

Teaching Non-Written Communication Skills to MBA Students Through Evaluated Exercises

Diganta Chakrabarti, Shilpa Shinde, and Smita Chaudhry

Faculty of Business, FLAME University, India

Abstract. Communication skills are a fundamental requirement to effectively carry out job responsibilities. In this paper, we explain the process by which a course on non-written communication skills for management students in India was designed and delivered. The course objectives, expected learning outcomes, content, pedagogy and evaluation are described. The group and individual exercises for evaluating skills of presentation, listening, group discussion, public speaking and personal interview are also discussed. Through this paper, the importance of a structured pattern of activities, relevant procedure for evaluation, explicit instructions, and a detailed feedback mechanism for an effective learning of non-written communication skills are highlighted. The unique contribution of the paper is in helping faculty plan pedagogy for a basic course on business communication. The course has stood out in terms of its exclusive focus on evaluated exercises, time and attention devoted to feedback and relevance of the content to the management field.

Keywords: business communication, presentation, listening, group discussion, public speaking and personal interview.

1. Introduction

This paper is an account of the authors' teaching experience in the first year of a post-graduate program in management (MBA) at a private university in Pune, India, during the academic year 2018-19. The MBA program at the university is for students who want to take up the post-graduate degree soon after completing their under-graduate studies with little or no work-experience. Business Communication (BC) as a subject is a core requirement for all first-year students of the MBA program. This course is offered in the first semester of the program and is divided into two parts. In the first term, students take a course on the written aspect of BC (BC-I). This is followed by a course in the second term that focuses on the non-written aspect (BC-II). In the academic year under description in this paper, the BC-II course was structured as a two-credit course, requiring classroom

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teaching/learning of 30 hours. This paper should be considered relevant for new faculty teaching a basic BC course and experienced faculty looking for new ways or ideas to improve their courses. Although the course was designed for students in the post-graduate program, it is also appropriate for upper undergraduate level students who have not done the course before and have only had limited or no work experience.

1.1. Conceptual Background

It is important to distinguish business communication, management communication, and organizational communication as they have so much in common (and often used interchangeably). Reinsch (1991, p. 308) offered the following definitions:

- “Organizational communication is communication intended to affect (overthrow, modify, fortify) organizational structure.”
- “Management communication is communication intended to affect or to effect a manager’s decisions.”
- “Business communication is communication intended to help a business achieve a fundamental goal, to maximize shareholder wealth.”

Training in communication skills is an essential component of any standard MBA program. Apart from written communication skills, whose importance cannot be over-emphasized, non-written communication (also referred to as “oral communication”) is very important for MBA students (Alvi 2012; Butz & Askim-Lovseth 2015; Golen *et al.* 1989). The *Wall Street Journal* claimed that MBA programs should hone “soft skills” (Dvorak 2007). Employers and potential recruiters identified the value of oral communication primarily in the following areas: following instructions; conversation and listening skills; giving feedback; communication with the public; meeting skills; presentation skills; handling client complaints; conflict resolution; negotiation skills; following client instructions; teaching/instructing skills; interviewing skills (Ulinski & O’Callaghan 2002). It is therefore important to develop these skills in students through the application of different teaching techniques (Alvi 2012; Choudary & Kalyani 2016).

Research evidence and expert opinions from varying contexts emphasize the critical importance of including training in “soft skills” as part of the MBA program (Choudary & Ponnuru 2015; Iyengar 2015; Mitchell *et al.* 2013; Ramani 2017; Shuayto 2012; Silvis *et al.* 1999). Bersin (2019) discussed the 2019 Global Talent Trends report and pointed out that 91% of companies and 92% of hiring

managers validated the importance of soft skills and that soft skills were gaining significance in technology-driven work – more and more employers and hiring managers stated that they are as important as technical skills.

Appropriate training in effective BC skills during an upper undergraduate management program and/or MBA can enable graduates to perform their job better in organizations (Valentine & Sokuvitz 2002). Soft skills such as persuasion skills (Apparaju 2016), listening skills and effective communication (Bauer-Wolf 2019) are considered highly significant for a corporate career. There is strong research evidence to claim that successful integration of soft skills training enhances the learning of hard skills (e.g., accounting) within the scope of management programs (Hartman 1992; Stout 2014). More importantly, recruiters and faculty members have pointed towards inadequate communication skills of thousands of graduating Indian MBAs (Francis 2012). Interestingly, the five fundamental behavioral objectives of a BC course, proposed by (Hatch 1972) almost fifty years ago, are still relevant today. These objectives are: a) willingness to communicate well, b) ability to communicate well, c) ability to write well, d) ability to speak well in public, e) ability to communicate informally in a small group.

2. Course Objectives

In the first phase of developing this course, textbooks on business communication, curricula offered by other universities/institutions, and opinions on this subject from several sources (academicians, industry experts and past students of the same course) were researched. After several rounds of discussion among us (faculty members), the following primary objectives for the course were finalised. Since the students were fresh out of an under-graduate program with little to no work experience, and lacked exposure to soft skills relevant to workplace, the following objectives were decided upon: a) Emphasize the importance of non-written/oral communication for employees and managers through multiple methods; b) Familiarize/introduce students to the most critical forms of non-written communications used in organizations; and c) Develop skills in the most important forms of non-written communications through evaluated exercises.

2.1. Expected Learning Outcomes

The aim was to achieve these objectives through elaborately designed evaluated exercises, closely aided by brief instruction sessions, and availability of essential instruction materials (book chapters /articles, expert comments/opinions, video

links, etc.). The learning outcomes were to be achieved through highly engaged participation of all students while giving extensive critical feedback.

The expectation was that after successful completion of the requirements of the course, each student would learn valuable lessons and develop their skills so that they would be able to demonstrate the following learning outcomes: a) Make strong, persuasive presentations; b) Apply listening skills for effective communication; c) Apply improved conversation skills; d) Conduct effective meetings; e) Use proved techniques in conflict management and negotiation; f) Become an effective public speaker; g) Use techniques for better telephone conversations; h) Participate and contribute in meaningful group discussions, and i) Make a positive impression in personal interviews.

2.2. Content, Pedagogy, and Evaluation

When course content and pedagogy employed by the previous faculty was researched, three areas were found where there was scope for change: a) use of multiple conceptual models linked to business communication within the curriculum, b) lectures and demonstrations by the faculty as the predominant method of delivery, limited application of exercises, and c) end-term written examination as the main method of evaluation. A significantly different approach was adopted in all three areas by: assigning more priority to practical tips and guidelines than conceptual models; using evaluated exercises, prior instructions and detailed feedback as the predominant form of content delivery; and replacing the written examination with personal interview as comprehensive evaluation.

Accordingly, appropriate modules were included within the planned 30 hours of classroom sessions. The modules contained instructions, demonstrations, and exercises on the following topics: Effective presentations skills; Listening and conversation skills; Telephonic conversation skills; Meeting skills; Conflict Management skills, Negotiation skills; Interview skills; Group discussion skills; Public speaking skills.

In the introductory two sessions, the scope and importance of non-written communication was explained (as an integral part of business communication) through brief lectures, case examples, and short video clips. The class had 70 students divided into 12 groups (six students each in ten groups; five students each in two groups). The groups were pre-decided by the academic office to maintain similarity among the groups and diversity within the groups. The academic office used the following criteria for maintaining (as far as feasible) even distribution in the constitution of groups: gender and educational background. The course content was delivered through brief instruction sessions and supply of useful reading/viewing material (through the university's customized Learning Management System-LMS), followed by evaluated exercises.