

Effectiveness of a Business Communication Course: Evidence From a Business School in India

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Abstract

This study aims to show the effectiveness of a business communication course offered in a business school in India. All students who enrolled for the Master of Business Administration program in the school were considered for the study. The study adapted a pretest and posttest approach to find the effectiveness of the course. It also describes the curriculum offered and methodology followed in the school. The results show that the course was effective in improving the oral communication skills of the students. The study also discusses the implications for business schools, faculty, and students.

Keywords

oral communication, curriculum, business schools, methodology, effectiveness

Introduction

The Master of Business Administration (MBA) degree is a golden key that opens the door to a challenging career for aspiring managers (Francis, 2012). There are about 4,500 business schools in India churning out nearly 360,000 MBA graduates every year (Sinha, 2013). While the number of providers of MBA degrees has proliferated over the last 5 years, the employability of MBA graduates has dropped. According to the latest MeritTrac-MBAUniverse.com report, only 21% of MBAs graduating in India were found to be employable (Bhaduri, 2012). Surveys have

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shown that a large number of MBAs remain unemployed as they lack the requisite communication skills (Francis, 2012). According to Bhargava (2012), there is a huge requirement for good managers in the industry. Management graduates from most of the business schools in India are not skilled enough to meet the current industry requirement.

Today's workplaces demand more soft skills than technical skills (James & James, 2004), because soft skills are critical for productive performance (Nealy, 2005). According to Kumar and Jain (2010), communication skills are considered to be a major survival skill in today's organizations. Business executives perceive communication as the second most important skill next to integrity (Robles, 2012). As one climbs the organizational ladder, the relative importance of technical skills declines, while the importance of communication skills increases. Robles (2012) recommended that instructional strategies and methods be applied in the classroom to enhance the interpersonal skills of business graduates. Therefore, business schools should place greater emphasis on improving the communication skills of the aspiring MBA graduates through innovative curriculum and interesting methodologies.

Some schools across the world have already implemented various forms of interventions to improve the communication skills of students and have demonstrated an overall improvement amongst students. A repetition of written tasks throughout the accounting courses showed an overall improvement in the written skills of undergraduate and postgraduate students (Ashbaugh, Johnstone, & Warfield, 2002; Evans, Tindale, & Hamil Mead, 2009; Hirsch & Collins, 1988; May & Arevalo, 1983; Stout & DaCrema, 2004). Collaboration between the accounting faculty and a writing consultant also showed improvement in the written skills of students (Mohrweis, 1991). To improve the writing skills of accounting students, Riordan, Riordan, and Sullivan (2000) developed a structured writing-effectiveness program across three different subjects and demonstrated significant improvement. A study undertaken by Cleaveland and Larkins (2004) examined the effect of web-based writing instruction, practice, and feedback in a taxation subject, and showed that the approach was effective in improving sentence-structure aspects of students' written communication skills.

The review of previous literature shows that the learning interventions had a positive effect on the writing skills of undergraduate and postgraduate accounting students. However, studies pertaining to oral communication skills were scarce. Kumar and Jain (2010) urge that business schools should redesign their curriculum, approach, and training to improve the industry's expectation in regards to skills of students, among which communication skills tops the list (Jackson, 2014). Hence this study attempts to address the gap and aims to assess the effectiveness of a business communication course in a business school. The course is designed with objectives that primarily focus on the oral communication skills of MBA students (see the appendix). The effectiveness of the course is measured by assessing the oral communication skills of the students, precourse and postcourse delivery. An improvement in the posttest is an indication for the effectiveness of the course.

Methodology

The research design adopted in this study is descriptive in nature. Descriptive research involves gathering data that describe events and then organizes, tabulates, depicts, and describes the data collection (Glass & Hopkins, 1984). The details about the samples, sample size, instrument used, and the data collection methodology are described below.

Samples and Site

The study was done in a business school in India, and the sample consisted of all the 180 MBA students who joined the course in that particular academic year in that school. This study was conducted with permission granted by the school's Research Committee. A majority of the sample (75%) consisted of engineers, and the rest were from other disciplines. The language of all the respondents during the undergraduate course was English. Out of the 180 students, the study considered only 162 students because only 162 students took both preassessments and postassessments.

Measures

A personal communication audit developed by O'Hair, O'Rourke, and O'Hair (2001) was used to assess the oral communication skills of the students. This was selected as the research tool because the book written by O'Hair et al. (2001) was used as a reference text for the course and it aligned very well with the syllabus. The audit has 20 statements that are to be rated by respondents on a 4-point scale ranging from VSA to VSD, where *Very Strongly Agree (VSA)* = 4; *Agree (A)* = 3; *Disagree (D)* = 2; and *Very Strongly Disagree (VSD)* = 1. It has four levels (19 and below = Not Competent; 20 to 39 = Marginal; 40–59 = Competent; and 60–80 = Fully Prepared). A potential limitation is that self-report measures leave a lot of room for response biases and validity problems (Moskowitz, 1986). The concern is whether or not the respondents know enough about themselves to accurately portray what the self-report is attempting to determine (McDonald, 2008). However, this does not mean that all self-report data are invalid, only that they cannot be trusted in all cases (Ericsson & Simon, 1993). The great advantage of self-report is that it gives the respondents' direct views about themselves. Thus researchers should not abandon this method of data collection, although it is often advisable to supplement self-report data with observational data (Barker, Pistrang, & Elliott, 2005). Based on this, the study also aimed to substantiate the self-audits of students by indicating the correlation between students' self-assessments and their final marks (awarded by the faculty through continuous assessment).

Data Collection

The students were informed about the objective of the pretests and posttests. The pretest was administered on the first day of the course and the posttest was administered on the last day of the course. Since the business school follows a trimester pattern

Table 1. Pretest Levels.

| Level | Number of Students | % |
|--------------|--------------------|------------|
| 60–80 | 69 | 42 |
| 40–59 | 92 | 57 |
| 20–39 | 1 | 1 |
| 0–19 | 0 | 0 |
| Total | 162 | 100 |

(3-month duration), pretests and posttests would suffice. Both pretests and posttests were administered in the classroom. On the day of pretest, the respondents were informed that they had to take a posttest on the last day of the course. Paper versions of the assessment were used for pretests and posttests.

Results and Discussions

The scores of preassessments and postassessments were calculated and fed into SPSS for analysis. The pretest results are presented below.

Pretest

The students secured an average score of 59 in the pretest ($SD = 6.3$) (see Table 3). The number of students falling in the four levels are shown in Table 1.

In the pretest, 42% of students were in the Fully Prepared level. This means they felt they were ready to begin speaking and writing in professional business situations with very little additional preparation in communication skills. Fifty-seven percent of the students fell into the Competent level. These students already thought they knew a great deal about communication and had the skills required to succeed in the workplace. They felt they needed a little more study and practice to be fully prepared. Only 1% of the students were in the “Marginal” level. Based on the pretest assessments, the methodology of course delivery was fine-tuned. The curriculum, methodology, and assessments will be discussed further.

Course Curriculum

The business communication course curriculum at the business school under study is periodically enhanced based on the feedback sought from industry experts, alumni groups, recruiters, and academicians. The objective of this course is to develop the learners’ basic communication and presentation skills required to work effectively in an industry.

The course outline for Communication and Presentation Techniques is given in the appendix. This course is one of the core courses offered in the first term for four credits. The course curriculum covers basics of communication and its importance in business, organizational communication and barriers to communication, importance of body

Table 2. Posttest Levels.

| Level | Number of Students | % |
|--------------|--------------------|------------|
| 60–80 | 128 | 79 |
| 40–59 | 34 | 21 |
| 20–39 | 0 | 0 |
| 0–19 | 0 | 0 |
| Total | 162 | 100 |

Table 3. Mean Score: Pretest and Posttest.

| | Pretest | Posttest |
|------------|---------|----------|
| Mean score | 59 | 65 |
| SD | 6.3 | 6.9 |

language in communication, listening skills, ethics and etiquettes, interpersonal and intercultural communication, and making effective oral presentations. The curriculum was carefully designed based on the expectations and the needs of the industry.

Course Delivery and Assessment

The methodology adopted for the business communication course includes individual and group role plays, case presentations, group activities, miniprojects, guest lectures, and discussions. Apart from this, students' presentations are videotaped, evaluated and shown back to them with feedback. The students are continuously assessed from the first day of the course through various components. The final grades are awarded based on the continuous assessment marks and there is no final examination. Every activity is assessed based on objective criteria and constructive feedback is given to the students, enabling the students to improve. Throughout the course the faculty ensure that the teaching-learning process happens not only within class hours but also outside the class.

Posttest

The posttest was conducted on the last day of the course to determine if there was an overall improvement throughout the course and whether or not the scores improved compared to the pretest. The students secured an average score of 65 ($SD = 6.9$) (see Table 3) in the posttest. The various levels of students' readiness to communicate are given in Table 2.

In the posttest, 79% of students were in the Fully Prepared level. This indicated that they thought they were ready to begin speaking and writing in professional business situations with very little additional preparation in communication skills. Only 21% of

Table 4. Comparison of Pretest and Posttest Levels.

| Levels | Pretest | | Posttest | | Difference | |
|--------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|----------|
| | N | % | N | % | N | % |
| 60–80 | 69 | 42 | 128 | 79 | +59 | +37 |
| 40–59 | 92 | 57 | 34 | 21 | –58 | –36 |
| 20–39 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 0 | –1 | –1 |
| 0–19 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Total | 162 | 100 | 162 | 100 | — | — |

the students fell into the Competent level. These students thought they already knew a great deal about communication and had the skills required to succeed in the workplace. They felt they needed a little more study and practice to be fully prepared.

Comparison of Preassessments and Postassessments

The mean score of the students has increased from 59 to 65 (see Table 3) in the posttest assessment. The students falling in the various levels before and after the course are shown in Table 4.

During the pretest, it was found that the majority of the students were in Level 2 (competent) and only 42% of them felt fully prepared. The posttest results showed that 79% of the students were in Level 1 (an increase of 37% from the pretest; see Table 4), which means they felt fully prepared. A paired-sample *t*-test showed a significant difference between the pre and post self-assessments ($t = -11.207; p < .05$). During the period of this study, the students took four other courses (Management Concepts, Managerial Economics, Research Methods, and Financial and Management Accounting). The focus of the other courses was mostly on the technical skills pertaining to those courses. The communication course focused more on aspects like clarity and coherence in communication, improving feedback skills, nonverbal communication, listening skills, and giving effective presentations. Moreover, the items in the self-audit instrument included statements pertaining to the above-mentioned skills, and the respondents were able to connect well between the scale items and the course outline. The comparison of preaudit and postaudit scores shows the effectiveness of a well-planned and executed business communication course, which caters to industry needs.

Comparison of Posttest and Final Marks

The pretests and posttests were self-audits. To strengthen the self-assessments, the study also analyzed the correlation between students' posttest self-assessment and their final marks awarded by faculty through continuous assessment. The continuous assessment components included group activities, case presentations, project presentations, and class participation. There was a significant correlation ($r = .23; p < .01$) between the students' self-assessment and their final marks. Hence it is evident that the students assessed

themselves correctly. The correlation also shows that there was an improvement in the oral communication skills of the students and that the course objectives were met.

Implications

Business schools have the responsibility to produce MBA graduates who are good communicators. This study showed the effectiveness of a well-designed business communication course in a business school in India. The Higher Education Forum (2010) presents employers' views on MBA graduates in that "they expect new MBAs to come to the corporate world with the proper attitude . . . they must possess strong analytic, listening and communication skills" (see also Francis, 2012). Arora and Stoner (1992) opined that oral and written communication skills are highly sought by recruiters. They have also found that communication skills were perceived by recruiters to be more important than several other skill categories for new MBA graduates. Though most business schools offer communication courses, only a few offer it as a core subject. In both Indian and U.S. business schools, communication courses are taught separately as stand-alone courses and are not integrated into the main course curriculum (Rajadhyaksha, 2002). Considering the importance of communication skills from the recruiters' point of view, Indian business schools should begin offering more core courses on communication than they do at the moment.

Faculty teaching business communication courses should be aware of industry needs and the importance of imparting these skills to students. To motivate the students to participate in the course and to enhance their skills, faculty should design innovative and interesting methodologies. They should adapt activity-based teaching to improve the retention level of the students. Faculty should include more group activities and oral presentations as assessments and give continual feedback to facilitate continuous improvement in the students' oral communication skills. Since communication skills are the need of the hour for entry-level managers, students should understand that possessing theoretical knowledge of business subjects is just not enough. One must be able to communicate business ideas effectively. Students should realize that communication skills gain increasing importance as they climb up their career ladder and, therefore, should make a sincere attempt to enhance their communication skills.

Conclusion

This study discusses the effectiveness of a business communication course offered in a business school. The course had well-defined objectives and the content was developed in line with the objectives. Since today's millennials are technologically sophisticated and capable of multitasking (Hartman & McCambridge, 2011), the course delivery was activity-based to appeal to the student and to be effective in the global market place. The pretest and posttest findings reveal the effectiveness of the course in developing the communication skills of the student.

The study also offers implications to the following populations:

1. Students: They should understand that communication skills are crucial to business and hence get involved in the course to improve their communication skills.
2. Faculty: They should carefully design the course and should include innovative methodologies to appeal to the millennials.
3. Business schools: They should incorporate the feedback they receive from different stakeholders like recruiters, industry, alumni, and students in developing and enhancing the business communication course curriculum. They should also make business communication a core course for their students.

The study also invites a broader focus besides the current microfocus in skill acquisition.

Appendix

Course Title: Communication and Presentation Techniques

Course Objectives

1. To enable the students to communicate in a clear, courteous, concise and sequential manner in the workplace and to help them prepare and present effective oral presentations.
2. To enable them to analyze the impact of context and culture on communication and thereby enhance their global perspective.

Course content

1. Basic Communication: Communication Definition, Process of Communication, Forms of Communication, Importance of Feedback, Giving and Receiving Feedback
 2. Nonverbal Communication: Definition, Importance of Nonverbal Communication, Classification of Nonverbal Communication and its Implications
 3. Listening Skills: Process of Listening, Importance of Listening, Types of Listening, Barriers to Listening
 4. Organizational Communication: Formal and Informal Networks of Communication and their Importance, Channels of Communication in Organization, Benefits of Communication in Organization, Barriers to Organizational Communication and Gateways to Overcome
 5. Ethics and Etiquettes for Managers: Importance of Ethics in Business, Etiquettes in Workplace, Etiquettes in Social Settings, Online Etiquettes
 6. Interpersonal Communication: Developing and Building Teams, Key Dimensions of Team Communication, Characteristics of Effective Teams, Communication Strategies for Groups and Teams
 7. Intercultural Communication: Understanding Cultural Diversity, Adapting to other Business Cultures, Improving Intercultural Communication Skills
 8. Oral Presentation Skills: Audience Analysis, Three-Step Process for Presentations, Online Presentation
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Note. Duration of the course: 10 weeks.

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