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Congruence between language proficiency and communicative abilities

Ernisa Marzuki*, Su-Hie Ting, Collin Jerome, Kee-Man Chuah, Jecky Misieng

Universiti Malaysia Sarawak, 94300 Kota Samarahan, Sarawak, Malaysia

Abstract

Reports in mass media and narratives of people in authority as well as the lay person in the street attribute unemployment of graduates to their poor communicative abilities and, in the same breath, poor proficiency in English. This raises questions for applied linguistics to address through empirical studies. This paper reports students' views of the congruence between language proficiency and communicative abilities. The specific aspects examined are whether students conceptualise these two constructs as the same, overlapping or different; and whether students think their language proficiency and communicative ability affect their chances of employability. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with university students with different English proficiency levels. The preliminary results indicate that students see both English proficiency and communicative ability as important factors affecting their employability but they can tease apart the two constructs. The students view communicative ability as going beyond language proficiency to encompass ability to take account of other viewpoints and clarity in thought patterns during communication. The findings suggest that strategies to improve undergraduate communicative abilities cannot target English proficiency alone.

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1. Introduction

Reports in mass media and narratives of people in authority as well as the lay person in the street attribute unemployment of graduates to their poor communicative abilities and, in the same breath, poor proficiency in English. In the Malaysian context, informal feedback from stakeholders in the private sector, reported in the mass media [1, 2], indicate that graduates do not have the necessary language and communication skills for workplace communication. Shortfalls cited include inability to speak English properly or to make oral presentations confidently [3]. Furthermore, at the Malaysia Career and Training Fair 2011, employers had stressed the importance of English Language Proficiency among fresh graduates [4]. The employers expect graduates to have confidence when they communicate in English.

However, to claim that English Language proficiency is the most important skill is debatable. For example, Singh and Singh [5] studied perceptions on Malaysian graduates' employability skills in the Klang Valley. The summated scores from both employers and graduates show that English Language proficiency and communication

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +6 082 581762.
E-mail address: mernisa@cls.unimas.my

skills are ranked as separate employability skill factors. The rankings of importance are as follows: 1) probability and adaptability skills, 2) interpersonal and teamwork skills, 3) time management skills, 4) English language proficiency, 5) information communication technology skills, 6) leadership skills and 7) communication skills. In another setting, a study of 30 International Medical Graduates from University of Ottawa, Canada revealed that these graduates lack specific patient-physician communication training and good understanding of English terms and idioms [6]. Hall et al. [6] concluded that lack of communication skills, especially in English, affected the graduates' performance in the workplace as well as their self-esteem. In Hall et al.'s [6] study, English language proficiency and communication skills are not seen as synonymous but overlapping at some point. In this study, English language proficiency and communication skills were treated as separate employability skills factors.

Other studies have also focused on graduates' lack of communication skills. For example, Crosling and Ward [7] found that Business/Commerce undergraduates from Monash University have difficulty in communicating formally with those of higher status and from other companies. Most of the communication that took place was informal in nature. In the United States, DuPre and Williams [8] reported a survey conducted by National Association of Colleges and Employers on 219 employers, which clearly place communications skills as the most sought-after skill in graduates and at the same list it as the most lacking skill found in fresh graduates.

In language research and language teaching, proficiency and communicative ability are treated as separate notions. A proficiency-oriented curriculum stressing function, content and accuracy can increase communicative ability, that is, the ability to function effectively in the language in real-life contexts [9]. However, it takes more than language proficiency to have good communicative ability. Kramsch [9] refers to communicative ability as interactional competence for which discourse aptitude is required. For example, the ability to take turns, hold and yield the floor, and introduce and build topics. Discourse aptitude goes beyond proficiency and it does not only "remain at the textual level of discourse cohesion, e.g., the right use of cohesive devices such as pronouns or verb inflections" [9, p. 370]. Byrnes [10] highlighted the argument that interactional skills can only be taught to learners with good proficiency in the target language. We acknowledge that poor language proficiency can compromise communicative ability but learners with low proficiency can be taught interactional skills so that they maximise use of their language resources for communication.

1.1. Purpose of study

The study examined students' views of the congruence between language proficiency and communicative abilities. The specific objectives were to determine whether students conceptualise language proficiency and communicative ability as the same, overlapping or different constructs; and whether students think that communicative ability affect their chances of employability and the reasons for their view.

1.2. Method of study

The participants of this study were 27 students in a public Malaysian university in Sarawak. They were selected based on a convenient sampling method from English classes taught by the five researchers in this study. Based on the students' self-ratings on a scale of 1 (bad) to 7 (very good), their English proficiency was mostly average to above average: 30.8% average (level 4), 46.2% above average (levels 5 and 6), and 23% below average (levels 2 and 3). Their proficiency in the national language, Bahasa Malaysia, was better from average to very high. Out of 14 participants who responded to this questionnaire item, the frequencies are as follows: six on level 7, four on level 6, two on level 5 and another two on level 4. Self-rating of language proficiency was used instead of scores in public examinations because this provides an indication of their confidence in using languages in their linguistic repertoire. Because of their better command of Bahasa Malaysia, some of the interviews were conducted in Bahasa Malaysia rather than English.

To ascertain the similarities or differences between the perception of language proficiency and communicative abilities of university students, a questionnaire and focus group interview were used. A pilot study on three students was conducted to ascertain the effectiveness of instruments.

After the pilot study, the interview questions were refined to deal with language ability and communicative ability separately if the participants gave indications that they viewed these two constructs as different based on their answers to questions 1 to 4. The six questions for the focus interviews were:

1. How well do you communicate? I communicate well only if ...
2. What are the characteristics of someone who can communicate well?
3. What are the characteristics of someone who is a bad communicator?
4. Do you think communicative ability depends on that person's language proficiency?
5. Can you rate yourself on your communicative ability in BM? And English?
6. Will communicative ability affect your chances of getting a job?

The questionnaire contained questions on students' ratings of their language skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing) using a 5-level Likert item (1- Not at all, 2-To some extent, 3-Just enough, 4-To a reasonable extent, and 5-To a great extent). Students were also asked to rate their ability based on a 5-level description of communicative ability [11] and language proficiency [12]. Their employability skills was ascertained based on 5-level Likert items (1-Strongly Disagree, 2-Disagree, 3-Neutral, 4-Agree, and 5-Strongly Agree).

The students completed the questionnaire and participated in the focus group interview in groups of five to seven. Each of the five focus group interview sessions was audio-taped. The interviews were conducted both in English and in Bahasa Malaysia, particularly the latter for those who lacked the necessary English language proficiency so as to focus on the content and not their ability to communicate in English.

The audio recordings were transcribed for analysis. The transcripts were coded using Miles and Huberman's [13] framework of pattern coding. After the open coding stage, the axial coding method was used for comparability across individual cases based on the objectives of the study. The coding reduced the large amount of data into a smaller quantity of relevant themes for subsequent analysis. The themes are used to construct a preliminary cognitive map of the constructs of language proficiency and communicative abilities. The transcripts were read and reread to capture emerging themes. The researchers went back and forth between the transcripts when they came across new themes that were missed in earlier analyses due to manner of expressions. The themes and results reported here focussed on students' conceptualisation of language proficiency and communicative ability as this is the focal point of the paper.

2. Results and discussion

2.1. Student conceptualisation of language proficiency and communicative ability

For the analysis of how students conceptualised communicative ability, the students were asked to list characteristics of someone with good and poor communicative ability. The characteristics were then grouped together based on the meaning. For example, "fluent", "correct words and grammar" were grouped with "good command of the language".

Similarly, "not shy" was grouped with "confidence". The antonym of confidence which is a characteristic of a poor communicator is "low self-esteem", "low confidence" and "shy". The results of the analysis are shown in Table 1, ordered from the highest total frequency to the lowest. As students could give any number of descriptors during the focus group interview, the relative frequency of the descriptors are used as an indicator of the important elements of communicative ability.

In the students' view, the three most important elements of communicative ability are confidence, (n=17), responsiveness (n=16) and ability to talk (n=10). Even when communicative ability is viewed from the aspect of good and poor communicative ability, the two most frequently highlighted elements are the same: confidence and responsiveness. For good communicative ability, the third and fourth frequently mentioned descriptors are being knowledgeable (n=5) and having the ability to talk (n=4). The opposite of ability to talk is the third frequently mentioned descriptor of poor communicative ability.

Based on the results, the image of a good communicator coming across is one who speaks one's mind in public without fear, is knowledgeable on the subject matter and is interactive. On the contrary, a poor communicator is one who cannot speak well, lacks self-confidence, does not feel like talking, may be emotional, and may have problems getting the message across. These are expected characteristics of a poor communicator. However, what emerged as interesting is that eight students highlighted self-centredness as a characteristic of a poor communicator, that is, one who cannot accept other viewpoints, does not listen to others, and criticises others. This interactive element of

communicative ability goes beyond mere ability to talk. In fact, in their own ways, the students have highlighted what Kramsch [9] refers to discourse aptitude which encompasses the ability to take turns, hold and yield the floor, introduce and build topics.

Table 1. Elements of communicative ability

Good communicative ability		Frequency	Poor communicative ability	Frequency	Total frequency
1.	Confidence (i.e. not shy)	11	Poor self confidence	8	19
2.	Responsiveness (Listen to others, talk more in conversation)	8	Self-centred (cannot accept other opinions, don't listen)	8	16
3.	Ability to talk	4	Inability to talk well (incomplete responses, cannot ask questions)	6	10
4.	Courageous (expressing ideas/speak out)	3	Reticent (don't feel like talking)	5	8
5.	Comprehensible (i.e. understood by others)	3	Incomprehensible (others don't get meaning)	4	7
6.	Calm/collected (i.e. not angry, talk slowly)	2	Emotional	5	7
7.	Knowledgeable (i.e. have lots of ideas)	5	Poor academically	1	6
8.	Good command of the language (fluent)	3	Poor command of language	3	6
9.	Outgoing personality (Cheerful/bright)	3	Anti-social (alone in crowd)	3	6
10.	Good interpersonal skill (Know how to build relationship)	2	No connection with others	1	3
11.	Friendly	3	-	-	3
12.	Persuasive	2	-	-	2
13.	Positive thinking	1	-	-	1

A point of contention that is addressed by this paper is the congruence between language proficiency and communicative ability. Table 1 shows that command of the language is among the less frequently mentioned elements of communicative ability, whether good or poor. The lower frequencies are probably due to the students' tendency to link communicative ability with emotions and attitudes that one demonstrates in conversations rather than grammatical accuracy. In this study, the students conceptualised language proficiency and communicative ability as different rather than similar or overlapping constructs. The finding that confidence and responsiveness are the two most frequently mentioned elements of communicative ability suggests that these might have been understood by students as indicators of language proficiency. Elsewhere, "studies have demonstrated that one's *confidence* in using a second language is an important predictor of foreign *language proficiency*" [14, p. 68].

2.2. Communicative ability and employability

Considering that so much has been written in the mass media and in research articles on how poor communication skills compromise undergraduates' employability in the workplace, this study investigated student views on this relationship. The interview results showed that the participants believed that communicative ability can affect their employability but their level of agreement varied (Table 2). None of the participants stated that communicative ability had no bearing on employability.

Participants who expressed partial agreement felt that communicative ability only affects selected aspects of the job, for instance, job interviews. Others stressed that although communicative ability is important, it does not really apply in cases where the nature of the job does not require communication such as laboratory work. In cases like these, the participants viewed results and other specific job-related skills as the more important components. As one participant put it, "...even if you cannot speak well, if you can perform well, then it's OK." This group of participants felt that the importance of communicative ability is conditional upon the job type and job situations, and can be compensated by competence in technical skills required by the job.

The group of participants who strongly agreed that communicative ability affects job prospects generally cited two reasons for this view. These students believed that to be employed, one has to possess a certain level of

communicative ability. One of the interviewed participants relayed a personal experience of being selected for a job as a result of having better communicative ability despite his slightly lower academic result (compared with a friend's).

Table 2. Students' reasons for communicative ability affecting employability

Agreement level	Reason given	Frequency
Partial agreement	It depends on the (type of) job. Some jobs do not require communicative ability, for example, lab work.	3
	Communicative ability is not the only skill that matters (in finding jobs)	1
	It depends on the place (of job application)	3
	It only affects the job interview.	5
Strong agreement	The need to deal with other people and to communicate well with them.	6
	Experience shows that people with better communicative ability would be selected for a job.	1

Another point of interest in the context of this paper is that some participants answered the question about communicative ability with two (or more) languages in mind. This was clear from the responses from a number of participants who perceived that communicative ability is only crucial when applying for a job in certain locations (e.g., Kuala Lumpur). Should they apply for a job in their hometown, then there is little need for communicative ability. In these cases, it seemed that the communicative ability perceived by these students was related to English and their colloquial dialect. This provides further support for the notion that the students view communicative ability and language proficiency as separate constructs.

The results on the participants' notion of language proficiency and communicative ability show that although the participants were students, they had the awareness that these were different constructs – similar to findings of language research [5, 6]. In this sense, mass media reports which conflate the two constructs may engender the misguided notion that the only way to improve undergraduates' communicative ability is to improve their mastery of the language. It is undeniable that language proficiency is a necessary element for good communication because it is one of the many descriptors of good and bad communicators. However, having a good mastery of the language does not automatically lead to good communicative ability in the language. Other descriptors used for communicative ability shows that good communicators are confident, knowledgeable and have conversational skills. Apart from these more frequently mentioned elements of communicative ability, the other descriptors can be grouped together as personality traits – courageous, calm, outgoing, friendly, persuasive, interpersonally connected for good communicators versus poor communicators are seen as reticent, emotional, anti-social and disconnected from others. In short, the students profiled good communicators as outgoing personalities and poor communicators as reserved personalities. In view of this, to address the issue of undergraduates having poor communication skills, the training needs to go beyond teaching language skills to possibly confidence building and skill in using available language resources to communicate. The latter refers to use of communication strategies such as restructuring of messages, circumlocution, paraphrase and literal translation – this is referred to as strategic competence.

In this study, communicative ability in Bahasa Malaysia is not an issue because the students are confident of their command of the language. The discussion will be centred on communicative ability in English. As it takes time to build the English proficiency of students in an environment where some may need to use little to no English in a day, it may not be reasonable to expect obvious improvements in their command of English through limited hours of formal instruction in English classes. Admittedly, formal communication is more difficult to handle for the less proficient speakers [8]. However, what is more possible is instruction in conversational skills so that the students have confidence to communicate in English at whichever level their proficiency may be. The conversational skills would enable less proficient students to handle informal communication by learning to interact with others. Building interactional competence would entail teaching strategies to take turns (e.g., encouraging responses from others, finding the opportunity to talk) [9]. In other words, in order to develop the communicative ability of less proficient speakers, it is more feasible to focus on interactional competence and strategic competence rather than grammatical competence to help them speak with confidence using available linguistic resources.

3. Conclusion

The study showed that the university students viewed language proficiency as an essential element but not the only element of communicative ability. While a low level of language proficiency can hamper communicative ability, good proficiency does not automatically bring about good communicative ability. Past a certain threshold of language proficiency, good communication skills include the ability to speak with confidence and in an interactive and knowledgeable manner with other people. On the other hand, a poor communicator is not confident, does not have conversational skills, and is reticent. The students in this study are of the view that communicative ability affects their chances of employability but excellent communication skills are not necessary in some locations, job types and job situations. They feel that technical skills can compensate for the lack of communication skills. Our contention is that lack of language proficiency does not mean that the speaker cannot develop communicative ability in the language. The findings suggest that lack of communication skills can be addressed by teaching strategies to make conversation (including turn-taking and responding to others) as well as communication strategies. With this, less proficient speakers would have more confidence to communicate in the language and develop the persona of a good communicator they aspire towards. However, these observations would need to be verified in other studies.

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