

The Reality of Training Communication Skills for First-Year Students at Hung Vuong University - Phu Tho

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Abstract

Communication skills are among those of great significance for everyone in general and for students in particular. They are difficult to master, because when it comes to communication, there are countless circumstances that require skillful conduct. In fact, students in general and those from Hung Vuong University in particular have poor communication skills; the communication skills performance among the freshmen are still at low level (average level); many employers are saying that students lack them or have low level, etc. Hence, it is essential to study the current situation of training students on communication skills so that solutions for developing communication skills among students can be brought to light.

Keywords: Communication skills, communication skills performance, practicing communication skills, students, Hung Vuong University.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Vietnam has been increasingly deeply integrating into the world economy and getting actively and ready for the 4th Industrial Revolution, which has created rapid and non-stop changes across all aspects of the socio-economic life. However, all successes should derive from human factors, which requires human resources to meet requirements set forth by the new era.

To this end, education-training plays a leading role. In the current educational renovation process, the education sector as a whole and universities specifically are undertaking reform in terms of educational contents, programs and methodologies in the direction of learner-intended capacity development, better quality of education and training, better training quality for human resource to meet social needs.

Reality shows that, although many companies have demands for labor recruitment, including foreign enterprises, graduates are having difficulty in finding

jobs; those with labor recruitment needs share the same remark that the supply of labor fails to meet requirements; job seekers lack many important skills to be eligible for employment. According to a survey by Nguyen Thi Thu Hang mentioned in the article "The current situation of life skills education in the world and in Vietnam" that was published in an education magazine in 2011, up to 90% of students and working people lack soft skills. Tran Trong Thanh, Chairman of the Board of Directors of VINAPO Company emphasized, "It can be said that 90% of graduates have almost no soft skills. Degrees and diplomas are important but your real capabilities and experience are the deciding factor." Mr. Tran Thanh Liem from Ho Chi Minh City Electricity Corporation said that many graduates have poor skills, especially presentation and communication ones. "Technology students have profound knowledge, but when they attend foreign seminars or workshops, they are unable to understand, speak, and write. In addition, their teamwork skills are extremely poor". According to Mr. Masaki Yamashita,

General Director of Vietnam Mitsubishi UFJ Bank, most foreign companies and businesses are dissatisfied with Vietnam's human resources because Vietnamese people's communication and teamwork skills are very poor: "I feel bad that students learn a lot at school, but they can't transfer their knowledge into work skills, can't apply it in practice, and when an incident provokes, you can't talk about it with your superiors". [Quoted, 3]

With regard to the above reasons, developing soft skills for students in general and those of Hung Vuong University in particular is an objective requirement in order to improve training quality and meet labor market needs.

2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

We conducted a study on 500 first-year students of Hung Vuong University, Phu Tho.

Good: "the mean + 3 standard deviations" : $4.61 \leq \text{Good}$
Fairly good: " the mean + 2 standard deviations " : $3.38 < \text{Fairly good} < 4.61$
Average: the mean ± 1 standard deviation: $2.15 < \text{Average} \leq 3.38$
Poor: " the mean - 2 standard deviations": $1.53 \leq \text{Poor} < 2.15$
Very poor: < " the mean - 3 standard deviations" : < 1.53

To quantitatively evaluate the performance level in communication skills training by items (specific communication skills), we use the conventional scoring method for the performance level of the communication skills training:

- Can't do : 0 point
- Do occasionally : 1 points
- Fairly proficient : 2 points
- Proficient : 3 points
- Very proficient : 4 points

- + Calculate the total score of each performance of skills training based on the frequency of selection. Calculate the average score of each performance.
- + Rank the performance according to the total score and according to the average score.

3. Contents

3.1. Definition of communication skills:

The concepts of communication skills have been introduced by many authors when they conducted studies on groups of different research subjects.

According to Hoang Thi Anh: "Pedagogical communication skills are communication skills that are applied to the communication process between teachers and students in teaching and educational activities. It is the ability to quickly perceive external manifestations and internal psychological developments of students and teachers themselves. It is also the skills in using verbal and non-verbal cues, knowing how to organize,

We used a questionnaire and an in-depth interview to survey levels of the students' communication skills performance and let them self-assess their own levels according to 5 levels: very poor, poor, average, fairly good, and good. Specifically:

Students are required to self-assess and peer-assess acquired levels of every performance of each skill according to 5 levels from "can't do/ hasn't done yet/hasn't been done yet" to "do very well". Quantative conventional scoring ranges from 1 point to 5 points accordingly.

The level of the students' communication skills performance is classified based on the mean and standard deviation. Details are as follows:

adjust and control the communication process to achieve educational purposes" [1].

In the study on "Communication skills of managers of Hanoi Transaction Office under Vietnam Bank for Industry and Trade", Nguyen Thi Tuyet Mai defined communication skills as follows: "communication skills are the ability to recognize, judge, and use means of communication to direct and control the communication process". Specifically, people with good communication skills are those who have the ability to predict others' psychological developments such as needs, desires, emotions, and educational levels. They can properly identify their position and role in communication activities, know how to attract attention, take the initiative in the communication process, know how to control themselves and others in this process, thereby having appropriate impact to create empathy with their target audience. People with good communication skills are those who can control their emotional state, listen actively, have the ability to persuade and behave appropriately in various situations" [5].

According to Nguyen Van Luy: "Communication skills are the most appropriate level of coordination between manipulations, gestures, postures, behaviors (including speech acts) to achieve expected results in the communication process. Communication skills are both stable, flexible, creative, and purposeful. The essence of communication skills is a complicated combination of social and individual behavioral norms with body movements (facial muscles, eye contact, lips, hand, foot, head, etc.) and the language. That

coordination is harmonious and reasonable, which means that it has certain information content suitable for the purpose of communication and effective in the communication process" [4].

Nguyen Thanh Binh said that: "Pedagogical communication skills are the ability to quickly perceive external manifestations and internal psychological developments of students and teachers themselves, and at the same time the ability to use appropriate verbal and non-verbal means, know how to organize, adjust and control the communication process to achieve educational purposes" [2].

Thus, with regard to communication skills, the authors agree on the following points:

- Communicative skills indicate individuals' ability to recognize or perceive a specific subject of communication, which is the quick recognition of the audience's external psychological manifestations, the prediction of their internal psychological characteristics.
- In the process of communication, the communicator uses verbal and non-verbal cues to best achieve the communication purpose. Or it is also the communicator's ability to use

verbal and non-verbal means to effectively exercise communication skills.

- Communication skills show the communicator's ability to control, adjust and direct the communication process so that the communication purpose is reached in the most effective way. (The mentioned control and adjustment can include the control of the communicator's own emotions and behaviors.)

Upon analyzing and finding out the characteristics of communication skills, in our opinion, communication skills can be understood as follows: *Communication skills are the ability to use the system of verbal and non-verbal means, the ability to proficiently adopt necessary techniques to supplement communication skills, quickly recognize the audience's external psychological manifestations, predict their internal psychological characteristics so that the communicator can identify ways to direct, adjust and control the communication process to achieve a certain purpose. Communication skills are demonstrated through specific communication performances.*

3.2. Results of training students on communication skills at Hung Vuong University

Table 1: Achieved results of communication skills training

No.	Performance	Result (N= 500)			p
		Mean	Deviation standard	r	
1	Listen	3.52	1.02	0.903	0.000
2	Categorize and organize information when listening	1.73	1.17		
3	Express thoughts or ideas verbally or in writing so that the listener or reader can understand the content of the message	1.45	1.38		
4	Speak or write clearly, fluently without interruption, concisely without errors in grammar, and pass on information in an understandable and accurate manner.	2.40	1.20		
5	Always get oneself mentally prepared before communicating with others, well control non-verbal signals, anticipate possible situations.	2.45	1.27		
6	Control and be aware of non-verbal cues of the voice (control the volume, pace, and tone of voice and be sensitive to the audience's feelings and emotions expressed in their voice)	2.41	1.12		
7	Be aware of and control facial expressions	2.47	1.12		
8	Control and be aware of nonverbal language of the body (posture, gestures, hand movements, body odor)	3.00	1.24		
9	Be aware of and control non-verbal cues expressed in one's appearance (choice of clothing, hairstyle, makeup, etc.)	2.06	1.14		
10	Analyze the situation when communicating directly (speaking) or indirectly (writing) to create a positive mood for the audience, retain their attention, etc.	1.72	1.12		
11	Balance verbal and non-verbal communications to suit the listeners, be aware of changes in their emotions and attitudes, and make them impressed.	2.54	1.23		
12	Prepare the communication setting	2.89	1.22		
13	Know how to relieve stress, get the audience back to normal when they are affected by emotions and feelings	3.40	1.34		
14	Make tea correctly, be skillful to offer different listeners tea or water while communicating	2.67	1.18		
15	Offer the audience a proper handshake	2.28	1.18		
16	Be humorous in appropriate communication situations to reduce stress	2.36	1.03		
17	Allow others to speak without interruption	3.61	1.04		
	Average	2.53	1.18		

(The lowest average is 1, the highest is 5)

The training results of students' communication skills were self-assessed by them to be "Average" \bar{X} = 2.53, which means that they considered their communication skills more or less limited. The scores are at the average level and the dispersion is wide (less than 2 points). *There is a very strong correlation between the self-assessment results of the performance of this skill with $r = 0.903$ and $p = 0.000$.* The obtained results are low for some specific performances of communication skills, such as "Express thoughts or ideas verbally or in writing so that the listener or reader can understand the content of the message" $\bar{X} = 1.45$, "Categorize and organize information when listening" $\bar{X} = 1.73$, "Analyze the situation when communicating directly (speaking) or indirectly (writing) to create a positive mood for the audience, retain their attention, etc." $\bar{X} = 1.72$...Some are close to the fairly good level, such as "Allow others to speak without interruption" $\bar{X} = 3.61$, "Listen" $\bar{X} = 3.50$, "Know how to relieve stress, get the audience back to normal when they are affected by emotions and feelings" $\bar{X} = 3.40$.

These results can be explained as follows: communication skills are among the relatively difficult skills; to master them, each of us needs a lot of time to experience and exercise. This affirms that the communication skills training must be done/re-done over and over on a regular basis. It also proves that: communication is a complex process and also a complicated skill. It is impossible to teach/learn communication skills in a few hours, or a few days as expected by some students, and many people who try to teach these skills also bear in mind that it only takes a few hours to acquire them. In fact, this is not possible. To get good results (exercise these skills "very well"), students themselves must make efforts to get hands-on experience, self-study, or study under the guidance and supervision of an expert. This also affirms the role of teachers in encouraging, accompanying and motivating students in the training process of communication skills. And better than anyone else, teachers must cling to the

belief that their students can acquire them and exercise them well.

For some complementary skills for communication skills such as "making and offering tea", students rated themselves at "average" level $\bar{X} = 2.67$. When we made a request to practice this skill as a must, we received contradictory opinions. However, in a positive sense, having tea is an age-old cultural feature of the Vietnamese people. It is said that betel leaves and areca nuts were offered as a conversation starter to guests; yet for alcoholics, a cup of tea is a feast starter. Tea drinking culture of Vietnamese people is different across walks of life. Farmers have a habit of drinking tea with garden herbs. The tea is kept in teapot and poured into a bowl; they often bring it to the entrance of the village to meet others and talk about their children, crops, livestock, etc. Business people offer tea at the start of their business meetings to get to know each others better. Tea drinking among intellectuals is very interesting. They drink tea to get inspired for composing and discussing literature, poetry, and science. Although this is not a daily need, it is necessary to have this skill at some specific times; that's why we include it in the training course on communication skills for students. However, students hardly had this skill; some were very clumsy to exercise this skill and many of them admitted they have never done it. We created hypothetical situations for students to practice; at first they were very confused, then they picked up the steps and techniques of making tea, pouring/offering tea... We hope they will be trained on all relevant skills that support their communication skills, so that they won't be confused, clumsy, or lose their confidence in any communication situations because sometimes small actions affect the outcome of the communication process.

To confirm the reliability of the research results shown in Table 1, we conducted in-depth interviews and created situations for students to deal with.

Upon being asked: What skills do we need to have a healthy relationship? Ng. Th. Tr (a K19 Accounting undergraduate) answered: Communication is an important skill, if not the most important. That's why the school is training the students to develop communication skills, in many different ways, Tr explained. Tr thought that all the ways were meaningful and Tr often participated in skills training through clubs and activities launched by the university's Youth Union. However, Tr was not really satisfied with the training results and considered himself currently at the fairly good level after participating in skills training activities; before that, his communication skills had been at average level. Tr wished and was determined to achieve "Good" level when he became a third-year student. (In-depth interview results obtained on March 26, 2023)

There are many ways and methods to teach communication skills to students such as: through student clubs, hands-on practice, vocational training, and dominant academic subjects. We believe that giving students knowledge must go hand in hand with equipping them with necessary skills in education. The latter must aim at giving learners social adaptability,

positive behaviors in social relationships and life situations. Therefore, in most of the modules in the training program, students have been introduced to skills including communication skills. They are among practical skills that every student needs to adapt to his career and life later on.

Unlike the knowledge of any other subjects, communication skills are trained and developed continuously during 4 school years and even after

students' graduation. Therefore, we have integrated these skills into the training program to train them on communication skills. Here is an example:

Organization of the game "How to say it right"

Here are some inappropriate replies when communicating over the phone, please correct them.

- Hello, who is that? Dialed the wrong number.
- Hello, I'm listening. Who do you want to speak to?
- Hello, why have you been calling repeatedly? I told you that tomorrow a repairman will come to your home to fix it.
- Please call another department. It is not our responsibility.
- You want to know, huh? Call the customer service.
- Please speak louder, I can't hear anything.
- Our director just went out to have his hair washed. Please call back in about 2 hours.
- If you want to talk to me, then stop using that tone of voice, I'm not your employee.
- Do you know what time it is now? Call back in thirty minutes.
- Which Quyên do you want to speak to? The one with dark skin or with fair skin?

In this situation, the students corrected the way they spoke and addressed themselves, and replaced the inappropriate replies with appropriate ones. After a 15-minute thinking and discussing session, the results were as follows:

- Hello, sorry, who am I speaking with? You dialed the wrong phone, I'm not An.
- Hello, An speaking. Excuse me, who do you want to speak to?
- Hello, An speaking. Yes, at 8 a.m. tomorrow morning, a repairman will come to your home to fix it. You can rest assured!
- Our department is not in charge of this area. Please call the customer service department for more detailed information.
- Regarding the issue in which you are interested, please dial the customer service department to be answered.
- Aunt, I can't hear you well. Can you speak up a little please?
- Our department has two Quyêns. Do you want to speak to Le Quyên or Nguyen Quyên?

.....

(The diary on practicing telephone communication skills integrated into dominant academic subjects - the basic counseling module- content: Telephone consultation. K18 Social Work)

It can be said that there are many ways and paths for students to practice and develop their communication skills. Self-learning and self-study will help them develop those skills most effectively by coming up with their own plans and goals; identifying ways and paths suitable to their abilities, conditions and timetable; making efforts, persistently practicing and cultivating knowledge, skills and attitudes to research under the guidance and support of lecturers.

Lectures should direct and support students to establish a sense of self-learning and self-study, create their own needs, motivations, interest in learning, improve their willpower and make efforts to overcome difficulties to acquire knowledge, practice soft skills and occupational skills, and the independent work habit. The independent work habit will enable students lifelong self-learning and self-study in their future life and professional activities.

4. CONCLUSIONS

Training students on necessary skills in general and communication skills in particular is an objective requirement in order to improve the quality of training and meet the needs of the labor market. The article analyzes the results of training communication skills for 500 first-year students of Hung Vuong University. For some specific performances, students almost achieved

the fairly good level, but the overall result was at the average. Those results initially confirm the training quality of students' communication skills; with the students' current sense of self-study and self-training under the supervision of experts, it is certain that they will have interesting and useful experiences in the following years and be confident upon their graduation with good communication skills they have acquired.

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