

ANALYSIS OF THE MAIN WEAKNESSES OF UNIVERSITY STUDENTS REGARDING THE “EFFECTIVE ORAL COMMUNICATION” STUDENT OUTCOME

Maria del Carmen Bas¹, María Jesús Lerma-García¹, Nuria Matarredona-Desantes², Raúl Oltra-Badenes², Édgar Pérez-Esteve², Joan Albert Silvestre-Cerdà¹

¹*Universitat de València (SPAIN)*

²*Universitat Politècnica de València (SPAIN)*

Abstract

The "Effective oral communication" is one of the most demanded student outcomes in the workplace, since being a good communicator is essential in any field. Inefficient communication can lead to misinterpretations and erroneous conclusions. Therefore, it is a very important student outcome both in the university and in the workplace. The student or graduate must know how to communicate effectively, both orally and in writing, appropriately using the necessary resources and adapting to the characteristics of the situation and the audience. However, despite its importance, the disparity in the mastery level of the oral communication student outcome by students makes it difficult to work this ability in the classroom through collective activities. For this reason, to properly develop this student outcome in a subject, it is important to have an idea of the main weaknesses that students have in terms of effective oral communication, to be able to establish and carry out actions and training activities that can improve that transversal student outcome. This article presents the analysis of the main weaknesses that students of a university subject have. This analysis is made based on a self-assessment survey, a self-diagnosis, which allows the student to detect their weaknesses and strengths in the domain of effective oral communication, and at the same time, gives information to the teacher about the main deficiencies of their students, so the teacher can devise and launch training activities appropriate to the level of their students.

Keywords: Oral Communication, oral skills, student outcomes, self-learning methodologies.

1 INTRODUCTION

In recent years, institutions of higher education have experienced various changes conditioned by the demands of today's society. The adaptation of the degree titles to the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) is one of the unavoidable factors that have led to a change in the application of teaching methodologies and a need to adapt and make flexible the training offer to the current reality. In particular, the inclusion of cross-curricular competences in curricula is of special importance for both the university and the business world. There is a consensus between university and business about the need for future employees to master certain competences in the face of their professional development. For the student it is very important to acquire and accredit their training in university skills and, on the other hand, for the employer it is very important to know the level of mastery of the competences acquired by the graduates.

As a consequence of this need, the Universitat Politècnica de València (UPV) has included as a strategic objective the evaluation of specific and transversal competences. 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 if they have worked, no formative activities have been provided in order to improve their level of proficiency. 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.

To carry out this study it has been necessary to define the concept of transversal competences as "those competencies that are key and transferable in relation to a wide variety of personal, social, academic and work contexts throughout life. In this sense, they constitute a fundamental part of the professional profile and the formative profile of all or most of the degrees. These are skills that include a set of cognitive and meta-cognitive skills, instrumental and attitudinal knowledge of great value to the

knowledge society [1]. It is, therefore, a very complex know-how, so it is necessary to specify them in more specific learning outcomes. Therefore, it will be necessary to resort to methodological strategies that favor the change of roles. It is no longer possible to use a 'traditional' methodology based on lectures and problems that the teacher solves in the classroom. Even laboratory practices must change their approach to achieve new objectives and ensure that students acquire a set of skills that, in general, were not previously taken into account or evaluated, such as the ability to work in groups, the ability to make oral presentations, etc. [2]. To achieve the competences, it is necessary to carry out training actions. These actions should be based on active methodologies for the formation of competences and methods of student participation that generate a deeper, more meaningful and lasting learning [3].

The present study of teaching innovation aims to work on the transversal competence "Effective Oral Communication" that seems to be one of the competences in which there is a greater consensus regarding the importance it has for future graduates. According to the institutional project developed by the UPV, communicating effectively means having developed the ability to transmit knowledge and express ideas and arguments in a clear, rigorous and convincing way, both orally and in writing, using appropriate resources appropriately and adapting to the circumstances and to the type of public. It is important to differentiate two dimensions within this competence: oral and written communication [4].

The mastery of the competence of effective communication implies the effectiveness in the communication of ideas, knowledge and feelings through the word and the writing both in conversational / written situations and in group activities and in public presentations before more or less numerous audiences [5]. Students who have access to the university have already acquired some instrumental baggage of techniques and strategies for good communication, but it is important that the university continues to work on that competence taking into account its important academic, professional and personal implications. From a strictly academic point of view, verbal and written interactions are the key to the teaching-learning process, since they facilitate collaborative activity, make possible the internalization of knowledge and are fundamental to achieve a good academic performance. In professional life it is essential to know how to transmit ideas, knowledge and feelings in a precise way to obtain greater efficiency. Finally, from a personal perspective, the fact of being able to speak in public with safety and without nervousness, as well as the ease of expressing oneself in writing without difficulties, entails an increase in personal security and reinforces self-esteem [6].

In general, we think that we dominate this competition due to the need we have to communicate information between us. However, in many situations there is a great difference between what we intend to say and the message that reaches the recipient. That is why students face the development of this competition with very different levels of mastery due to the different innate abilities and the different acquisition rhythms of this competition. In addition, this disparity can be accentuated if the students are enrolled in degrees and in different cycles. Therefore, different problems arise in terms of the acquisition of this transversal competence:

- What level of initial proficiency of this cross-disciplinary competence do students from different degrees and cycles have?
- How does such competition work in class?
- What assessment / diagnostic tools are used to analyze the proficiency level of the competition?
- Are there support and improvement tools that guide the student to the acquisition / improvement of the competence?
- What training activities should be proposed to improve mastery of the competition?

In this study we have addressed the first of the problems presented above, trying to find out what is the level of mastery of the competition at the beginning of the course. In this way, the main weaknesses can be identified, and thus, formative actions adapted to the needs of the students can be established.

The work presented here focuses on a subject taught at the UPV, specifically the subject "Audits of Quality Management Systems and Food Safety" that is taught in the first course of the Master in food safety and quality management.

This is an optional subject, which is really divided in two, of 2.5 credits each one.

2 METHODOLOGY

To obtain the results, a survey was carried out in the frame of PIMECOE project [7]. The survey consists of 6 categories, with a total of 45 questions, distributed in the 6 categories as follows:

- 1 Personal disposition towards communication 7
- 2 Quality of the presentation content 6
- 3 Structure of the speech 3
- 4 Verbal language: semantic, syntactic and orthographic 7
- 5 Correction – Non-verbal language 12
- 6 Presentation tools 10

The questions formulated for each one of the different categories are listed below.

2.1 Personal disposition towards communication

When you are in a situation in which some kind of oral communication occurs (conversation between colleagues, conversation with teachers, oral presentations, debates, etc.):

1	Do you have a favourable attitude towards the speaker?
2	Do you participate in the dialogue?
3	Do you favour the participation of other colleagues through your words and attitudes?
4	Do you accept the other points of view?
5	Do you seek to express yourself in such a way that the message is not racist, sexist, classist, etc?
6	Do you question your own point of view on that subject?
7	Do you accept the criticisms and show a respectful attitude to the one who transmits them to you?

2.2 Quality of the presentation content

When you perform an oral presentation,

1	To what degree is the information you transmit relevant?
2	Do you transmit the information in a way that is easily understandable by the recipients?
3	Do you support your ideas by using examples, analogies and / or metaphors?
4	To what extent do you encourage participation and debate through questions to the audience?
5	Do you do it accurately, answering exactly what you are asking?
6	Do you base your answers based on theoretical frameworks, examples, reasoning, etc.?

2.3 Structure of the speech

1	Do the ideas presented follow a clear structure and a logical sequence?
2	To what degree does the structure of your exhibition fit the set time?
3	To what degree does the organization of the contents and the illustration of your presentations encourage the curiosity and motivation of the audience?

2.4 Verbal language: semantic, syntactic and orthographic correction

In your presentations,

1	Do you use a varied and rich vocabulary?
2	Do you incorporate specific vocabulary of your subject?
3	Do you use short, direct and meaningful phrases?
4	Do you avoid making grammatical errors (predicate subject agreement, <i>leismos</i> , <i>dequeísmos</i> , etc.)?
5	Do you avoid spelling mistakes?
6	Do you avoid the excessive use of filler words? (e.g. okay, uh, er, good, etc)
7	Do you adapt the vocabulary and terminology to the audience?

2.5 Non-verbal language

When you perform an oral presentation,

1	Do you show tranquillity and security?
2	Do you express yourself easily?
3	Do you explain naturally, avoiding reciting from memory?
4	Do you pronounce and vocalize properly?
5	Do you adapt the tone and volume of your voice to the speech?
6	Does the speech develop at an appropriate pace?
7	Do you move naturally?
8	Are you looking for a visual contact with the audience alternating the look between the audience and the presentation?
9	Do you use gestures that accompany the speech? For example, pointing in one direction or a photograph, or stretching two fingers of the hand while saying that two key ideas will be presented, etc.
10	Do you avoid gestural tics or movements that can distract the public? For example, scratching, playing with a pen or ring, brushing hair, putting on glasses, etc.
11	Are you able to connect with your audience?
12	Do you consider the type of audience your message is aimed at to adapt verbal and non-verbal language?

2.6 Presentation tools

When you design the slides of your presentation,

1	Do you take care of your personal image when you have to expose in public?
2	What is your degree of mastery of your usual presentation tool (For example, MS PowerPoint, Prezi, Google Presentations, etc.)?
3	Do you select the background colors, type and size of the font you are going to use, so that they are the most appropriate?
4	To what extent do you use images, videos or other visual support that contribute to a better understanding of the discourse?
5	In what degree do you look for a balance between text and images, effects, transitions, etc?
6	To what extent do you design the presentation to emphasize / reinforce the key ideas of the discourse so that the message arrives and is better understood?
7	To what extent do you include connectors, markers, etc. to help place the audience in the course of the presentation? For example, by marking an index and an indicator that allows the public to know in which point of the presentation it is.
8	To what extent do you reflect on the animations and transitions to be used?
9	The means of support you use in the presentation (text, images, vocabulary, examples, etc.) to what extent do you adapt them to the type of audience / context / schedule?
10	To what degree do you use other means of support in a creative way, in addition to the conventional ones?

The answer should be comprised between 1 and 5 (1 = never/nothing and 5 = always/very much).

The self-diagnosis was sent to the students of the subject through a link to a survey developed in Google Forms [8] as part of the teacher innovation project PIMECOE [9]. 35 responses were obtained from the 35 students of the subject (a 100% response rate).

3 RESULTS

The answers to each of the questions were scored from 1 to 5 (1 = never / nothing and 5 = always / very much.) Therefore, the questions that obtained the highest score were because the students had greater mastery in them.

With these scores, we could assess the answers based on the means. After reviewing the average results obtained, it is observed that the question that has received the lowest rating, and therefore reflects a greater weakness in the mastery of the alumni's competence is "To what extent of you encourage participation and debate through questions to the audience?" which obtained a 2.63 assessment.

The average assessment of the responses of the 35 students to each of the questions was 3.91. The questions that obtained an evaluation below that average, and that are therefore considered as the weakest aspects by the students are those reflected in the table below:

Cat	Nº	Question	Mean
2	4	To what extent do you encourage participation and debate through questions to the audience?	2,63
2	3	Do you support your ideas by using examples, analogies and / or metaphors?	3,29
5	11	Are you able to connect with your audience?	3,40
5	7	Do you move naturally?	3,46
6	10	To what degree do you use other means of support in a creative way, in addition to the conventional ones?	3,54
5	1	Do you show tranquillity and security?	3,60
4	1	Do you use a varied and rich vocabulary?	3,66
1	6	Do you question your own point of view on that subject?	3,69
5	2	Do you express yourself easily?	3,69
5	4	Do you pronounce and vocalize properly?	3,69
5	6	Does the speech develop at an appropriate pace?	3,69
2	6	Do you base your answers based on theoretical frameworks, examples, reasoning, etc.?	3,71
4	6	Do you avoid the excessive use of filler words? (e.g. okay, uh, good, etc)	3,74
5	3	Do you explain naturally, avoiding reciting from memory?	3,77
5	5	Do you adapt the tone and volume of your voice to the speech?	3,77
1	3	Do you favor the participation of other colleagues through your words and attitudes?	3,80
2	5	Do you do it accurately, answering exactly what you are asking?	3,80
3	3	To what degree does the organization of the contents and the illustration of your presentations encourage the curiosity and motivation of the audience?	3,80
6	8	To what extent do you reflect on the animations and transitions to be used?	3,80
1	2	Do you participate in the dialogue?	3,83
6	7	To what extent do you include connectors, markers, etc. to help place the audience in the course of the presentation? For example, by marking an index and an indicator that allows the public to know in which point of the presentation it is.	3,86
2	2	Do you transmit the information in a way that is easily understandable by the recipients?	3,89

4 CONCLUSIONS

In this work an analysis of the main weaknesses that the students have in terms of the transversal competence "Effective oral communication" has been carried out.

For this, a self-diagnostic test has been used that the students fill in to know their level of competence.

The results indicate that the average of the students appears in most of the analyzed indicators. Students only suspend their assessment in the question "To what extent of you encourage participation and debate through questions to the audience?"

Anyway, there are indicators that come out lower than others. For that reason, a relation of what is below the average is presented. This will permit lecturers to adapt the activities to work the oral communication in class to the actual level of their students which will result in a higher improve on the mastery level of the "Effective Oral Communication" outcome.

As future research, it is proposed to extend the study to other groups, in order to make a meta-analysis that can be used in a generalized way

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