



THE EFFICACY OF COMMUNICATION SKILLS CURRICULA AND INSTRUCTION ON ACQUISITION OF SOFT SKILLS FOR STUDENTS IN KENYAN UNIVERSITIES: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS

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Abstract:

Soft skills are some of the 21st century's most important life skills that should equip university students. Communication skills is one of the courses offered in Kenyan Universities to enhance the soft skills competencies of all undergraduates in their first-year semester. However, employers raised a concern that the newly hired graduates lack essential employability skills to perform office tasks effectively. Communication skills instruction and curricula do not contribute to the required soft skills competencies. The purpose of this study is to conduct a critical analysis of the efficacy of communication skills curricula and instruction on the acquisition of soft skills competencies required in the 21st-century workforce. The study had two objectives: to carry out a critical analysis of listening skills curricula and instruction on the acquisition of soft skills competencies and to examine critically speaking skills curricula and teaching on the acquisition of soft skills competencies. Speber and Wilson (1995) relevance theory of communication anchored the study. The study employed a qualitative approach to research methodology and content analysis to analyse the data. The findings revealed that communication skills instructors taught listening and speaking skills theoretically. There is a need for communication skills curricula to be aligned with industry-specific skills and communication skills instructors to utilise differentiated instruction, engaging pedagogies, and integrate information technology in their classrooms. The learner-centered approach will enhance the acquisition of soft skills competencies among the graduates. The research recommends that universities in Kenya review the communication skills course and align it with the Competency-Based Curriculum.

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1. Introduction

Soft skills are some of the 21st century's most important life skills, with which universities should equip all students. They refer to personal attributes that allow individuals to live amicably with others and succeed academically and professionally. They include communication skills, adaptability, corporate etiquette, and teamwork. Employers across the world are seeking unique human skills among potential hires. Research conducted by teams from Harvard University, Stanford Research Centre, and the Carnegie Foundation established that soft skills accounted for up to 85% of the employee efficiency (Madsen, 2018). To produce competent graduates in a highly competitive and globalised labour market, universities have a responsibility to equip graduates with technical and soft skills. This study explored the importance of effective communication from Kenya's employers' perspectives.

The communication skill unit is a typical course for all first-year undergraduate students in their first semester to enhance learners' communication competencies. The course's curriculum includes listening, speaking, reading, and writing instructional domains. However, employers raised a concern that the newly hired graduates lack essential employability skills to perform office tasks effectively. Communication skills instruction and curricula do not contribute to the required soft skills competencies. In a recent survey report conducted in the USA, employers believed colleges were not teaching employability skills such as speaking, writing; critical thinking and teamwork since they were deficient among most newly employed graduates. The managers argued that the likelihood of finding workers with strong listening and interpersonal skills was only 50% (Wilkie, 2019).

Previous studies found that the soft skills gap among graduates stemmed from the education systems' failure to enhance the skills (Wilkie, 2019). Similarly, Muindi and Ogonda (2019) observed that the uniquely human skills are not well captured in the curriculum at the university or, put rightly, they tend to be neglected since they are hard to measure. On their part, Ketamo & Passi-Rauste (2019) argued that the Kenyan University curricula do not match the skills required in the labour market. Asemanyi (2015) agrees but argues that the failure to equip students with people skills stemmed from inappropriate pedagogy, underqualified lecturers, large class sizes, short course duration (difficult for learners to develop the skills), and negative student attitudes towards the course. Konstant (2020) noted that the 2021 workforce requires employees that possess, among others, emotional intelligence, communication, adaptability, creativity, collaboration. The literature review revealed that there were hardly any studies that had addressed the communication skills curricula and instruction and their impact on the acquisition of soft skills required by employers in the 21st-century global workforce. Are the skills taught in communication skills still relevant in the global job

market? Or is there a need to review the communication skills curricula to align with the industry-specific skills? Against these premises, the researchers sought to carry out this research to fill that lacuna.

2. The Statement Problem

A communication skills course is offered as a common unit in all Kenyan universities to enhance learners' listening, speaking, reading and writing skills in various areas of specialisation for success in the labour market. However, research has shown that university graduates are devoid of communicative, pragmatic competencies and other crucial industry-specific skills needed in work. Globalisation has led to a shift in employers' skills in the job market. Consequently, a "skills gap" has emerged where the skills possessed by job seekers are different from the ones that employers require. The skills gap may be attributed to communication skills curricula not being well structured to align with the industry-specific skills. Further, novel instructors are not well prepared for its implementation, thus translating to the soft skills competencies required in the dynamic job market. The current research attempts to provide critical information to universities and graduates on soft skills gaps and how they can be addressed to enhance communication skills.

3. Objectives

Two objectives guided the research:

- 1) To carry out a critical analysis of listening skills curricula and instruction on acquiring soft skills competencies.
- 2) To examine critically speaking skills curricula and instruction on acquisition of soft skills competencies.

4. Research Methodology

The researchers utilised the desktop research methodology which the researchers consulted online resources such as journal articles, newspaper articles, government reports and data sets. The online data was later analysed together with twelve written communication skills course descriptions and curricula selected randomly from universities in Kenya. Richie et al. (2013) observes that samples for qualitative research are usually small because more data does not necessarily lead to more information. Moreover, since this study aims to critically analyse oral skills taught in communication skills, Lichman (2010) argues that there are no complex rules about how many participants should be included in the study. Through this method, researchers extended their critique as a positive evaluation of reviewing Kenyan universities communications skills course in tandem with the soft skills acquisition, pragmatic and communicative competencies.

5. Theoretical Framework

This research was anchored by Relevance Theory (RT) propounded by Sperber & Wilson (1995). RT is a cognitive theory of communication and an inferential approach to pragmatics. One of the central claims of this theory is that the search for relevance is a fundamental feature of human cognition. Communicators exploit this by making the listeners recognize that what they are communicating is relevant to their interests. In communication skills instructions, learners need to be taught according to their different learning styles, needs, cognitive abilities and interests. Learners tend to understand information that is relevant to them. The Cognitive Principle of Relevance which is *“human cognition tends to be geared to the maximization of relevance”*, supports this claim. Sperber & Wilson (1995) posit that an utterance is relevant to an individual when it relates to his/her worldview and enables one to answer questions in mind or improve one's knowledge on a specific concept. Communication skills instruction that is differentiated will thus contribute to the acquisition of needed soft skills by the learners.

6. Critical literature review

6.1. A critical analysis of the efficacy of listening skills curricula and instruction on soft skills competencies in students at the universities in Kenya

Listening, which is the initial step in comprehending a given discourse, is a salient skill in communication. It leads to the development of speaking, reading and writing skills. Listening and speaking are integrated since one has to listen to speak. The following concepts are taught in the communication skills listening domain course: listening process, barriers to effective listening and possible solutions, types of listening, and note-taking techniques. Examining the curricula lacks suggested engaging learning experiences per topic, key inquiry questions to prompt learners thinking and integration of Information technology in the provision of meaningful learning experiences. The communication skills classes have a new type of students known as the millennials. Therefore, integrating technology into the curricula would enhance the acquisition of active and critical listening skills required in the global digital workforce. The learners will listen to native speakers' discourse and be motivated by various audio-visual materials.

Research on listening skills instruction has revealed that learners are rarely taught to listen effectively. Instructors use listening for discussion and testing students understanding of concepts (Thorn, 2009). Emphasis is put on the final product; correct response after a listening session instead of developing learners listening skills (Kaur, 2014). Other scholars have posited that the bottom-up approach where learners focus on keywords and phrases used to construct meaning is ineffective (Gilakjani & Ahmadi, 2011). On the other hand, the top-down approach where learners are required to utilise their prior knowledge of the subject matter to interpret the listening situation does not assist them to be effective listeners since it is a short term strategy (Wallace, 2012).

Therefore, listening skills are taught theoretically without utilising engaging pedagogies and differentiated instruction where learners are instructed according to their needs (areas of specialisation), abilities, and learning styles. Such education is attributed to the large communication skills classes in many universities in Kenya, where learners are instructed without inculcating active and critical listening skills needed for success in the job market. According to Lloyd, Boer, Keller, & Voelpel (2015), employees with active listening skills contribute to achieving an institution's objectives since effective listeners communicate well. Therefore, the researchers can argue that students have not been guided on acquiring specific listening strategies such as paraphrasing, using inferences, interpreting information in different contexts, and paying attention to speakers' verbal and non-verbal cues to facilitate comprehension.

In every communicative event, the speaker, in this study communication skill instructor, aims to pass certain information (listening skills) and ensure that they are acquired. Sperber & Wilson (1995) calls it ostension which is the behaviour "*to make manifest an intension to make something manifest*". The instructors should thus provide the learners with evidence that helps them to infer their intended meaning. Verbal or non-verbal cues will aid the learners in interpreting the listening situation. Moreover, exposing learners to various listening contexts of communication is essential in enhancing active and listening skills, which are lacking in the listening skills instruction. Speber & Wilson (1995) argue that dynamic context also aids listeners in interpreting the speaker's intended meaning in an utterance. In RT, context refers to several factors used to interpret utterances. These are speakers and listeners shared culture, encyclopaedic knowledge of the uttered utterance, text surrounding the utterance and anything else that gets in the mind of the communicators during communication. The communication skills learners need to be exposed to different speaking situations to listen and select the most relevant context to interpret the utterance.

6.2.A critical analysis of the efficacy of speaking skills curricula and instruction on soft skills competencies in students at the universities in Kenya

Speaking is one of the fundamental productive skills required for effective communication. The following topics are taught in communication skills speaking course in Kenyan Universities: Oral presentations, podium panic and how to overcome, preparing effective audio-visuals and interview skills. The curricula are still devoid of specific engaging pedagogies for topics and key inquiry questions to provoke learners' thoughts, enhancing critical thinking and problem-solving. Universities in Kenya should review the communication skills curricula to align with Competency-Based Curricula and incorporate issues such as the dynamics of professional presentations and the art of negotiation, which are required in the global market. Scholars have attributed a lack of practical speaking skills among learners to mother tongue interference, lack of exposure to the target language, innate phonetic ability and demotivation (Brown, 2001). Other scholars observed a need to utilise traditional approaches such as question and answer methods, discussions and demonstrations in the speaking skills lessons. Instructors need

to be sensitised on innovative techniques such as task-based and communicative language teaching that enhances soft skills acquisition (Cummings & Davidson, 2007). Oral proficiency of learners can be improved by the integration of information technology such as video clips and pads. Learners can also record themselves using their mobile phones and later listen to their recorded speech to correct their pronunciation.

7. Recommendations

- 1) There is a need to review the communication skills curricula to align with the Competency-Based Curriculum.
- 2) Universities should tailor the teaching of communication skills courses to students' areas of specialisation. The students taking Information technology, business, and education, among other classes, should be instructed separately to focus on training specific industry skills.
- 3) Universities need to organise forums where industry experts can sensitise the curricula development teams on the training needs required by employers in various industries.
- 4) Universities should reinforce constructive alignment of expected learning outcomes, engaging learning experiences, and assessment methods in communication skills instruction.

8. Conclusions

Globalisation and technological advancements have led to a shift in employability skills towards soft skills. Therefore, universities in Kenya need to review their communications skills courses to align with the Competency-Based Curriculum and incorporate the much-needed soft skills by the labour market.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The Authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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