course came out as some of the factors that affect the performance of students.
- Some of the students have the perception that the course is difficult, however the majority of the undergraduate students have positive attitudes towards the study of the course and that students are not performing poorly but rather averagely.

- It has been established that almost all the undergraduate students as well as all the lecturers want the course to be compulsory and maintained because of the importance of this course. Again both the lecturers and the students want the duration of the course to be extended since one semester is not enough.

4.2 Research question two

What can be done to improve the teaching and learning of the Communication Skills course?

No matter how good or bad a situation or phenomenon can be, there is always room for improvement. This research has brought out several ways of improving the teaching and learning of the Communication Skills course at the University Of Education, Winneba. The following are suggestions made by the respondents of this study and they are sub-sectioned into the various roles everyone involved has to play including other general suggestions.

a. Lecturer's Role

The study revealed that lecturers have a major role to play in improving the performance of student's in the Communication Skills course. The lecturers need to be tolerant, have positive attitudes towards students, have open communication with students in and outside the lecture hall and be democratic in their teaching. They also need to use teaching methods that engage students intellectually. In addition, teachers should be involved in a lot of research so as to help their learners in the lecture hall.

b. Students' Role

The study found that learners can help improve their performances in every course, in this case Communication Skills by being tolerant to each other's ideas and accommodate new teaching methods or strategies employed by their lecturers. Learners need to develop more positive attitudes and perceptions towards learning. Another suggestion for the study was that the Communication Skills course helps students a lot in the job market especially in interviews and so it will be helpful if students take the course seriously and strive to work hard at it. Again, communication is very important in all spheres of human life and as such every individual must develop good communication skills. Other inputs made by some of the respondents' on how to improve students' performances in the course were that it enhances their listening, speaking, reading and writing skills which will be very important for them in all their endeavours including writing their thesis and other books.

c. Administrative/Institutional Roles

The management of the University of Education, Winneba, in collaboration with the Communication Skills Unit should re-examine the curriculum, syllabus and course content. The teaching methods should also be varied to suit the peculiarity of every topic in the course. The coordinators of the course should check on lecturers often to find out if the right things are being done in the lecture halls. In connection with that, students can be interviewed once in a while by the coordinator to find out if they like the methods used to teach and if they actually understand what is being taught. The administrators of the course should also meet very often with the lecturers to discuss students' progress and how it can be improved.

5.0 Conclusion

On the basis of the findings made by the study, the following conclusions are made:

1. Communication Skills is not difficult for the students; it is just that students do not have a good perception about the course and so do not learn.
2. The success of the students in the course depends on the lecturers, the coordinators the university administration as a whole. However, the success of students depends greatly on the students themselves.
3. Most students do not approach or consult their lecturers for academic help when in difficulty.
4. It was also found that students do not spend much time when studying Communication Skills even though they do not learn the course daily. Most of them do not learn daily because, they take the course to be just like normal English Language which they do not learn because they think they speak the language all the time.
5. It was also found that students who approach their lecturers when in difficulty are helped (though not many of them consult their lecturers). They only go to their lecturers when they have problems with their grades.
6. Large class size hinders students' progress in class.
7. Teaching and learning will be more comfortable if better lecture halls with modern facilities are provided.
8. More lecturers will be needed to help ease the number of students that the current lecturers of the course handle.

5.1 Recommendations for improving the teaching and learning of the Communication Skills course

Based on the findings and conclusions drawn from the study, the following recommendations are made:

1. Lecturers should encourage their students to perceive the course as not difficult
2. The Communication Skills lecturers should be encouraged to write more textbooks on the course
3. Students should put in more efforts to improve upon their communication competence because besides performing well in examinations, it will go a long way to help them.
4. Lecturers should encourage their students to consult when in difficulty
5. Effort should be made to employ many English language and Communication Studies oriented lecturers into the Communication Skills Unit to lecture in the course.
6. Lecturers should take a second look at the topics that the students said should be excluded such as, 'Ambiguity', Sentence Pattern' and 'Dangling Modifier'. They may be a little difficult for students so lecturers must teach them in a way that the students will develop interest in these topics mentioned earlier.
7. Class sizes should be reduced to encourage active participation in class.
8. The researcher finally suggests that the curriculum planners for the course should set up a committee to investigate the number of years that the course should be studied.

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