



Ethnicity and attitudes of Management undergraduates towards their communication skills

R. P. Dharmawardene¹, I.A. Kavirathna²

^{1,2} Business Communication Unit, Faculty of Management Studies, and Commerce,
University of Sri Jayewardenepura
Corresponding author: prasadini@sjp.ac.lk

Abstract

The purpose of this study was to ascertain if ethnicity and short English courses (less than two weeks) were related to undergraduate management students' perceptions of communication abilities. It also attempted to ascertain if attitudes ought to be connected in any way to the results of communication skills assessments. 123 participants from two cohorts of management undergraduates—first-year (n = 53) and second year (n = 70) students—who completed the Communication Skills Attitude Scale in the Faculty of Management Studies and Commerce of the University of Sri Jayewardenepura in Sri Lanka in 2023 were included in a cross-section survey design. The participants were drawn from pre-tertiary education backgrounds with varying language media and belonged to the three major ethnic groups in Sri Lanka: Sinhalese, Tamils, and Muslims. The results were compared to the measurements of attitudes. The negative attitude differed significantly. There was no discernible variation in opinions regarding communication abilities based on ethnicity. When compared to other students, students from the Tamil medium education system had more negative attitudes, with a mean score of 14.7. Regarding the evaluation results, there was not meaningful prediction regarding the opinions of the students. Initial results from the modest sample size point to suggestive links that call for more research using a larger number of participants and backgrounds that are proportional to short English courses.

Keywords: Communication skills, attitudes, ethnicity, university education

Introduction

Cultural diversities have challenges for clear communication in various sides of societal functioning (Foong et al., 2019). Being socially conveyed, culture pervades the mindset of people of diverse cultures, influencing signs for different meanings of words, gestures, interpretations, and reactions (Martin and Nakayama, 2013).

Sri Lanka has a unique school system. Prior to independence in 1948, to meet the needs of the three main ethnic groups; Sinhalese, Tamils and Muslims, the British facilitated diverse types of education systems, inadvertently reinforcing discrimination of the racial, social, linguistic, and cultural groups (Rathnayaka, 2014). Attempts have been made to offer one common system of education to stand-in national incorporation amongst the different ethnic groups, whilst also allowing for alternative paths of education delivery at both primary and secondary

school levels, to satisfy differing needs and interests (Rathnayaka, 2014). The primary and secondary schools are designed according to the three language mediums of instructions, namely, Sinhalese, Tamil, and English languages to cater for the all-racial groups. However, in tertiary education, all the instructions are in the English language. The short English courses in universities have been seen to offer students' lack of confidence in communication (Wickramasinghe, 2018).

Each of the three ethnic groups in Sri Lanka has reserved their strong ethnic identity in the form of linguistics, social values, beliefs, and traditional cultural customs (Wickramasinghe, 2018) which play a part in shaping attitudes, as with the theory of linguistic relativity where language could influence thinking (Spillan and Rahman, 2023). Our language capabilities are established by our vocabulary capacities and such capacities and capabilities could, in turn, influence levels of thinking, behaviours, and values (Ratnayake, 2023). Inherent sociocultural values transferred may be displayed in the form of cognition, beliefs, and behaviours, such as from influences by significant others (Senaratne and Ruwanpura, 2016).

The aims of the study are to explore whether any of the identified pre-tertiary language-based education systems are associated with the attitudes of management students towards communication skills. Secondly, as language is linked to ethnicity, the study investigates whether ethnicity is associated with the attitudes of management students towards communication skills.

Methodology

This study draws upon a cross-sectional survey design with data collected from two cohorts of Management students from Year 1 and Year 2 at a state university management Faculty in Sri Lanka. A cross-sectional design is utilized as the aims of the study are, firstly, to determine the association of pre-tertiary language-based education systems with attitudes towards communication skills, and secondly, to investigate the association of ethnicity with attitudes towards communication skills at the present moment. Participants were recruited using a purposive sampling method. The inclusion criteria for this study is all actively enrolled first year and second-year Management students. Management students from Year 1, were three months into their study and were not exposed to the communications teaching in the curriculum. They were recruited for this study based on the justification that differences in attitudes towards communication skills could be identified following further experiences on the course of Management studies. The possibility for change in attitudes is real, in light of experiences students may encounter over the course of their Management education (Kaluarachchi, 2010). Students from Year 2 are those who had been trained for two years in communication skills in a simulated environment along with some extra exposure in the university environment.

The participation of all samples in this study was strictly voluntary and the rights to withdraw at any time were verbally explained to them and also stated on the consent form. Consent included using the data collected and the communication skills assessment results for the purpose of data analysis as well as publication.

With the aim of the study outlined, the 26-item Communication Skills Attitude Scale (CSAS) was employed to measure the students' attitudes towards communication skills (Weerasiri, 2012). The reliability coefficient for all CSAS items was 0.873 for subscale 1, and 0.805 for subscale 2. It is a 5-point Likert-scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) which has been adopted by Ullah and colleagues (Ullah et al, 2012) in their study which demonstrated validity and reliability in the Sri Lankan context. The CSAS items comprises of two categories i.e., the positive attitude subscale (PAS) and the negative attitude subscale (NAS) with modest modification (Ullah et al, 2012). The PAS scores included items 4, 5, 7, 9, 10, 12, 14, 16, 18, 21, 22, along with revised scoring for items 2, 15, 19, and 26. The NAS scores included items 1, 3, 6, 8, 11, 17, 24 and revised scoring for item 23. Both PAS and NAS scores were calculated based on the summation of their items. They ranged from 15 to 75 for PAS, and 8 to 40 for NAS with the higher scores indicating a stronger attitude accordingly.

The 123 students who had agreed to participate in the study were provided with explanations of the project in the lecture hall, followed by reinforcement of their rights to withdraw from the study at any time. Data collection was

undertaken on two separate occasions for each of the Year 1 and Year 2 cohorts. Informed consent forms were distributed for signatures and returned to the researchers. The students retained duplicate copies. The demographic questionnaire and CSAS were distributed for self-completion by the students and collected individually as they completed them, for data entry and analysis.

The Statistical Analysis System (SAS) was used to analyse the data. In addition to the descriptive demographic data, t-tests were used to compare the education systems and CSAS scores between Year 1 and Year 2 cohorts, respectively. Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) was conducted to assess the significant differences between education systems and ethnicity variables, respectively, with PAS and NAS scores for each cohort.

Results

The descriptive demographics of the two cohorts are presented in Table 1. The majority of the participants were female (58.2%), and of Sinhalese ethnicity (79.1%). The majority of Year 1 participants were from a Sinhalese education system, at both primary (46.4%) and secondary levels (68.6%). On average, Year 1 participants had higher PAS mean scores of 64.0 (SD=6.8, $p = .002$), out of a maximum score of 75, and lower NAS mean scores of 15.1 (SD=3.9, $p = .001$), out of a maximum score of 40, compared to Year 2 PAS mean scores of 61.7 (SD = 6.4, $p = .002$) and NAS mean scores of 16.7 (SD = 4.2, $p = .001$).

Table 1

Data of students in Year 1 and Year 2

Characteristics	Year 1 (%)	Year 2 (%)	p-value
<u>Gender</u>			
Female	(62.1)	(54.7)	0.179
Male	(37.9)	(45.3)	
<u>Ethnicity</u>			
Sinhalese	(79.1)	(82.8)	0.186
Tamils	(11.9)	(10.2)	
Muslims	(8.6)	(6.5)	
Others	(0.4)	(0.5)	

In relation to the first aim of the study on whether there are any significant differences between the pre-tertiary language-based education systems with attitudes towards communication skills, no significant results were found with PAS ($F_{(3, 319)} = 0.43$, $p = .649$), and NAS ($F_{(3, 319)} = 7.79$, $p = .001$). For the second aim of the study there was no significant difference between ethnicity and attitudes towards communication skills with PAS ($F_{(2, 320)} = 0.66$, $p = .519$) and NAS ($F_{(2, 320)} = 1.24$, $p = .291$). In all cases, those from Tamils medium education backgrounds had stronger negative attitudes with a mean score of 14.7, (SD = 3.6) for primary school levels and 15.9 (SD = 3.0) for secondary school levels, compared with their counterparts.

Table 2**Differences between demographics and communication skills attitude scale (CSAS) in Year 1 students**

Characteristics	Positive attitude subscale (PAS)		Negative attitude subscale (NAS)	
	Mean (\pm SD)	F (p-value)	Mean (\pm SD)	F (p-value)
<u>Age in Years</u>				
20 -20.3	64.0 (6.5)		13.7 (3.4)	
20.4 – 20.6	63.1 (9.0)		12.4 (4.1)	
20.7 and above	68.0 (4.7)	0.88 (0.418)	9.8 (4.2)	3.49 (0.033)
<u>Gender</u>				
Female	63.9 (6.9)		13.7 (3.5)	
Male	64.1 (6.7)	0.01 (0.905)	13.0 (3.6)	1.26 (0.263)
<u>Ethnicity</u>				
Sinhalese	63.1 (9.8)		13.6 (3.3)	
Tamils	63.6 (7.0)		13.8 (3.7)	
Muslims/Other	64.8 (5.2)	0.66 (0.519)	12.8 (3.4)	1.24 (0.291)
<u>Language medium at Primary School</u>				
Sinhalese	64.9 (4.8)		14.0 (2.3)	
Tamil	64.0 (6.9)		14.7 (3.6)	
English	64.7 (4.3)	0.19 (0.900)	13.5 (2.5)	4.67 (0.004)
<u>Language medium at Secondary School</u>				
Sinhalese	64.9 (3.9)		14.2 (3.0)	
Tamil	64.5 (5.2)		15.9 (3.0)	
English	63.6 (7.6)	0.43 (0.649)	12.8 (3.6)	7.79 (0.001)

ANOVA statistic, $p < 0.05$, statistically significant.

Comparatively, for Year 2, there was an observation of greater NAS for the Tamil medium education system, with a mean score of 15.8 (SD = 4.2) for the primary school level, and a mean score of 15.9 (SD = 3.9) for the secondary school level. Those from the English medium education system had the lowest NAS, with mean scores of 14.2 (SD = 3.6) for the primary school group, and 14.6 (SD = 3.7) for the secondary level school group..

Table 3**Differences between demographics and communication skills attitude scale (CSAS) in Year 2 students**

Characteristics	Positive attitude subscale (PAS)		Negative attitude subscale (NAS)	
	Mean (\pm SD)	F (p-value)	Mean (\pm SD)	F (p-value)
<u>Age in Years</u>				
21-21.3	59.8 (4.4)		16.1 (3.6)	
21.4-21.6	62.1 (6.1)		15.0 (4.0)	
21.7 and above	57.7 (14.2)	2.24 (0.110)	11.8 (3.1)	2.63 (0.075)
<u>Gender</u>				
Female	62.2 (6.0)		14.5 (3.6)	

Characteristics	Positive attitude subscale (PAS)		Negative attitude subscale (NAS)	
	Mean (\pm SD)	F (p-value)	Mean (\pm SD)	F (p-value)
Male	61.0 (6.9)	1.46 (0.228)	15.5 (4.3)	2.97 (0.087)
<u>Ethnicity</u>				
Sinhalese	63.4 (4.6)		15.9 (4.3)	
Tamil	60.3 (7.0)		15.5 (4.0)	
Muslim/Other	64.4 (4.6)	7.48 (0.001)	12.9 (2.8)	7.42 (0.001)
<u>Language medium at Primary School</u>				
Sinhalese	63.1 (4.8)		14.4 (3.9)	
Tamils	60.0 (7.8)		15.8 (4.2)	
English	62.2 (5.9)	2.85 (0.039)	14.5 (2.9)	2.01 (0.114)
<u>Language medium at Secondary School</u>				
Sinhalese	63.0 (4.9)		14.8 (4.2)	
Tamil	58.8 (9.1)		15.9 (3.9)	
English	61.9 (5.6)	5.71 (0.004)	14.6 (3.7)	1.35 (0.263)

ANOVA statistic, $p < 0.05$, statistically significant.

Although the results suggest those from the Tamil education system were most negative towards communication skills, it should be noted that those who failed were not all from that group. Within the ethnic groups, proportionately, the failure rate for Sinhalese was 8%, compared with Tamils at 5.1%, and Muslims at 2.6%. Logistics regression was used to predict outcomes about the CSAS scores. The odds were that Year 2 students were 18% more likely to fail their outcome tests, for every one-unit increment in their negative attitude toward communication skills.

Discussion

Many students in a batch being female is consistent with the global picture (Ullah et al, 2012) whilst positive towards communication skills as a whole, on further analysis, the findings suggest different attitudes prevailing between the various sub-groups. Those from the Tamil medium education background and the Tamils ethnic group are more negative towards communication skills, whilst those from the English medium education system are more positive. A larger sample size than was available for this study may well have presented a more significant finding in this respect. Such preliminary findings may suggest the role of pre-tertiary language-based education systems and ethnicity in influencing attitudes towards communication skills. It raises the question of contributory factors for such a difference between the various education systems and ethnicity. The issue of ethnicity and its inherent cultural traits is a challenging one including the need for sustained, concerted action from the community if there is a perceived desire for it. On the other hand, the link with the pre-tertiary language-based education systems is a matter that may be more responsive for appropriate action by government policy. It deserves further exploration, given the significant role both primary and secondary education systems play in moulding the minds of children for the future.

Further examination of the data suggests complicated interactions between the variables in this study. One striking aspect is the change in attitudes from Year 1 to Year 2, where the older Year 2 students have changed attitudes towards the negative for communication skills due to such matters as enculturation exposure which may exist as they progress through their management education. However, it is inconclusive due to the cross-sectional sampling, and a longitudinal study is needed for verification. Rees and Sheard (Rees et al, 2002) found that as age increased, PAS scores decreased. Longitudinal data suggested a deterioration in empathy during management

school education and residency, for a range of reasons including the presence of vulnerabilities to values of idealism, enthusiasm, and humanity at the beginning of management studies (Ravindran and Bandara, 2015).

Results from this study suggest pre-tertiary education, and the process of socialization over the years influence attitudes and behaviors of the students.

It can also be noted that the phenomenon of unwillingness to ask questions or speak up in class, in both Asian and English-speaking countries, has also been attributed to situation-specific factors of language proficiency, teaching methodologies, learning requirements, and learning habits, rather than cultural factors (Bandulahewa, 2015).

In this study students who failed the outcome measuring test were all identified as being on the list of those who held negative attitudes towards communication skills. Such a finding is consistent with the theory that attitudes influence behaviours with impacts on learning outcomes (Nasmil and Seneviatne, 2020).

Communication skills are also determined by other factors including teachers, supervisors, psychodynamics that break down barriers and organisational climate (Saraniya and Thevaranjan, 2016). They include the teachers' skills at teaching communication skills, incorporating modeling of their own passions for their significance to garner students' interest, curiosity, and motivation towards wanting to develop and aspire to be competent practitioners.

The above discussions lead us to the question of whether our study's findings are consistent with other studies of other ethnic groups such as those from the Western world. It is pertinent given the increasing mobility of students from various parts of the world to tertiary institutions in the Western world. Proportionately, PAS and NAS amongst the participants in this study were comparable to participants from the UK, such as in Leicester and Nottingham where it was suggested the findings of higher NAS scores were due to non-white students at Leicester (which happens to have more non-white students) who have different cultural beliefs about the importance of communication skills within their educational practice (Rees et al, 2002).

Limitations

This study design, being cross-sectional, was only able to acquire data from management faculty students at one point in time. It does not provide an accurate picture of the changes and differences between the two cohorts. Notwithstanding that, data comparisons suggest initial differences between the Year 1 and Year 2 cohorts in their attitudes. It requires further exploration by a longitudinal follow-up with the Year 1 groups to determine if exposure over time could bring about changes in attitudes.

Considering the disadvantages of self-administered attitude measures discussed earlier, and in this case, being self-administered in a group in a lecture hall, there could be issues such as lack of conscientious responses. The study with a greater number of students from the Tamils ethnic group could potentially affect the generalisability of the results to the entire management student population in Sri Lanka, where the main racial groups of Sinhalese make up 77% of the population, Tamils 15%, and Muslims 8%

Conclusion

The findings suggest some correlation between pre-tertiary education and ethnicity with management students' attitudes towards communication skills learning in Sri Lankan universities. There are indicative relationships which deserve further studies including higher numbers of participants and proportionate pre-tertiary language-based education systems. The preliminary findings serve to reinforce the need to determine the reasons for negative attitudes towards learning communication skills. In this respect, a qualitative study would help identify the reasons for poor communication skills amongst Management students in Sri Lanka (Ravindran and Bandara, 2015).

References

- Bandulahewa, B. K. M. (2015). *Effective project communication for construction project managers in Sri Lanka* (Doctoral dissertation).
- Foong, A. L., Sow, C. F., Ramasamy, S., & Yap, P. S. (2019). Pre-tertiary education, ethnicity, and attitudes of Asian medical undergraduates towards communication skills. *International journal of medical education*, *10*, 1–8. <https://doi.org/10.5116/ijme.5c30.988d>
- Hettiararchchi, H. A. H., & Jayarathna, S. M. D. Y. (2014). The effect of employee work related attitudes on employee job performance: A study of tertiary and vocational education sector in Sri Lanka.
- Kaluarachchi, K. A. S. P. (2010). Organizational culture and total quality management practices: a Sri Lankan case. *The TQM Journal*, *22*(1), 41-55.
- Martin, J. N., & Nakayama, T. K. (2013). Thinking dialectically about culture and communication. *The global intercultural communication reader*, 204-222.
- Nasmil, U. H. M., & Seneviratne, S. M. K. S. (2020). Perceived Barriers in Communicating with Nurses and Patients During Clinical Learning among Nursing Students of Two State Universities in Sri Lanka. *Journal of Health Sciences and Innovative Research*, *1*.
- Rathnayaka, R. K. T. (2014). Cross-cultural dimensions of business communication: Evidence from Sri Lanka. *International Review of Management and Business Research*, *3*(3), 1579.
- Rathnayake, S. (2023). New Trends in Intercultural Communication Under New Conditions of Normalization in Sri Lanka. *International Journal of Media and Communication Research (IJMCR)*, *4*(1), 32-42.
- Ravindran, K., & Bandara, C. M. Y. S. S. (2015). Factors Affecting Acquisition of Soft Skills and the Level of Soft Skills Among University Undergraduates (With Special Reference to Management Students of Rajarata University of Sri Lanka).
- Rees, C., Sheard, C., & McPherson, A. (2002). Communication skills assessment: the perceptions of medical students at the University of Nottingham. *Medical education*, *36*(9), 868-878.
- Saraniya, D., & Thevaranjan, D. (2016). Interpersonal skills and organizational commitment. *Journal for Studies in Management and Planning*, *2*(1), 117-126.
- Senaratne, S., & Ruwanpura, M. (2016). Communication in construction: a management perspective through case studies in Sri Lanka. *Architectural Engineering and Design Management*, *12*(1), 3-18.
- Spillan, J. E., & Rahman, M. (2023). Cultural Issues Affecting Business Activity in Sri Lanka. In *Doing Business in Bangladesh and Sri Lanka: Challenges and Opportunities* (pp. 89-108). Cham: Springer International Publishing.
- Ullah, M. A., Barman, A., Rahim, A. F. A., & Yusoff, M. S. B. (2012). Determinants of medical student attitudes to a learning communication skill teaching program. *Journal of Men's Health*, *9*(4), 245-254.
- Weerasiri, S. (2012). Attitudes and awareness towards environmental management and its impact on environmental management practices (EMPs) of SMEs in Sri Lanka. *Journal of Social and Development Sciences*, *3*(1), 16-23.
- Wickramasinghe, T. A. (2018). Organizational communication culture of local governance and its impact on democracy: A case study of Sri Lankan local authorities.