

## ASSESSING THE TEACHING OF COMMUNICATION AND WRITING SKILLS IN HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS

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### Abstract

*Written and oral communication is considered one of the most critical competencies for academic and future career success for every student in higher education institutions. One of the numerous skills a student should be able to develop before they leave university or college is the ability to communicate effectively through writing. This paper aimed to establish whether higher education institutions in Zambia offer compulsory communication and writing skills to students. The study employed both qualitative and quantitative techniques. Data from students on whether or not they learnt communication skills was elicited through a questionnaire while data on views and opinions from language lecturers was collected through semi-structured interviews. The findings of the study revealed that out of the ten public universities and colleges that participated in the study, only four offer Communication and writing skills to all first-year students. It was revealed that in some institutions, Communication and writing or study skills are taught only to students who study languages. The study further recommended that all higher education institutions should consider offering compulsory Communication and writing skills to all first years regardless of their study areas to equip them with useful communicative skills for their adult life.*

**Keywords:** communication; higher education institutions; writing skills

### 1.0 INTRODUCTION

Effective communication is a fundamental primary medium through which learning takes place at all levels of learning. Communication skills are therefore the foundation of language learning from which effective speaking, writing and reading emerge and it is the bedrock of human language learning (Asemanyi 2015). Language plays a significant role in the learning process and if the learner is handicapped in language use, then learning may not take place at all. This is principally because the learner and the teacher will not be communicating. Students who can't communicate effectively after school often become adults who have challenges when it comes to expressing themselves properly.

According to Demirdag (2021) being able to communicate effectively is an extremely vital skill that can enable us to become useful in all facets of life. He points out that while at college, communication is one of the most vital life skills students must master at all levels of education if they are to succeed and progress to higher levels. Without well-developed competency in communication, students run the risk of failing their promotion assessment, as a result remaining behind their peers and becoming emotionally frustrated and consequently withdrawing from school.

In Zambia, Communication and Writing Skills is a compulsory course for students who are training as teachers of languages (English, Zambian languages and French). The reason is that teachers of languages are supposed to impart communication and writing skills to all learners who in turn, apply them to other subjects (Mc Millan, 2021). However, it is globally considered view that Communication and writing skills are significant and should be taught to all students in the college or university regardless of the programme of study. This study seeks to establish if higher education institutions offer compulsory Communication and writing skills to all students.

## **2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW**

Several studies have been conducted by many scholars on the importance of communication and writing skills to students in higher education institutions. Only studies that are relevant to the current study have been reviewed and presented accordingly.

### **2.1 Definition of Communication and Writing Skills**

Generally, communication can be defined as a process by which information is exchanged between individuals through verbal and nonverbal modes (Mohammed 2019). Zanaton *et al* (2012) defined communication as a process of exchanging information, from the person giving the information through verbal and non-verbal methods to the person receiving the information. Seiler & Beall (2005) defined communication in terms of its role in generating and sharing meaning occurring at the same time through symbolic interactions. Communication includes a broad range of actions which help people to work more effectively with others. The process of communication begins when one person (the sender) wants to transmit information to someone else (the receiver). This information has meaning to the sender. This is what Sulaiman (1997) points out when he said that communication has been said to start when a message or information is transferred from the sender (the speaker, writer) to the receiver (listener, reader) through an instrument or channel, and followed by the receiver giving feedback (coding and interpreting the information; Sulaiman Masri,1997).

Communication is also looked at in terms of the expression of feelings, sharing and understanding the message transmitted. Sikiti (1998: 1) defines communication thus: "Communication is a purposeful process of expressing, receiving and understanding messages containing factual information, feelings, ideas and needs by two or more individuals through common symbols." Communication has further been defined as the transmission of a message that involves the shared understanding between the contexts in which the communication takes place

Durga and Rao (2018) explain that Writing is one of the four skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing) in language learning that every student must acquire. Writing is a system consisting of written symbols, representing the sounds, syllables or words of the language, with different mechanisms such as capitalisation, spelling and punctuation, word form and function. The importance of teaching communication and writing skills is one important necessity that cannot be ignored in any higher learning institution. McMillian (2020) explained that Communication skills are highly valuable, particularly to post-secondary students. He recommended that students should be exposed to intensive writing skills during the formative years in post-secondary education to cultivate great habits and work ethics that will benefit students later in life.

It cannot be gainsaid that language plays a significant role in the learning process and if the learner is handicapped in language use, then learning may not take place at all. This is principally because the learner and the teacher will not be communicating. Developing the above argument further, Wolf (2006) correctly indicates that communication is not everything in education but without communication, everything is nothing in education. He further argued that communication and writing skills as a course expose students to conceptual skills like sentence patterns, concord (subject-verb agreement), ambiguity and many others. Commenting on the importance of communication skills to students in higher learning institutions, Yemeh (2007) argued that the communication and writing skills course is a foundation course that enables first-year students to have the knowledge or ability to use the communicative requisite skills to communicate effectively. He adds that the objective of the Communication skills course in any tertiary institution is to equip first-year students with writing; reading and note-making skills to enable them to pursue their studies in various fields effectively.

Sharma (2023) observed that due to the evolution of information technology across the globe, writers are in demand and need to design digital media content such as digital advertisement marketing display strategies. With the advent of news websites and social media, writers with IT-related skills are needed to help through writing for digital marketing channels such as brand quotes, advertisements, social media posts, blogs *etc* According to Zechman (2014), the teaching of communication skills has future bearing on the learners' life. She points out that Kids with communication challenges at school often become adults who struggle to express themselves properly, which puts them at a disadvantage. She proposes that communication skills should be at the top of the list in the school curriculum.

### **3.0 METHODOLOGY**

This study was carried out to establish whether higher education in Zambia do offer compulsory Communication and writing skills courses to their students.. The study employed a descriptive survey design for this study. According to Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2004), a descriptive survey design is appropriate for examining and assessing opinions, views and practices that exist. According to Ary, Jacobs and Rezavieh (2002), a survey permits the researcher to gather information from a large sample of people relatively quickly and it is less expensive. The design takes cognizance of both qualitative and quantitative data. The target population comprised students and language and communication lecturers in public institutions. The sample for the study was selected from the 8 institutions. A total of 120 participants were randomly selected

as follows: 20 lecturers and 100 students with ages ranging between 41 and above 61 and between 20 and 40 years respectively.

As a way of collecting data for the study, questionnaires were designed and distributed to students in their respective institutions. Unstructured interviews via phone and face-to-face were used to collect qualitative data from lecturers. The data collected was about knowledge and teaching of communication and writing skills.

The questionnaire for students was divided into two parts 1 and 2. The first part aimed at gathering biographical data of the participants while the second part was designed to find out if the students learnt and if they had an idea about the importance of Communication skills. Quantitative data was analysed using charts and tables generated using Microsoft Excel while qualitative data was analysed thematically. The quantitative data was coded and then filtered using MS Excel.

#### 4.0 FINDINGS

As mentioned above, the data that were analysed were based on 100 questionnaires from students and 20 from lecturers.

##### 4.1 Biographic Data from Students

100 students participated in the study through questionnaires. For each type of questionnaire, data collected was categorised into biographic characteristics and learning of Communication and writing skills.

In terms of academic qualifications of the respondents, the majority constituting 82% had grade 12 certificates or school certificates, with only 6 (6%) having diplomas and only 2 having craft certificates. Results further show that almost all the student respondents (92%) were pre-service students and only a paltry 8% were in-service. This is explained by the fact that at the time the study was conducted, only full-time classes were in session in all higher learning institutions and these classes were dominated by pre-service students; given the departure of in-service students who were now back at work in their places of work. The table below summarises the biographical data from students:

**Table 1: Summary of the biographical data from students**

Biographical information		Frequency	%
Gender	Male	35	35
	Female	65	65
<b>TOTAL</b>		<b>103</b>	<b>100</b>
Age Range	15-20	3	3
	21-25	80	80
	26-30	15	15
	31-35	2	2
	36 and above	0	00
<b>TOTAL</b>		<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>
Highest Education Qualification	School Certificate	82	82
	Diploma	12	12
	Craft Certificate	6	6
<b>TOTAL</b>		<b>103</b>	<b>100</b>

Status	Pre-service	92	92
	In-service	8	8
<b>TOTAL</b>		<b>103</b>	<b>100</b>

*Table 1: Biographical Information of the Respondents*

Table 1 above shows that there were 100 respondents of whom 35 (35%) were male and 65 (65%) were female. It is worth mentioning that these data do not include that of lecturers elicited through interviews. The participants were of varying ages from 15-20 and 36 and above. The majority of these, constituting 80%, were aged between 21 and 26 years of age while 15% were aged from 26-30 years. Only 5 participants (5%) fell outside these two age groups.

#### 4.2 The Status of Communication Skills Learnt

As a preliminary step in the quest to analyse data relating to the teaching of Communication and writing skills, the researchers looked at the first question which was designed to get a general idea if respondents were learning communication and writing skills. Therefore, respondents were asked to indicate whether they were learning or learning communication and writing skills in the first year of their training. Results are summarised in the table below:

**Table 2**

No. of students	Component of English	Compulsory course	Did not learn it	%
12	√			12
60		√		60
28			√	28
<b>100</b>				<b>100</b>

Findings in Table 2 above indicate that, out of the 100 respondents, 60 (60%) indicated that they learnt communication and writing skills as a compulsory course for all first-year students. while 12 (12%) participants indicated that they learnt communication and writing skills as a component in the English subject in those training as teachers. On the other hand 28 participants (28%) indicated that they did not learn communication and writing skills.

On the importance of the teaching of Communication and study skills, lecturers interviewed mentioned that one way to improve communication and writing skills in institutions of higher education is to take a communication and writing skills course. Most of them observed that the communicative ability in terms of writing by many students leaves much to be desired. They pointed out that many students are unable to express themselves fluently in their various course assessments. Consequently, they proposed and recommended that all colleges and universities should offer these courses to all first-year students, and students must learn the various strategies in communication in various contexts.

#### 4.0 DISCUSSION

Based on the findings of this study, several conclusions can be made. The findings revealed that more than half of the student respondents learnt communication and

study skills and understood their significance. In addition, it was clear that lecturers appreciated the significance of the Communication and Study Skills course and they believed the introduction of this course to all first-year students is crucial. While students and lecturers find these skills necessary, the question remains: Do students explicitly trained in this course apply these skills in real post-tertiary life?

The findings of this study are indeed in tandem with the studies of the majority of the researchers as reviewed in the literature section. Just as pointed out by Wolf (2006), communication skills are the bedrock of students' life in the university. This has been confirmed by lecturers who participated in the study when they acknowledged the important role played by communication skills as a course in the university.

Much as lecturers appreciate the significance of teaching communication and writing skills, little effort is made to transmit the same pedagogical skills to their students to equip them with the same skills. The fact that about 28 per cent of student respondents neither learnt nor understood the significance of learning communication and writing skills, shows that these students. The study revealed that all teacher training institutions offer compulsory communication and writing skills to all first-year students. Maybe this could be the reason why teachers are considered by society as good communicators.

## **5.0 CONCLUSION**

The study has revealed that lecturers and students in institutions of higher education are aware of the significance of communication and writing skills courses. However, there is a challenge when it comes to implementation. Generally, of the higher education institutions that participated in the study, teacher training institutions and a few universities offer compulsory Communication and writing skills courses to all first years.

### **5.1 Recommendations**

There is a great need for further research using this preliminary data to further investigate the professional development needs of lecturers and students in developing the necessary competence to teach Communication and writing skills to all first-year students. This study reiterates the need for all colleges and universities to introduce and teach Communication and writing skills to all first-year students.

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