# ACTIVITIES TO PROMOTE THE SELF-LEARNING OF THE EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION STUDENT OUTCOME

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## Abstract

Universities all over the world are implementing a competence-based type of teaching and learning to guarantee certain student learning outcomes at the end of the studies. To reach these student outcomes, active methodologies should be included in teaching practice at the same time that carefully designed rubrics might be used for the evaluation of the students. Despite the fact that teachers introduce more and more authentic tasks in the classroom, these activities are not still well employed by all the University teaching staff. The goal of this work is to propose a guideline of activities to promote the self-learning of the effective communication outcome by the students. For that purpose, rubrics to assess the outcome proficiency developed by different institutions have been collected and analysed. From those rubrics, six main areas of proficiency have been identified: personal disposition towards communication, quality of the presentation content, structure of the speech, verbal language, non-verbal language and presentation tools. Finally, for each of these areas, keywords to find out effective activities on Internet to improve the proficiency of a piece of the outcome have been proposed.

Keywords: Activities, self-learning, effective communication.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

Student outcomes describe what students are expected to know and be able to do by the time of graduation [1]. These relate to the knowledge, skills, and behaviours that students acquire as they progress through the program. One of the most repeated students' outcomes in different accreditation systems (i.e. Accreditation Board for Engineering and Technology, European Network for Accreditation of Engineering Education) is effective communication, or the ability to communicate effectively [1-2]. To certify the attainment of students' outcomes the Universities have put a big effort in carrying out different approaches to identify, collect, and evaluate evidences of achievement. However, the same efforts have not always been put in providing activities to help the students to develop this common but really complex outcome. In this context, the goal of this work is to review the essential skills needed to effectively communicate and to propose different self-learning activities to develop them.

## 2 METHODOLOGY

The methodology of this work is summarized in Figure 1. First of all, a review of different rubrics for the evaluation of the "effective communication students' outcome" in different Universities was done. Rubrics included in the study were written by Polytechnic University of Valencia, Universidad Estatal de Sonora, University of Central Arkansas, Lane Community College, Universitat Politècnica de Catalunya, University of Nevada - Reno, Universidad de Cantabria, University of Rhode Island, Stephen F. Austin State University and Louisiana State University. [3-12].
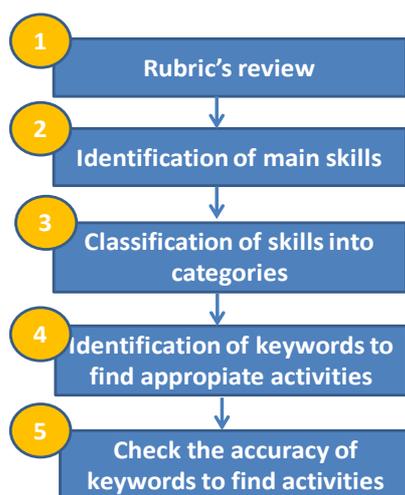
*Figure 1. Scheme of the followed methodology.*

From the rubrics, the main skills demanded in students were identified and classified in six different categories. For each one of these skills, keywords to find useful activities/recommendations to get/improve these skills were identified. Finally, selected keywords have been checked on the Internet by using a common search engine to find operative, reliable and adequate activities.

## 3 RESULTS

The analysis of the 10 rubrics allowed us to identify 41 skills needed to master the students' outcome "effective communication". These categories comprised: personal disposition towards communication, quality of the presentation content, structure of the speech, verbal language, non-verbal language and presentation tools. For each one of these skills, we have identified "keywords" that could be used by the students to find out useful and updated activities (books, Internet…).

### 3.1 Personal disposition towards communication

Communication is a process by which individuals interact with each other, through symbols that represent information, ideas, attitudes and emotions in order to influence each other. In this communication process, our disposition influences the ways that we communicate. Thus, personal disposition towards communication is the starting area of skills that should be trained. According to the studied rubrics, skills comprised in this area (see Table 1) are related to attitudes such as being opened to the communication (talk and listen), being able to participate in a conversation with initiative, encouraging the participation of other colleagues in the conversation, as well as accepting other points of views, accepting constructive criticisms, and using a politically correct language.

*Table 1. Skills related to personal disposition towards communication keywords of activities to work them.*

| Skills | Activities should work… |
|---|---|
| Show favourable attitude towards the speaker | Active listening |
| Participate in a conversation with initiative and opportunity | Interesting conversation topics |
| Encourage the participation of other colleagues | Phrases; inclusive speech |
| Accept the opinions of others | Assertiveness |
| Use politically correct language | Gender; non-racist; non-violent; language |
| Question your own point of view | Development; critical thinking |
| Accept constructive criticism from others | Acceptance; constructive criticism |

Table 1 also include the features that the activities should contain. As observed, to master the effective communication outcome, students not only need to practice aspects directly linked to

language (vocabulary, grammar…) but also complex abilities that take time and patience to develop. Some of these abilities are active listening, assertiveness or critical thinking, among others.

Examples of activities and resources found on the Internet by using the proposed keywords are:

- How To Become An Active Listener: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0eHxNdIyo7g
- 7 Greatest Conversation Starters That Actually Work: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2hLcCnZzRtY
- Gender inclusive gender: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xrzl4Bmf1fs

## 3.2 Quality of the presentation content

Ideas are the heart of the message. The message of a speech is clear when ideas are powerful. The good speakers choose not only the most relevant concepts and ideas, but also those that are most interesting for the audience. On the other hand, a speech overloaded with ideas and information can be heavy and difficult to assimilate. Thus, the second area comprises all of those skills linked to the quality of the presentation content (see Table 2).

For each of the skills different keywords were identified. These keywords were then used to seek activities, videos and advices on the Internet. Some of the most interesting activities are summarized beneath.

**Table 2.** *Skills related to quality of the presentation content in a speech and keywords of activities to work them.*

| Skills | Activities should work… |
|---|---|
| Select relevant information | Selection main ideas; keywords outline |
| Use examples, analogies and/or metaphors | Selection examples; analogies; metaphors |
| Transmit information in an understandable way | Clarity; confidence; emotion; speech |
| Promote audience participation and debate | Ask; questions; audience |
| Provide accurate and well-founded answers | Handle; questions; audience |

Examples of activities and resources found on the Internet to help students to improve the quality of the content in their speeches by using the proposed keywords are:

- Keyword outline: The little writing tool with big impact. https://www.thehomeschoolmom.com/key-word-outline
- How to answer the question, even when that feels hard to do. http://speakupforsuccess.com/public-speaking-tip-46-answer-the-question/
- 11 Tips for calming your nerves before a big presentation. http://www.businessinsider.com/tips-for-calming-nerves-before-a-speech-2014-6

## 3.3 Structure of the speech

A speech that has a logic order and a perceived structure is easier to follow, to understand and to remember. Thus, after selecting the information, this must be put in order. Table 3 describe the 3 skills needed to perform a speech with an adequate structure.

**Table 3.** *Activities to learn how to improve the structure of the speech and keywords of activities to work them.*

| Skills | Activities should work… |
|---|---|
| Select a proper structure and sequence | Types speeches; speech structures; catchy speech; storytelling |
| Organize concepts and contents | Concepts organization; speech |
| Adjust the length of the speech to the available time | Speech; timing; long |

Examples of activities and resources found on the Internet by using the proposed keywords are:

- How long should a speech be? http://www.prettygoodspeech.com/?p=247
- How to make a funny speech without telling jokes.
  https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CHNyVkDJPlM

## 3.4   Verbal language: semantic, syntactic and orthographic correction

Verbal communication refers to the use of sounds and language to relay a message. It serves as a vehicle for expressing desires, ideas and concepts and is vital to the processes of learning and teaching. In combination with non-verbal forms of communication, the verbal one acts as the primary tool for expression between two or more people. The proficiency of verbal language requires the domain of different skills, which are summarized in Table 4.

**Table 4.**  *Activities to learn how to improve semantic, syntactic and orthographic correction and keywords of activities to learn it.*

| Skills | Activities should work… |
|---|---|
| Employ a varied and rich vocabulary | Vocabulary expansion; synonyms; antonyms; language style |
| Employ a varied and rich vocabulary of the matter of the speech | Glossary of terms; language accuracy |
| Employ effective sentences | Short; meaningful; effective sentences |
| Avoid spelling mistakes | Spelling correction |
| Avoid filler words | Stop saying; filler words; um; uh |
| Adapt the speech language to the audience | Audience identification; speech focus |

Table 4 also includes useful keywords to find resources to self-improve verbal language skills. Examples of resources found by using the proposed keywords are:

- Easy ways to improve and expand your vocabulary.
  http://www.enhancemyvocabulary.com/improve-expand-vocabulary.html

- Glossary of Architectural Terms. https://architecturaltrust.org/outreach/education/glossary-of-architectural-terms

- How to stop using filler words when you talk. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8enBJt5vyto

## 3.5   Non-verbal language

When we interact with others, we continuously give and receive wordless signals. All of our non-verbal behaviours -the gestures we make, the way we sit, how fast or how loud we talk, how close we stand, how much eye contact we make - send strong messages. These messages don't stop when you stop speaking either. Even when you're silent, you're still nonverbally communicating. Thus, the control of non-verbal language is crucial to reinforce verbal language and to provide a good speech. Table 5 shows the 11 skills needed to master non-verbal language and keywords to find activities to improve them.

**Table 5.**  *Activities to learn how to improve non-verbal language and keywords of activities to learn it.*

| Skills | Activities should work… |
|---|---|
| Convey calmness and security | Overcome shyness; public speech |
| Express yourself easily | Must have; communication skills; hook audience |
| Use a proper pronunciation | Pronunciation practice; exercises |
| Use a proper volume, tone and rhythm | Voice; volume; tone; rhythm |
| Move naturally through the space | Space; natural movement |
| Eye contact | Eye contact; audience |
| Use gestures that accompany and reinforce the speech | Gestures; Body language |

| | |
|---|---|
| Avoid gestural tics | Body language tics; erase |
| Connect with the audience | Hook the audience; catch the audience |
| Adequate non-verbal language to the audience | Audience analysis; audience adaptation |
| Adequate your personal image to the message of the presentation | Personal image; self-image; personal branding |

Examples of activities and resources found on the Internet to help students to improve their non-verbal language in their speeches by using the proposed keywords are:

- What to do with your hands when you're presenting!.
  https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ooOQQOQdhH8

- 10 Body language tics that could cost you the interview.
  https://www.forbes.com/sites/meghancasserly/2012/09/26/10-body-language-tics-that-could-cost-you-the-interview-and-the-job/#6781db724bfe

- 12 Ways to Hook an Audience in 30 Seconds - https://www.americanexpress.com/us/small-business/openforum/articles/hook-presentation-audience-30-seconds/

## 3.6  Presentation tools

A presentation is one of the best ways to convey ideas, especially for visual learners and thinkers. The use of slides, videos, graphs, photos, etc serves to attract attention, to exemplify, to explain the structure of discourse and to make complex concepts comprehensible. However, a bad use of the presentation (setting the font on the slides too small, choosing poor or complicated design templates, including too many slides, losing the message with animations, picking out unusual color combinations, etc) can lose your audience and ruin your speech. Thus, a good communicator needs also to be a good slide designer - or at least pretend it.

Table 6 summarizes all the skills needed to design presentations that keep the audience focused on the presentation.

*Table 6.  Activities to learn how to improve the presentation slides and keywords of activities to learn it.*

| Skills | Activities should work… |
|---|---|
| Domain of presentation software programs | Presentation software |
| Select adequate colours, size and typology of fonts | Awesome presentation; slide types; template |
| Use adequate graphics and support images | Visual aid; image selection; presentation |
| Balance the use of texts, images, effects, transitions, etc | Composition; visual balance; presentation |
| Emphasize and reinforce ideas | Emphasize ideas; reinforce ideas; presentation |
| Use temporary markers and appropriate connectors | Animations; transitions; presentation |
| Position the audience at the exact point of your presentation | Sequence elements; presentation |
| Adapt the presentation to the audience | Audience analysis; please your audience; presentation |
| Use creatively the presentation tools | Creative presentation |

Table 6 also includes keywords to find activities and resources for the self-learning of quality presentation design. Examples of resources and activities found on the Internet to help students to improve these skills are:

- How to create an awesome slide presentation.
  https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6bSOAl1i8bw

- Make your Presentations Pop! Using Transitions and Animations.
  https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W2WV0N3a8Og

- 7 Ways you can emphasize an important point during your presentation -
  https://www.sketchbubble.com/blog/7-ways-can-emphasize-important-point-presentation/

## 4   CONCLUSIONS

The proficiency of an effective communication involves the master of lots and varied skills. In this work, we have identified 41 skills involved in an effective communication. These skills can be grouped in six different categories: personal disposition towards communication, quality of the presentation content, structure of the speech, verbal language, non-verbal language and presentation tools. Development of these skills takes time and patience. Thus students not always have enough time to develop them at class. Luckily, Internet is full of activities that can be used to self-practice these skills in the own language of the student. To help students in this task, for each one of the identified skills, this work proposes different keywords that can be used by students to find activities to work each one of these skills. The selected keywords have been checked using a common search engine in both, English and Spanish (after translation), and lots of appropriate activities have been found. These keywords will help students to find a myriad of high quality, leveled and updated resources and activities for the self-learning of the "effective communication" student outcome.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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