

A framework Model to Enhance Communication Skills – An Experiment

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ABSTRACT

As social beings we need to communicate, and this need is emphatically felt in the current pandemic situation where we are forced to live in a state of unnatural isolation and unnatural restrictions. Miscommunication is the cause of most of the communication break downs that happen. Healthy and effective communication therefore assumes paramount importance. Spoken language enables people to take an active role in social groups. This study focuses on creating awareness among learners that employers look for good communication skills whether online or offline, especially while recruiting fresh college graduates. The aim of the research is to identify the conversational shortcomings in students at the undergraduate level, which hinder their prospects in getting employment after they graduate. Against the backdrop of the current situation this study gains even more significance as now more than ever with jobs getting scarcer, the graduates seeking employment have to be more employment ready. The research concentrates on ways in which students could be trained in acquiring a repertoire of techniques, which will make them effective speakers. Having good communication skills can give a job aspirant an edge over other prospective employees. Mastery over the communication process can be brought about by training in specific pragmatic structures and conversational strategies. This project aims to emphasize the point that successful conversational and interactive strategies can be taught through carefully graded modules. Though some research has been done in listening, speaking, reading and writing, not much has been done on conversational skills required by corporate employers who are inevitably going to employ fresh college graduates. The experiment was done using control group and experimental group, using before and after two group design. If such a training in healthy communication skills especially conversational niceties, is included in the curriculum itself, the students would definitely go on to do extremely well when they seek employment.

Keywords: *Timely remedy, healthy communication, conversational skills, employer needs, experimental design*

1. INTRODUCTION

Situational demands need to be taken into account especially when we are dealing with the ultimate end of every educated person, which is to land a decent self-satisfying job. Spoken language is undeniably the dominant mode in our society and speech is the medium used to communicate in a variety of contexts, and for a range of purposes. The current pandemic situation has forced everybody to live in a situation which demands higher level of communication skills that was not needed before. On line and off line conversational skills are required. The study focuses on creating awareness among learners that employers look for good communication skills especially while recruiting fresh college graduates. It is also an attempt

at making learners realize that fluency in one or two important conversational strategies will motivate them to develop their communicative skills further. This research concentrates on the conversational or phatic mode used in casual or informal settings.

The importance of speaking skills is indisputable. In spite of this, the courses in colleges do not prepare students for the communication tasks that will be required of them. Students need to be made aware that employers look upon good communication skills as one of the most important characteristics they seek in job candidates. Communicative skills are one of the most frequently cited competencies in a job requirement. The aim of the research is therefore to identify the conversational shortcomings in the

students at the undergraduate level, which hinder their prospects in future employment. The project will concentrate on ways in which learners could be trained in acquiring a repertoire of techniques, which will make them effective speakers, and able to engage in interactive, satisfying conversations. It is these specific conversation skills which the researcher sets out to identify and train students in. Each form of communication whether spoken or written has its own linguistic conventions. Mastery over the communication process is required. This mastery comes from training in specific pragmatic structures and conversational strategies. This project aims to emphasize the point that successful conversational and interactive strategies can be taught through carefully graded modules.

2. METHODOLOGY

The methodology adopted is the experimental design.

- a. **Stage one** – Needs or Situation analysis was conducted by means of a questionnaire administered to a group of heterogeneous, tertiary level students to find out what they lack in interactive abilities. This situation analysis survey threw light on future plan of action.
- b. **Stage two** - The Experiment. The findings of the situation analysis laid the guidelines for the experiment. Students of the B.Com course of study were chosen and grouped, with five to six students per group. The groups were then numbered from one to ten and the even numbered groups were assigned as the Control group. The odd numbered groups were assigned as the Experimental group.

They were asked to converse on given topics for two to three minutes. This was recorded by the students. The students who formed part of the experimental group were given training in conversational strategies and nuances of holding a successful conversation, which was not given to the control group. After the training, the conversations of the experimental group and the control group were again recorded

The conversations were recorded by the students themselves, with the support of the teacher but with minimal interference, to ensure greater authenticity. Once the conversations were recorded, they were

given to subject experts to evaluate on the basis of given parameters. The difference in the scores of the experimental group and the control groups would show whether the experiment had made any significant difference in the performance of the students who formed part of the experiment. The analysis was done using the paired t-test. This type of data gathering comes under the head of quasi – naturalistic data which involves the case knowing that they are being quantified but are not given too many details.

Hypotheses

- a. Creating awareness among learners that employers look for good communication skills in job entrants will motivate them to develop their conversational skills.
- b. Success in one conversational strategy will embolden learners to attempting more challenging strategies required for tackling a variety of situations.
- c. Awareness creation about employer expectations regarding communicative abilities will motivate learners to adopt conversational strategies.

The target group for collecting data was tertiary level students who will be the beneficiaries of the program.

Sample size and area

- a. The sample size was collected from tertiary level students (about 50 for pilot survey and about 500 for final survey). The sample size for the control groups was five groups, and for the experimental group was five groups - each group consisting of five to eight students. The grouping was done randomly. Of the ten groups, the even numbered groups were assigned as the control group and the odd numbered groups were assigned as the experimental group.
- b. First step is to determine if the students are currently using a strategy in the learning situation and what that strategy is. It is a fact that efficient learners use strategies while less successful learners use inefficient strategies or may be unaware of the need to use a strategy. After evaluating the strategy the students are currently using, present the proposed strategy. When students are

informed about what strategy they are learning, how they should employ the strategy and in what context they should employ the strategy, the students will be aware of what they are learning .This will improve their performance level (Duffy and Roehler,1986) Students have to be helped, to learn to use self-management strategies. This will enable them to manage their attempts to improve their use of a particular language skill.

- c. Communication skills are looked upon as essential skills desired by employers as well as for future career progression. The employer of today looks for creative, flexible workers who have a broad range of interpersonal and managerial skills as well as be able to communicate effectively.

The main emphasis of this research is therefore to prove that conversational skills which are manifested through various strategy usages can be acquired and must be acquired. This research also reinforces the fact that, oral communication is the most important competency for college graduates entering the workforce. It focuses on the most important oral skills required for entry level graduates such as following instructions, listening, conversing, and giving feedback.

The experimental design

The methodology followed was the experimental design. Kidder’s (1981) before and after two group design was selected.

The questionnaire that was administered to the undergraduate students of the college gave a clear indication as to what the needs of the students are, and whether their needs are being met in the current scenario. It also gave a forum for the students to voice their views on what they felt they were missing out and what they felt could be given to them as part of their course curriculum itself.

Findings of Needs Analysis survey

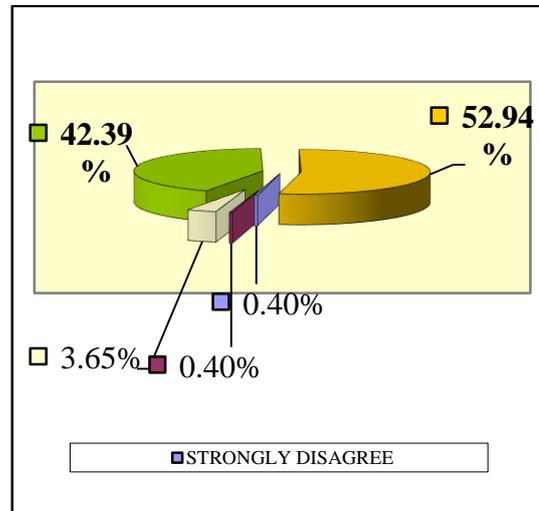


Figure 1: Survey responses for questionnaire do good vocabulary skills give you confidence while conversing in public?

Fifty two percent of the 493 respondents strongly agreed to the question that good vocabulary skills gave a person confidence while conversing in public. Forty two percent agreed and 0.40% strongly agreed to the same. 3.65% of the respondents were not sure while 0.40% disagreed.

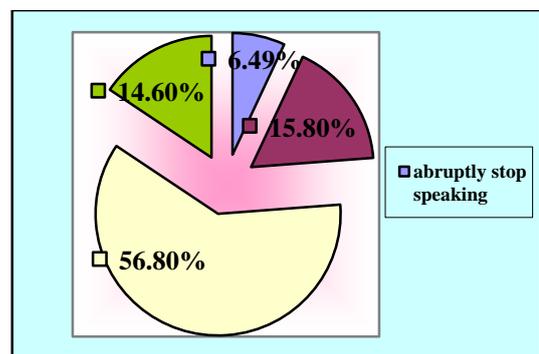


Figure 2: Survey responses for questionnaire when you don't get the right word while speaking what do you do?

Thirty nine percent felt that vocabulary skills could be taught while only six percent felt that it couldn't and eleven percent was not sure. To the question of not getting the right word while speaking, 56.8% responded by saying that they would pause, 6.49%

would abruptly stop speaking while 15.8 % would look around for help. 14.6% would change the topic.

Table 1: When talking to others and you don't understand what had just been said, do you

Sl. No	Frequency	Percentage
1	Lose interest in talk	6.89%
2	Keep quiet	12.98%
3	Directly ask for explanation	58.82%
4	Indirectly ask for explanation	28.89%

In the course of a conversation, when respondents did not understand what had been said, 6.89% lost interest in the talk, 12.98% kept quiet, 58.82 % asked the speaker directly for an explanation while 28.89% indirectly asked for an explanation.

Regarding switching to the mother tongue while speaking in English, 74.64% said they sometimes code-switched, 16.83% said they did it often while 8.72 % never did so. With regard to code switching, 23% code-switched, because they couldn't find equivalent words in English, while 79 % percent did it because it sounded more casual and friendly. Regarding their views on improving speaking skills 70 % felt that observing peers would help but 29 % did not agree.

89 % felt that listening to English news would improve their spoken skills while a marginal; 4.3% felt otherwise and 6.7 % did not reply. 50.9% felt that listening to cassettes that teach spoken English would improve speaking skills, 38.3% felt it wouldn't help and 11% did not give an opinion.

A good number of the respondents, that is, 63.3% of the 493 respondents were aware that employees look out for people with good conversational skills while 5.48% disagreed, and 32 % did not reply or were not sure. To the question of leaving in the middle of a conversation, 6.28% said they would leave abruptly, 63.36% said they wouldn't. 86.6% would excuse themselves and leave while 18.5% would feel awkward and not know how to end the conversation, 31.3% wished they knew what to say and leave.

In answer to the question on whether the respondents had heard of the term 'conversational strategies' 42.79% said that they had, 56.18% said that they hadn't. 96.11% of the 493 respondents said that they would be interested to know more about conversational strategies, while only 3.45% said that they wouldn't be interested.

From the analysis of the survey it is found that

A majority of the respondents

- Strongly agreed that vocabulary skills gave them confidence to converse in public
- Often switched to their mother tongue while conversing mostly because it sounded more casual and friendly
- Classroom interaction constituted the main way in which speaking activities were taught in the class
- Were aware that conversational skills were important to gain employment.

The analysis has proved that an overwhelming majority (93.11 %) felt that knowledge of conversational strategies would help in improving speaking skills. The researcher therefore proceeded with the experiment.

3. THE EXPERIMENT

Before-after two group design: The researcher decided to pursue the experimental design with a pre-test and a post-test using a control and experimental group design (Kidder, 1981)

For the experiment, 10 groups of four to six students in each group were chosen from students undergoing undergraduate course in Commerce (B.Com) from a city college. 5 groups were selected to be the control group and 5 groups were selected to be the experimental group by assigning the odd numbered groups as the experimental groups and the even numbered groups as the control groups. .

They were given the topics on which they were to converse with each other. They were instructed that they should record this conversation. They were not

given any kind of information that they were part of an experiment.

Contents of the conversational skills enhancement programme

The training programme was for duration of 120 hours. It comprised the following modules

- (1) Conversational strategies
- (2) Listening skills
- (3) Non - verbal communication
- (4) Presentation skills
- (5) Telephonic conversation
- (6) Group discussions.
- (7) Communicating in the workplace

Analysis of conversations of control and experimental groups- before and after the training

Evaluation by experts: The recordings were analyzed to see if there were any changes in conversational abilities, and also to see if the training given to the experimental group had any significant effect on the conversational abilities of the trainees. Evaluation was based on eight parameters (1) Turn taking (2) turn allocation (3) code switching (4) opening (5) closing (6) gap filling (7) cohesion (8) repairs.

These parameters were rated on a five point scale: Excellent = 5 Very good = 4 Good = 3
Satisfactory = 2 Poor = 1

The scores were analyzed using the Paired- T test, to see if there was a significant difference in the scores of the groups which underwent the conversational enhancement training programme. This is given in detail in the tables which have been titled as C1, C2 and C 3 for the Control group scores and the tables E1, E2, E3, E4, E5 and E6 for the Experimental Group scores.

Mean scores of the control group

Null Hypothesis (Ho): There is no significant difference in the mean scores of the control group before and after training.

(scores are the average scores of all five sub-groups which formed part of the control group)

Table 2: Expert 1 (control group)

Parameters	Mean scores pre	Mean value post	Calculated value	Table value
Turn taking	1.6	1.8.	1	2.13
Turn allocation	2	2.2	1.6	2.13
Code switching	1.6	1.8	1.6	2.13
Opening	1.2	1.4	1.6	2.13
Closing	1.6	1.4	0.4	2.13
Gap Filling	1.2	1.4	1.6	2.13
Cohesion	1.4	1.6	1	2.13
Repairs	1.4	1.6	1	2.13

Table 3: Expert 2 (control group)

Parameters	Mean scores pre	Mean value post	Calculated value	Table value
Turn taking	2	2.2	1	2.13
Turn allocation	1.2	1.4	0.5	2.13
Code switching	1.6	1.8	1	2.13
Opening	1.2	1.4	1	2.13
Closing	1.4	1.6	1	2.13
Gap Filling	1.4	1.6	1	2.13
Cohesion	1.2	1.6	1	2.13
Repairs	1.6	2	1.6	2.13

Table 4: Expert 3 (control group)

Parameters	Mean scores pre	Mean value post	Calculated value	Table value
Turn taking	1.6	2.2	.53	2.13
Turn allocation	2	2.2	1	2.13
Code switching	1.6	1.8	.53	2.13
Opening	1.2	1.4	.5	2.13

Closing	1.6	1.4	1	2.13
Gap Filling	1.2	1.4	1	2.13
Cohesion	1.4	2	1	2.13
Repairs	1.4	1.6	1	2.13

Inference

In all the eight parameters we see that the mean scores have not increased substantially. In all the parameters the level of increase in mean scores has been from 1 to 2, which means, an improvement from poor to satisfactory. Nowhere has the increase been from poor to good or very good. This shows beyond all doubt that there has been no significant difference in the scores of the groups who formed part of the control group because no training was given to them.

It is observed, from the Table nos. C1, C2 and C3, that the calculated values are less than the table values for all the parameters so the null hypothesis H_0 is accepted that 'There is no significant difference in the mean scores of the control group before and after training'.

4. EXPERIMENTAL GROUP

Ho: There is no significant difference in the mean scores of experimental group before and after training.

H 1: There is significant difference in the mean scores of experimental group before and after training.

Calculated values and table values (scores are the average scores of all five sub-groups which formed part of the experimental group)

Table 5: E1 Expert 1 (Experimental group)

Parameter	Calculated value	Table value
Turn taking	6.7	2.13
Turn allocation	3.0	2.13
Code switching	4.8	2.13
Opening	6.5	2.13
Closing	4.8	2.13
Gap filling	3.7	2.13
Cohesion	4	2.13
Repairs	3.4	2.13

Table 6: E2 Expert 2 (Experimental group)

Parameter	Calculated value	Table value
Turn taking	6.3	2.13
Turn allocation	4.7	2.13
Code switching	9	2.13
Opening	4.5	2.13
Closing	9.8	2.13
Gap filling	5	2.13
Cohesion	4	2.13
Repairs	5.9	2.13

TABLE 7: E3 Expert 3 (Experimental group)

Parameter	Calculated value	Table value
Turn taking	9.8	2.13
Turn allocation	9	2.13
Code switching	6	2.13
Opening	6	2.13
Closing	6.5	2.13
Gap filling	6	2.13
Cohesion	4.5	2.13
Repairs	4.5	2.13

Table 8: E4 Expert 1 Experimental group

Parameters	Mean scores	
	Before	after
Turn taking	2.2	3.6
Turn allocation	1.4	3.2
Code switching	1.4	3.2
Opening	1.4	3
Closing	1.6	3.4
Gap Filling	1.4	3.2
Cohesion	1.6	2.4
Repairs	1.8	3.4

Table 9: E5 Expert 2 Experimental group

Parameters	Mean scores	
	Before	after
Turn taking	1.8	3.8
Turn allocation	1.4	3.4
Code switching	1.6	3.4
Opening	1.8	3.8
Closing	1.6	4.2
Gap filling	1.4	4
Cohesion	1.8	4
Repairs	1.8	4

Table 10: E 6 Expert 3 Experimental group

Parameters	Mean scores	
	Before	after
Turn taking	1.4	3.8
Turn allocation	2	3.8
Code switching	1.4	3.8
Opening	1.2	3.6
Closing	1.6	4.2
Gap filling	1.6	3.8
Cohesion	1.8	3.8
Repairs	1.8	3.8

Inference

From the tables E1, E2 and E3 and E4, E5 and E6, there is a significant difference between the pre-mean scores and post-mean scores of the experimental group and also the calculated value is more than the table value with the level of significance more than 5 %. This rejects the hypothesis Ho that there is no significant difference in the mean scores of experimental group before and after training. It is therefore inferred that the training was effective. Therefore, the Ho that: **There is no significant difference in the mean scores of experimental groups before and after training' is not accepted.**

Hypothesis 1

H1 - Creating awareness among learners that employers look for good communication skills apart from professional skills in job entrants will motivate them to develop their conversational skills.

The results of the questionnaire that was given prior to the experiment to test whether the learners were interested in learning the communication skills that employers look out for, reveals that if the skills would lead to increased employability the learners would like to know more . The experiment resulted in an increase in the motivation level of the learner to improve their conversational skills. This was to be seen in their increased interest in participating in the activities of the training package.

The key factor for the learners to enrich their communication skills, especially their conversational abilities was an offshoot of their increased desire to be professionally qualified while entering the job market.

The hypothesis that creating awareness among learners that employers look for good communication skills apart from professional skills in job entrants may motivate them to develop their conversational skills is thus established.

Hypothesis 2

H2 - Success in one conversational strategy will embolden learners to make attempts at adopting more challenging strategies required for tackling a variety of situations.

From the conversational recordings we see that the learners during the pre-recording (that is before any training was given to them) were aware of a few strategies only. During the training period the experimental groups were exposed to audio and video clippings and activities which formed part of the training modules. It is only after this training that the learners were emboldened to try some of the conversational strategies. They first learned to use them in conversations with friends. When their confidence level increased, they began to use the strategies in a variety of role play situations and mock telephonic conversations. The next step was in using them in more real life situations as and when the situation would arise. Having first gained the confidence, it was a matter of time before they could use them in any situation that warranted their use in future.

The hypothesis that success in one conversational strategy will embolden learners to make attempts at adopting more challenging strategies required for tackling a variety of situations is also established.

Hypothesis 3

H3 - Awareness creation about employer expectations regarding communicative abilities will motivate learners to adopt conversational strategies.

The questionnaire that was administered to 493 students at the beginning of the research showed that more than 90 % wanted to know more about conversational strategies if it would better their employment prospects.

The training modules that formed part of the training package were an eye-opener to the learners. They learnt the nuances of conversational stylistic features such as turn-taking, turn-allocation and how to say 'no' without causing offence. They also learned to conduct business meetings and also hold telephonic conferences effectively. The improvement in their conversational skills was especially seen in the eight parameters. That this was assessed by three external experts in the academic and corporate fields adds weight-age to the evaluation. If there was a remarkable improvement in the communicative abilities of the experimental groups, it was to a great extent due to their increased awareness about employer expectations regarding these skills. Thus the hypothesis that 'awareness creation about employer expectations regarding communicative abilities will motivate learners to adopt conversational strategies' also stands proved.

5. SIGNIFICANT FINDINGS

After the training, the confidence level of the participants was charged, and they felt they could face any employer with poise and confidence.

The group discussions empowered the members to tackle the tests which were a part of the selection process in many interviews for higher studies and employment. The learners learnt to take responsibility for their own learning and learnt to study independently. They learnt how to work in groups on practical and analytical tasks and to solve problems in complex working environments.

The scores after training have improved the performance of the experimental group in all the parameters which formed the basis for evaluation. According to the evaluation of all the three experts' opinion, the increase in performance ratings for the experimental group had improved at an average from 2 to 4 that is from 'satisfactory' to 'very good' which

is an excellent improvement in their conversational ability.

6. CONCLUSION

The syllabus framers and educational consultants and educators in graduate colleges need to re-examine the courses offered to prepare students for the employment world. It is hoped an awareness of the importance of conversational abilities, irrespective of whatever field the student plans to pursue in future has been created among the academia and learning fraternity, has been created through this research. There is no sure fire way to teach a person to be a good conversationalist- this experiment is a proved method to learn the skills of better communication. It is in the hands of the learner to use these skills, and apply these techniques to develop their communicative abilities.

Landing a job is a difficult proposition at any time, unless armed with the right skill sets. Acquiring good and healthy communication skills is a timely remedy which will help cure the fresh graduates of their fears and make them confident and well prepared to face prospective employers.

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