

Secondary School Teachers' Perceptions on Applicability of Communication Skills Course in Their Workplace: The Case of Four Secondary Schools in Morogoro, Tanzania

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Abstract: This paper presents findings of the study that was carried out to examine secondary school teachers' perceptions on applicability of communication skills course in their workplace. The study used a total of 40 secondary school teachers and employed a case study research design. An in-depth interview was conducted to solicit detailed information from respondents and collected data were coded and thematically analysed. The study has revealed that communication skills knowledge is applicable in teachers' workplace for different situations such as in school meetings, in different forms of writing, in communicating with core-workers and other people in general, in giving directives to students etc. The study recommends that universities should continue offering the course but need to modify on the methods of delivery, time for studying the course and align the course with students' career so that they can see the need of paying more attention when learning the course.

Keywords: Communication, Communication Skills Course, Workplace,

1. Introduction

Communication is central to the flourishing of any organization. Bisen and Priya (2009) view communication as a life blood of an organization with a purpose of effecting change and influencing action. In a school as an organization, teachers are instrumental in effecting change and influencing action. For teachers to fulfil such purpose, they need to have effective communication skills. However, communication skills are not inherited but they must be learned (Guffey, Rhodes & Rogin, 2010:21).

In order to facilitate the acquisition of communication skills among college and university students, teachers in particular, the educational curriculums at university level and teacher training colleges in Tanzania incorporated a course of communication skills. The course was firstly introduced at the University of Dar es Salaam in 1978 followed by Sokoine University of Agriculture in Morogoro (Shishiwa and Ong'ondo, 2016). Currently the course is and has been compulsory in all universities in Tanzania (Komba, 2015) and all teachers' training colleges.

The goals of introducing communication skills were to minimize communication problems related to English language in academic setting (Komba, 2015) and to develop ability to learn effectively at University level through the medium of English language and communicate about the different subjects in English (Shishiwa and Ong'ondo, 2016). Likewise at the diploma level, the objective of communication skills course is to enable student teachers to develop and improve communication skills for effective interaction (TIE, 2009). Therefore, communication skills course is viewed as the set of planned lessons for improving different skills namely; reading skills, listening and note taking skills, planning and writing essays and skills for making oral presentations (Komba, 2015).

Several studies have been conducted related to communication skills course in Tanzania (Mbowe, 1994; Mwalimu, 1998; Komba, 2008 and Komba, 2015). Generally these studies addressed the influence of students' attitude and motivation in learning communication skills course (Mwalimu, 1998), impact of communication skills on students' development of communicative abilities and the importance of learning communication skills course among university students (Komba, 2008; 2015).

Shishiwa and Ong'ond (2016) remark that students, with reference to English language, need to know the language skills for social, academic and professional purpose. However, most studies done addressed the academic part of the course i.e. the motivation, attitude and the learning process of the course. Few studies touched on the social and professional aspect of the course. One of the studies done is by Shishiwa and

Ong'ondi(2016) who looked at the relevance of communication skills course to the needs of students with a focus on social, academic and professional needs. Thus, no study has been conducted to assess whether students, apart from academic setting, use acquired communication skills in their workplace after graduating from the university. This is the gap that this study sought to fill with a particular reference to secondary school teachers. Hence the study was designed to examine secondary school teachers' perceptions on applicability of communication skills course in their workplace. The guiding research question was: what are teachers' perceptions on the applicability of communication skills course in their workplace?

2. Literature Review

According to Foulger (as cited in Komba, 2015) the term *communication* has been derived from the Latin word "*communis*" which means "to make something common". Keyton (2011) defines communication as the process of transmitting information and common understanding from one person to another. Communication therefore is transmission of information, and meaning from one individual or group namely a sender to another known as a receiver (Guffey & Almonte, 2010). At the centre of communication is transmission of meaning. Thus, the process of transmitting meaning can be complete only when intended meaning by sender is what is captured by the receiver. The process of meaning sharing goes through five stages in which the sender forms an idea and encodes it in a message which he/she transfers through a channel to a receiver who decodes the message and gives feedback.

In understanding the process of communication there is a need to discuss briefly different models of communication. A number of models, which reflect an increasing understanding of the communication process have been developed namely; linear models, transactional models and transactional models (Wood, 2009).

Linear models are the earliest models of communication which regarded communication as a one-way process in which one person acted on another person (Wood, 2009). There are different models developed by different scholars (Aristotle's model/ rhetorics, Lasswell's model, Shannon Weaver model, Berlo's model etc.) that can be grouped under this category. For example Lasswell's (1948) model was based on the five questions that can describe how communication works namely: "*Who? Says what? In which channel? To whom? With what effect?*" These questions provide five elements of communication namely; sender, message, channel, receiver and effect respectively. The weakness of the linear models is that communication is regarded as one way process where a receiver of a message cannot be a sender in a communication process.

In the **interactive models** of communication, a communication process is regarded as a two way process where the effect of the message can be obtained through feedback from the receiver of the message. In interactive models "receivers" respond to "senders" and "senders" listen to "receivers" with the feedback which can be verbal, nonverbal, or both, and it may be intentional or unintentional (Wood, 2009). Schram's (1955) model is one of the examples of the interactive model in which feedback was thought to be an essential element in communication process. Deal & Kennedy (as cited in Wood, 2009) pointed out that supervisors report that productivity rise in organizations when they encourage their subordinates to provide feedback for example asking questions, comment on supervisors' messages, and respond to supervisory communication.

The **transactional models** of communication acknowledge that communicators involved in a communication process both send and receive messages often simultaneously. Also these models show that all features of communication are dynamically varying and not constant (Wood, 2009). One of the examples of transaction model is the Barnlund's 1970 model which presents a multi-layered feedback system that recognizes that anyone involved in communication process can be a sender and receiver often at the same time.

In the workplace these models; linear models, interactive models and transactional models can be applicable in the communication process. However, transactional models can be the most effective where communication can be viewed as the two-way process and communicators can both send messages and receive messages often at the same time. Supervisors and other workers in a workplace can communicate in a simultaneous manner; that is sending and receiving messages simultaneously. Also the issue of dynamism for all communication features is very crucial since features of communication always vary.

In today's workplace workers are expected to be communicating with a good number of people more often and rapidly (Masters and Wallace, 2011). In workplace, communication takes place both in spoken and written forms whether verbally or non-verbally. Thus workers need to speak and write to their supervisors, colleagues and customers and in turn read and listen to them. In school context, the supervisors can be head of schools, second master or mistress; the colleagues can be fellow teachers, administrative staff and customers can be parents, and students. Thus, teachers need to utilise all or some of communication skills namely speaking, reading, writing and listening depending on the intended purpose and how the message is framed and shared for decoding.

Communication can be effective if one can effectively apply the skills to get what he/she needs from others and in turn be able to understand what others need from him/her. Therefore, effective communication in

workplace calls for appropriate use of reading, writing, speaking and listening skills. Masters and Wallace (2011) note that effective communication in workplace is essential. Workers in their profession spend much of their time at workplace on communication through listening (45%), speaking (30%), reading (16%) and writing (9%) (Mahajan, 2015). Evidence shows that among the skills employers look for in an employee is effective demonstration of communication skills (Dench, Perryman and Giles, 1998). Given their importance, communication skills need to be learned and developed and put to use by all employees and prospective employees.

Since communications skills are not inborn but they can be taught and learned (Lloyd and Bor, 2009), universities and colleges in Tanzania incorporated communication skills course to equip students (prospective employees) with necessary communicative skills. A survey of the syllabi of communication skills course from three universities in Tanzania namely University of Dar es Salaam, Sokoine University of Agriculture and St. Augustine University of Tanzania show that communication skills course endows learners both with grammatical aspects of English language and communication skills at large.

The grammar part of the course aims at making students identify and interpret grammatical elements of English language and thereafter create appropriate and correct English language constructions and use them to communicate appropriately in given contexts. The second part of the course is geared at helping students develop and employ four communication skills namely speaking, reading, writing and listening. In speaking skills students are expected to effectively communicate orally and employ various methods of oral presentations whereas in reading students are expected to use study and reading skills such as skimming and scanning to comprehend content and analyse given texts. The aspect of writing requires students to be able to write technical writings, work documents, good paragraphs and essays and apply proper documentation and lastly be in a position to apply good listening habits learned and be able to take notes effectively.

Several studies have been conducted related to communication skills worldwide and Tanzania in particular. Worldwide, for example, Amiruddin, Mohd, Yunus, and Rahim, (2015) conducted a study in Malaysia to assess application of Communication Skills (CS) among lecturer on vocational teaching and learning in vocational College Zone Johor. The findings indicate that lecturers apply communication skills in vocational teaching and learning, however there is no relationship between teaching experience and application of communication skills. Similarly, Iksan et al (2011) conducted a study to assess the level of the attainment of communication skills among university students in UKM-Malaysia and found that students had attained the communication skills needed before they venture into the working world. The findings imply that classroom is a place of developing communication skills but the working world is a place for familiarising with the communication skills developed. Furthermore, Mahajan (2015), in his paper on the key role of communication skills in life of professionals conducted in India, highlights the importance of communication skills in an individual's career. As already pointed above, studies that have been conducted in Tanzania (Mbowe, 1994; Mwalimu, 1998; Komba, 2008; Komba, 2015; and Shishiwa and Ong'ond 2016) addressed students' attitude and motivation in learning the communication skills course, impact and importance of the course in developing communicative abilities and the relevance of communication skills to the needs of the students.

From the studies done, much of the efforts have been placed on assessing communication skills course in an academic setting (Universities and colleges) in relation to students' studying of the course. Little has been done to assess the applicability of communication skills course in workplace, for example, a study by Amiruddin, Mohd, Yunus, and Rahim, (2015) which however was conducted in Malaysia. Thus, in Tanzania no study has been conducted to assess whether students, apart from academic setting, use acquired communication skills in their workplace after graduating from the university which was a focus of this study.

3. Methodology

In this study researchers employed case study research design because it enables the researcher to have an in-depth understanding of people in real situation (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2007). This study sought to examine teachers' perceptions on the applicability of communication skills course; and Hitchcock and Hughes (1995) as cited in Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2007) argue that one of the hallmarks of case study design is focusing on individual actors or group of actors and seek to understand their perception of events (p.253).

The study participants were secondary school teachers from four randomly selected secondary schools in Morogoro municipality namely Morogoro, Nanenane, Tushikamane and Mafiga secondary schools. The study used a total of 40 (22 males and 18 females) respondents. A total of 36 respondents were obtained through random sampling from the schools and 04 were purposively sampled as per their positions (heads of schools). An in-depth interview method was employed in soliciting data from the selected secondary school teachers. The collected data were coded and later grouped according to the themes and sub-themes generated from the collected findings. The coding was important to keep privacy and anonymity of the respondents.

4. Findings and Discussion

The study was conducted to find out teachers' perceptions on the applicability of communication skills course in their workplace. In order to achieve that purpose, researchers inquired on some preliminary information of the respondents and the general view of the respondents regarding the relevance of the course. Then researchers went on to solicit respondents' perceptions on the applicability of the course. Therefore, findings are presented into three sections namely an overview, respondents' perceptions and respondents' recommendations regarding the course.

4.1 An Overview

The study involved a total of 40 respondents, 22 males and 18 females. From the current study it was found out that respondents graduated from different universities and teachers' colleges. Out of 40 respondents 37 were degree holders from University of Dar es Salaam (UDSM), Sokoine University of Agriculture (SUA), Muslim University, Tumaini University, and St. Augustine University of Tanzania (SAUT). The rest 03 were diploma holders from Kigurunyembe and Mpwapa Teachers' college. All respondents reported to have studied communication skills during their studies with different modalities based on the nature of syllabi content. Some universities such as UDSM offer communication skills course which is integrated with grammatical aspects of English language, some universities such as SUA and Tumaini offer communication skills by separating the grammatical aspects of English language from communication skills in general (reading, writing, speaking and listening) and some universities such as SAUT and Muslim University offer only communication skills in general without touching on the grammatical aspects of English. However, the findings show that all respondents studied communication skills which addresses language skills namely speaking, reading, writing and listening which was a focus of this study.

Furthermore, all respondents agreed that the course is relevant not only during their study while at the university but also at their workplace and outside their workplace. In commenting on this, one of the respondents had the following to say:

Communication skills are central to everything we do. We cannot live without communicating... regardless of your work; you will need communication skills... (D4)

With respect to whether all or some of the skills taught at the university are relevant to their workplace, majority of respondents (37/40) said all what was taught is relevant and they put them into use at their workplace. For example some of the respondents said:

...I don't remember if there is anything that I learnt in communication skills which is not useful here at my workplace (B4)

Communication skills is very useful because it helps me to communicate with teachers, parents and visitors as well as with students.....I know which language to use when communicating with these different groups (D1)

These findings concur with Masters and Wallace (2011) who argue that in today's workplace workers are expected to be communicating with a good number of people more often and rapidly. Hence this calls for appropriate communication skills for one to be effective in delivering and getting the intended message during the interaction.

Few respondents (3/40) identified some of the contents that they regarded not useful in their workplace such as sentence construction, tense formation and all issues related to grammar aspects of English language. One of the respondents said:

I don't see where I can use for example sentence construction in my teaching. I am a teacher of geography..... So to me sentence construction is not relevant... (C8)

However, this view seems to be contradictory to some who responded on the perceived applicability of communication skills. For example, it was identified that communication skills is applicable in setting of examination question particularly in the choice and appropriate arrangement of words in a sentence to avoid ambiguity. This is the true reflection of the universities' communication skills curricula especially on the grammar part which aims at making students identify and interpret grammatical elements of English language and thereafter create appropriate and correct English language constructions and use them to communicate appropriately in given contexts.

4.2 Teachers' Perceptions on the Applicability of the Course

The major study question was what are teachers' perceptions on the applicability of communication skills course in their workplace? From the findings, respondents presented their views on how they perceive the

applicability of communication skills course at their workplace by identifying different situations in which communication skills' knowledge is put to use.

4.2.1 In school meetings

Respondents identified school meetings as an important situation in which communication skills knowledge is applied. From the findings, respondents identified different meetings in which they participate, namely staff meetings, school board meetings, departmental meetings and school baraza (meeting involving teachers and students or parents). Respondents generally admitted that the knowledge and skills acquired from communication skills course help them to effectively communicate during the meetings. The following response justifies this assertion:

Speaking skills have assisted me to organise matters related to meetings. For example, preparing the meeting agenda.....also I use presentation strategies learned to present matters in the meeting (A2)

Also other respondents when commenting on the same point had the following to say:

By using the knowledge of communication skills, I am able to take down important points from a meeting.....let me tell you something, I don't write everything when I am in the meeting..... (D2)

When I am in the meeting, communication skills' knowledge helps me to read a voluminous report very quickly and accurately....for example we learnt reading strategies such as scanning and skimming which I often use...(B3)

Sometimes we can be in a meeting and a person rises up the hand, when later given chance to speak he/she responds by saying my point has been said by another person.... this shows that he/she was keen to listen to other while they were speaking (C1)

The above findings indicate that when in a meeting a range of communication skills are put to use. They are aggregates of skills from speaking, listening, reading and writing. For example in the above responses, preparing of agenda (writing skills), presentation skills (speaking), note taking (listening) and scanning and skimming(reading) have been identified as some of the skills employed. These findings are line with Iksen et al (2011) who found out that students get necessary communication skills required before the venture into the working world. Thus at the university they are equipped with the knowledge but the workplace provides a platform for applying the acquired knowledge.

4.2.2 In teaching and learning process

The findings also indicate that respondents use communication skills in teaching and learning process. Respondents specifically identified preparation of the lesson, lesson delivery, question setting to mention a few as scenario in which communication skills features. For example, one of the respondents had the following to say regarding preparation of the lesson:

...I use intensive and extensive reading techniques when preparing lesson notes. For example, I read several books for getting a broad understanding of the concepts (C2)

Also respondents noted that communication skills feature in lesson delivery. Respondents admitted that communication skills is of much use during teaching and learning in classroom setting as a teacher is able to figure out whether he/she is being listen to, students are following the lesson, and whether students understand what is being taught. In connection to this, the following respondents said:

....for example, I can be able to interpret non-verbal messages from students and be in position to know which students are listening and understanding the lesson and those who don't (A5)

You know, sometimes I use listening strategies to listen to students' questions so that I can be able to respond to the questions appropriately (B6)

Frankly speaking, I cannot proceed to another topic without getting feedback from students regarding the previous topic (D3)

Some respondents also admitted to use the knowledge of communication skills in setting questions. That is through proper choice of terminologies, appropriate phrasing of the questions so as to avoid ambiguous questions. One of the respondents had the following to comment regarding question setting:

.....by using different communication skills techniques, I have been composing questions accurately, for example composing questions that have no ambiguity(C5)

From such responses, it is clearly seen that teachers acknowledge the contribution of communication skills in question setting without which questions set would be difficult to interpret and sometimes difficult to be understood and answered by students. Thus, communication skills are seen here as central even to written communication.

4.2.3 In different formal writings

Respondents also indicated that the knowledge of communication skills helps to write different formal writings such as formal letters, Curriculum Vitae (CV), different reports (e.g. examination reports), minutes of the meetings. One of the head of school commented on how communication skills have been useful in assisting teachers to write official letters appropriately. He had the following to say:

.....I always help to correct teachers' letters which are incorrectly written....for example you may find a teacher has written an application letter without indicating the details of the advertisement of the post (which newspaper, of which date, reference number etc) (A3)

Similarly, other respondents commented on the importance of communication skills in writing, and they said:

.....for example in writing, when I write formal letters or anything I always consider punctuation as a very important element in writing. (D9)
I was taught how to write references....for example in different forms of writing here at my work station sometimes we are required to write references (B2)

The findings indicate that formal writings do not end with university studies but it also feature in a workplace. For example, the knowledge on how to write references in most cases had been attributed to academic writings such as term paper writing, and research. Contrary, respondents have admitted that they do write references for example in their scheme of works, lesson plans and preparing a list of references to give to students for further reading.

4.2.4 In giving directives to students

Findings show that most of the respondents reported that it is the knowledge of communication skills course that helps them to provide different directives to students. For example communication skills knowledge is applicable while giving instruction at the parade ground, in other communication outside the classroom such as when they are doing general cleanliness, in games and sports and in other extracurricular activities etc. One of the respondents while commenting about this point said:

You know what sir.....it is through knowledge obtained in the communication skills course that help me to communicate effectively while communicating to students in the parade ground.....when on duty I always use different strategies to make sure that I give effective directives to students (C3)

4.2.5 In communicating with core-workers and other people in general

Most of the respondents reported that communication skills course equipped them with sufficient knowledge that help them to communicate effectively with their core workers and different people in their school in general. They were of the view that different communication elements taught in this course such as sender, receiver, message, channel and feedback help them a lot when communicating with different people. One of the respondents said:

.....those elements of communication have helped me so much in communicating effectively with my core-workers....for example, we were emphasized to consider the receiver when communicating, and this has also helped me to communicate effectively with my supervisors (D 5)

Similarly one of the respondents who is an administrative staff in one of the school while commenting on the same, she said:

....you know! Communication skills made me recognise the importance of feedback in communication. This has helped me to execute my responsibilities efficiently here at my work

station because I always give feedback on time and always insist the teachers under my supervision to always give feedback in whatever they are assigned to do (A1)

In relation to feedback the current findings concurs with Deal & Kennedy (as cited in Wood, 2009) who pointed out that supervisors reported that productivity rise in organizations when they encourage their subordinates to provide feedback for example asking questions, comment on supervisors' messages, and respond to supervisory communication.

With reference to the choice of the medium to use, respondents indicated that they do use language depending on the person they are communicating to as stated by one of the respondents below:

...I do use different language forms depending on the person I am talking with. For example, the language I will use to talk to students will be different from the language I will use to talk to my head of school or to my fellow teacher (D7)

Choice of an appropriate medium is a logical finding because, in communication skills, students are exposed to medium as an important element in communication process. For a sender to choose an appropriate medium he/she must take into consideration among other factors, the receiver of the message. Therefore, for the message to be well understood, the sender should choose and use the language (both verbal and non-verbal) that is known by the receiver (Komba, 2015).

4.3 Respondents' Recommendations Regarding the Course

Despite their positive perception on the applicability of communication skills course, respondents also provided their recommendations on how communication skills course can be improved. The following are suggested recommendations

- It should be emphasized that every student must study the course regardless of the specialization be it science or arts
- The course should be taught from primary level, go through the secondary level up to the university level
- The coverage of the course content should be extended and contact hours in classes should also be extended i.e. at the university level, the course need to be offered from first year to third or fourth year depending on the duration of the program.
- Apart from lecture method, new methods of teaching should be adopted to enhance students' interaction and discussion.
- Communication skills in relation to language skills (reading, listening, writing and speaking) should be divided into two parts e.g. one semester may offer writing and listening and the other semester reading and speaking.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations for Further Studies

The findings of this study have shown that teachers perceive communication skills course as important and applicable in their workplace. The study has made a contribution in the field of communication studies by revealing the applicability of communication skills in a workplace and providing examples and situations in which the knowledge of the course is put to use. With these findings, universities and colleges in Tanzania should continue offering the course but should take into consideration modifying the methods of delivery, time for studying the course and aligning the course with students' career so that they can see the need of paying more attention when learning the course.

The findings of this study have revealed the general perception on the applicability of communication skills at workplace particularly in secondary schools. These findings, however, cannot be generalised to other workplace though they provide a gist on the applicability of the course. The researchers recommend more studies to be done to explore the applicability of the course in other work settings. Furthermore, in school settings, a more focused study on the applicability of the course in teaching and learning need to be carried out to unveil whether the course is fruitful in the actual teaching and learning process.

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