

IMPROVING THE STUDENT TRANSVERSAL COMPETENCE “EFFECTIVE ORAL COMMUNICATION” IN THE UNIVERSITY SUBJECT “INTRODUCTION TO BUSINESS ADMINISTRATION”

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Abstract

Given that the Effective Oral Communication is a fundamental transversal competence for the personal and professional development of any student whose objective is to develop their professional future within a Company, any effort to improve the students' ability to understand their environment is very useful, to synthesize ideas about the information it receives and with which it deals, to expose the conclusions or thoughts about it, and to defend those ideas and discuss them in public if necessary.

In the Degree in Business Administration and Management there are many subjects focused on knowing the economic fundamentals for decision making in companies. But the impact of the use of this economic knowledge in decision making seems to be less if the Business Decision Maker is not able to communicate and transmit clearly and effectively their thoughts and decisions [1].

This article aims to establish a development plan for the transversal competence "Effective Oral Communication" to implement during the first course of the subject Introduction to Business Administration in the Degree of Business Administration and Management of the Higher Polytechnic School of Alcoy (EPSA). The expected outcome is a development plan together with assessment surveys through which the students assess the effectiveness of this plan.

Keywords: Effective communication, Oral communication, Student outcomes, Business Administration, Management.

1 INTRODUCTION

Introduction to Business Administration is one of the core subjects of the first Academic Course in the Degree in Business Administration and Management. This subject is focused in the study of the relationship between the Company and its economic environment through the two functional areas: Production and Marketing [2]. The final objective of the subject is to introduce the student to the basic concepts of Business Administration and Management, so that the student can finish the course knowing the playing field in which the economic life of the companies is developed and knowing how to value the impact that any decision that affects the company's Value Added Chain may have on a company and its environment [3].

In addition to the expected outcomes related to the Company and its Administration and Management, this subject has additional outcomes called "transversal", meaning that during the acquisition of fundamental concepts by the student, the student must also acquire certain competencies not directly related to Economics, Marketing and Finance, but with the student's own development as a person and professional, and also their transversal competences [4]. To master these competencies, it is necessary to carry out training activities. These actions should be based on active methods of learning skills and student participation methods that generate a deeper, meaningful and sustainable learning [5].

One of the most important transversal skills to be developed by the student is the Effective Oral Communication, which refers to the ability to understand, raise, expose, and discuss in public the ideas or concepts under study or discussion. This competence is very complex because not only is it achieved by mastering the subjects under study, but it also requires the personal and professional maturation of the student [5].

1.1 The Subject “Introduction to Business Administration” and its competencies

The Subject related to this study is "Introduction to Business Administration", a core subject with a load of 6 credits, which is taught in the 1st year of the Degree in Business Administration and Management

in the Universitat Politècnica de València (UPV). This study takes part concretely in the campus that UPV has located in Alcoi, formerly Escuela Politècnica Superior de Alcoi (EPSA).

The objective of this subject is to situate the company in its environment from a systemic approach, serving as an introduction to three large business subsystems: management and control, commercial and operations. It should be noted the introductory nature of the subject that seeks to give a global vision that serve the student as a basis for further study in other subjects of the curriculum.

The content is structured in these basic topics:

- 1 Introduction and general concepts on Management. Introduction to the Production and Marketing Subsystem
- 2 The functions of Forecasting and Planning
- 3 The Organization functions
- 4 The Address functions
- 5 The Control functions

In this subject the following competences are worked on, fostering their development through active learning during the development of the theoretical and practical sessions:

- Ability to develop, analyze and interpret the processes of organization and management in the company.
- Ethical commitment at work
- Learn autonomously
- Work in diverse environments
- Work in multidisciplinary teams
- Communicate orally and in writing in their native language.
- Synthesize critically information from different sources.

Together with the core competencies, the student must learn to develop a series of transversal competencies [6] that will lead the student to exploit in a more effective way the basic competences [7], and that will not only be critical for this subject but for all his / her personal and professional development:

- Understanding and integration
- (06) Teamwork and leadership
- (12) Planning and time management

The reality is that competences of both types are worked on, but due to the reduced teaching load assigned to each subject, teachers usually prioritize the work of specific competences to the detriment of transversal ones. As a result of this, in many subjects there is no curricular alignment since transversal competences are evaluated that have not been worked in class or that even having worked, no training activities have been provided to improve the level of mastery of these. That is why this study focuses on the level of mastery of transversal skills and how they work in the classroom to improve that level of competency, especially "Effective Oral Communication" [8].

1.2 Current situation and student general satisfaction with the subject

During the last two courses (2017/2018 and 2018/2019) the dynamism introduced by the previous instructors has been taken advantage of, trying the current professor to deepen in the participative dynamics of the students both in the theoretical classes and in the practical classes. The continuity of the participative and interactive approach (teacher-student) of the classes has supposed continuity in the positive evaluation on the part of the students and the university community, as they reflect the annual surveys that an external company realizes to the students at the end of the subject to know their assessment of the teaching given and their own satisfaction with the methodology and outcomes developed and obtained.

The survey that was designed and presented to the students was composed of 10 questions shown below, directed to evaluate their satisfaction with the teacher inside the subject deployment environment,

so easily to understand that the results go directly to the teacher but they also reflect same time satisfaction with the general evolution of the classes and with the subject actual plan:

- 1 It seems to dominate the matter that imparts
- 2 Resolve questions and issues about matters with clarity and accuracy
- 3 At the beginning of the course it provides clear information on the subject: objectives, program, methodology and evaluation criteria
- 4 It has a good programming of the rhythm of the classes and of the time dedicated to each theme
- 5 The methodology used and the activities carried out in the course help to learn the pupil
- 6 The materials used and / or recommended (bibliography, documents, teaching resources, etc.) Are of great help for the learning of the subject
- 7 Contributes to creating a good work climate and encourages students to participate in classes
- 8 His way to explain gets the student motivated and awakening interest in the course
- 9 Taking into account the limitations, i think that the professor that impart this subject must be considered a good teacher
- 10 The educational materials enabled on-line (Poliformat or other official on-line spaces in the UPV) by this course are coherent with the contents of the program, represent an important help for your learning and to achieve the objectives of the subject.

The answers to the questions in this survey correspond to a Likert scale [9], from 1 to 5, in which the meaning of each answer is:

- 1 Totally agree
- 2 Agree
- 3 Medium term (neither agreement nor disagreement)
- 4 Disagree
- 5 Strongly disagree

The results for these 10 questions in course 2017/2018 have been for the 42 processed surveys (95% of the students of the course):

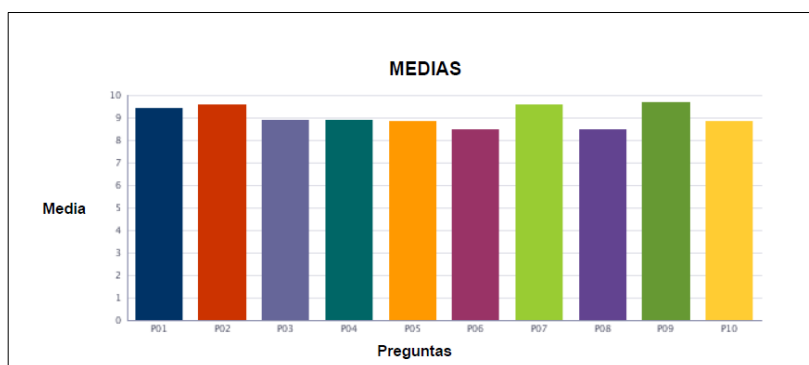


Figure 1. Surveys results for course 2017/2018.

The average of the score of the ten questions leaves the average satisfaction of the students with the methodology of the professor and the subject in a global value of 9,64 out of 10 in the course 2017/2018.

Similar picture has been obtained for the 46 processed surveys (97% of the global amount of students) to the students of course 2018/2019:

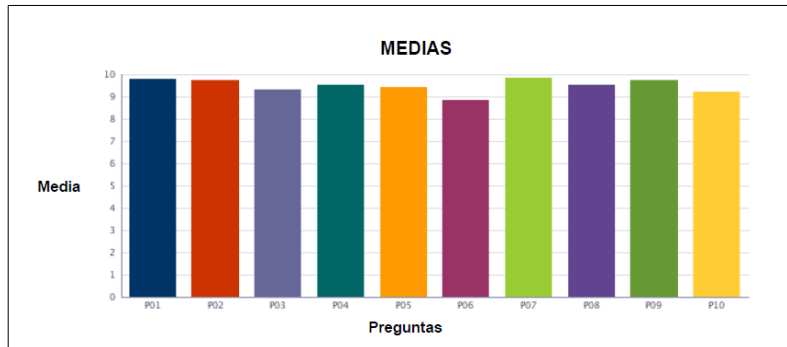


Figure 2. Surveys results for course 2018/2019

Again, the average of the score of the ten questions leaves the average satisfaction of the students with the methodology of the professor and the subject in a global value of 9,67 out of 10 in the course 2018/2019.

The general conclusion that can be obtained from this independent study is that the students are very satisfied with the development of the classes and the outcomes obtained. In this favorable situation of receptivity of the students and of the university community, the professor planted himself a work project to improve one of the competencies that has been detected as key in the development of the students of this subject and of this Degree: the competence Transversal of Effective Oral Communication. This favorable environment allows, without radically changing the focus of the teacher's work with students in the subject, you can try to go further and improve the specific work in specific areas such as effective oral communication, which is considered very important for the development in this Degree.

2 METHODOLOGY

In this section, and based on the past experience and documented by other authors and Universities [10], it is about establishing a plan for improving the transversal competence "Effective Oral Communication" for the subject "Introduction to Business Administration" of the first year of the Degree in Business Administration and Management.

2.1 Objectives

The final goal of this plan is to detect areas of improvement in the field of study that is available, which is the students of the first year of the Degree in Business Administration and Management, specifically in the subject of Introduction to Business Administration, which is why a series of detailed objectives are defined through which it is intended to achieve the final objective:

- Obtain an initial assessment about the maturity level of the students in the competence
- Plan and deploy incremental actions during the practice classes for letting the students to acquire the competence in a natural way.
- Obtain a final assessment about the maturity level of the students in the competence that can be compared with the initial one for conclusions.

It is important to note that the experience of the teacher of the subject during the last two years shows that the best field of work of this competence, so that the student feels comfortable and works effectively, is the practical classes of the subject, where it is usual the convenience of exposing the works and ideas acquired during discussions and group discussions, always based on the concepts learned in the theoretical lessons.

2.2 Deployment Plan

The work plan is limited to the objectives set as priorities, and without departing from the final objective of the subject that is to train students in the basic skills of administration and business management. An additional limitation is that it is intended that the student is not charged additional contrabass, or with tasks that may abstract from their basic educational itinerary marked by the Degree studied in this case.

First there is the need for checking the initial level of the students on the studied competence. A questionnaire must be prepared and offered to the students for filling it so that students and the teacher can evaluate the individual and group level of development in this competence. The questionnaire would be the following:

- 1 The student is used to working in a group and to participate in debates and discussions.
- 2 The student feels able to defend their ideas in discussions and group discussions.
- 3 The student feels able to listen and value the opinions and proposals of their classmates in a group.
- 4 The student is used to speaking in public.
- 5 The student feels capable of synthesizing, ordering and exposing their ideas in public.
- 6 The student wishes to present in front of his classmates the knowledge and experiences acquired during the theoretical lessons and group work.

The questionnaire should be completed by the students on the first day of practical classes, for two reasons: first, because attendance at the practical classes is compulsory (and thus ensures a greater field of study as there are more students in the classroom than there would be in any theoretical class in the classroom), and second because in the practical classes is where the focus of development of the present plan is intended. The desired outcome is not the individual perception one-by-one of the students, but the global and grouped average of the group for each question, having said that the project tries to improve the global perception of the group about auto-confidence on effective oral communication.

The development plan is designed in parallel to the development of the four practices foreseen in the Teaching Guide of the subject, so that in each of the four practices an action is launched that promotes the continuous and progressive acquisition of the competence by part of the students. These actions are designed in an incremental way, so that everyone includes the previous one.

2.2.1 Practice 1: Success story of the Zara group

Students must see a video about the reasons why Zara group has become one of the more successful ones in the Business world.

Students should discuss in groups of 5 or 6 students the reasons for the success of the Zara group, and answer the question about what is the key factor of this success.

In this case, after completing the group work, they are offered the possibility (not mandatory) of going to the board and presenting the conclusions in a group, and finally answering the questions or objections that can be made by colleagues from other groups.

The plan contemplates in this first practice the NO contribution by the teacher of any indication on how to exhibit, to observe:

- How the group members have been organized for the discussion and realization of the work.
- How the members of the group have proposed the task of exposing their findings in public.
- What has been the response of the students to the exposure of the other groups.

After this practice, the teacher will share the conclusions about these findings, and will make the students know that there will be some indications for improving this transversal competence during next practice.

2.2.2 Practice 2: Needs - Maslow Pyramid.

Students (in groups) must choose a good or service and proposing the existence of a client (real or imaginary), decide in which stage of the Maslow pyramid is the need to have that good or service. They should also outline what kind of company should offer this good or service, and what should be its marketing approach depending on the stage of the Maslow pyramid in which it is located.

In this case, before discussing the topics and before presenting the conclusions in groups, the teacher lets them know:

- that it is important to divide the tasks in the group during the discussion and during the writing of conclusions

- that it is important to decide if all the members of the group or only one should go out to expose in public
- that it is important to structure the message to be given in public, being direct and concise if possible, and being above all coherent and clear
- that the debate between the speaker and the listeners is important for invigorating the sharing, and because it enriches the learning, so it is valuable that the listeners expose their doubts or objections to what was presented by the speaker

Again, at the end of the practice, the teacher must explain the reason for the indications (as an improvement on practice 1), as well as the conclusions and feedback on whether these objectives have really been achieved in this exhibition. It is also mentioned that in the next practice there will be new indications to improve this competence.

2.2.3 *Practice 3: Lifecycle*

In this practice the students, again in groups, must choose a product from among those that the teacher shows through a video, and discuss in groups about which phase of the lifecycle the product is in, as well as the actions that the manufacturer should take on this product depending on the phase of the life cycle is currently in place.

The points of improvement in this practice, with respect to the previous one, and referring to the transversal competence of effective oral communication, are made known to the teacher one week before the practice, indicating to the students that they must have previously searched for additional bibliography on the product chosen, and have been documented extensively to have high knowledge of the product, company and sector. This is intended to make the discussion in groups richer in content, and therefore have to handle much more information, we must understand that amount of information, synthesize it, put it in order in terms of well documented conclusions, and present arguments in public with order and foundation.

It is therefore that the responsibility of communicating ideas not only lies in the form (practice 1) and order of ideas (practice 2), but also in the content that is supposed to be far more abundant and richer than in the previous practices .

2.2.4 *Practice 4: Marketing Plan*

In the last practice the students, again must have previously documented to have extensive information about a good or service, about the company that can provide the market, and about the own target market to which the marketing effort related to this product, working in the line of relational marketing focused on customer loyalty and putting the customer in the center.

This practice is divided into two sessions, so that in the first one it is discussed in class, by groups, and after having been previously documented, following the indications of incremental improvement of the previous practices. The second session, on the teacher's instructions, is exclusively devoted to exposing the work on the conclusions made in groups, but this time with the obligation to make two documents:

- an academic document with the literature on the findings and conclusions of the work
- a presentation that is to be used as a visual projection support during the exhibition in class

In this way the student learns to distinguish the format, content, and structure that a literary document and an expository document should have, the latter being more concise, direct, clear, and visual than the previous one.

At the point of finalizing the subject and the corresponding learning of the students, the teacher must validate whether the students' self-perception of their own abilities has varied (for better or for worse), to establish corrective measures for the following courses [11]. The clearest way to visualize these variations is to perform the same questionnaire launched in Objective 1 again, with the same questions. As it is intended to validate the expected improvement of self-perception as a group, the overall result (on average) should be comparable and the conclusions for a quantitatively similar sample should be valuable.

Once the study on the perception of the students on the improvement of their own abilities in terms of effective oral communication, the Professor must define the conclusions obtained about the actions designed and taken in this project. These conclusions are fundamental for:

- share them with the students themselves as reinforcement to their new skills achieved
- establish new actions in the following courses, reinforcing those of this course or replacing them with different ones
- share them with the university community through a research paper for Teaching Conferences

3 RESULTS

Seeing the results and conclusions of the project, the expected outcomes of the experience should be documents of evidence, recommendations, best practices, and advice that can help the entire academic community in the development of the transversal competence of Effective Oral Communication. More specifically, and regarding each project objective, the expected outcome would be:

- Comparative picture between initial and final state of the competence level of the students
- Recommendations and best practices for improving transversal competence "Effective Oral Communication"

4 CONCLUSIONS

This project tries to evaluate the degree of mastery of the students of a group in terms of a specific cross-section, as well as to elaborate a plan to improve it within the normal development of the subject in terms of its theoretical classes and above all the practical classes. This study is planted in this way because, in most of the Degree subjects, due to the theoretical and practical teaching load, and to the limited time available, it is very difficult to acquire transversal competences that are considered key and critical for the personal and professional development of the students, even more because most of the school time is focused on the acquisition of basic skills, not transverse. The purpose of this study is to help create a concrete plan to develop the transversal competence "Effective Oral Communication".

In this paper, a learning model has been proposed that starts from a assessment of the students (in groups) on their initial level of mastery in the transversal competence "Effective Oral Communication", as key starting point to elaborate the incremental actions to improve that level of mastery in the competence. The action plan should follow the evolutionary rhythm of the student along with the academic development of the subject, and in a natural way it should lead to improve their ability to: obtain and manage valuable information, understand it, expose it, debate based on this information, take conclusions, and prepare specific dossiers of conclusions for public exposure and debate.

The subject in which this project has been proposed, has received very positive satisfaction ratings from the students during the last two courses. Special care is recommended for not breaking this positive dynamic and not reversing the achievements of past courses. The final and global objective is then to maintain and increase the satisfaction level of the students through this natural and incremental development of this transversal competence, considered as basic and critical for the professional development of the students. It is expected and trusted that this will be the case, and that therefore in the satisfaction surveys of the students of the following course, an increase in the degree of satisfaction (at a quantitative level) and in the positive and participative attitude during the classes will be reflected.

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