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Sri Lankan undergraduates' perspectives towards enhancing their professional communication skills

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Abstract

In this mixed-method study, Sri Lankan undergraduates' perspectives towards practising professional communication are presented. Randomly selected three hundred undergraduates representing all subject disciplines across four universities in Sri Lanka were asked to complete an online survey on their perspectives about learning professional communication in their second year in 2023. The research method was descriptive. After analyzing the theoretical underpinnings of perspectives and professional communication, a survey was created, piloted, and given to all three hundred undergraduates. The survey results indicated that a significant majority of undergraduates (85%) recognized the importance of professional communication skills in their future careers. However, only 45% felt confident in their current communication abilities. The study also explored the role of technology in enhancing communication skills. With the rise of digital communication platforms, students recognized the need to adapt to new forms of communication. The findings may be helpful in designing professional communication courses for undergraduates in Sri Lankan universities.

Key words: Professional communication, Undergraduates, Curriculum Design

Introduction

Effective communication is a cornerstone of success in the professional world. For undergraduates in Sri Lanka, developing strong professional communication skills is essential not only for securing employment but also for thriving in their careers. This study explores the perspectives of

Sri Lankan undergraduates regarding the enhancement of their professional communication skills, drawing on recent research findings and surveys.

Professional communication encompasses a range of skills, including verbal and non-verbal communication, active listening, writing proficiency, and interpersonal skills. In a rapidly globalizing job market, these skills have become increasingly important. According to the World Economic Forum (2020), communication skills are among the top skills employers seek in graduates. In Sri Lanka, where the economy is diversifying and expanding, the need for effective communicators is more pronounced than ever.

Literature review

Research underscores that professional communication skills are essential for career advancement and employability. According to the World Economic Forum (2020), communication skills rank among the top competencies sought by employers. In Sri Lanka, where the economy is increasingly integrating with global markets, the ability to communicate effectively is paramount (Gamage & Gunawardena, 2021). Effective communication fosters collaboration, enhances teamwork, and improves problem-solving abilities within professional environments (Bandara, 2023).

A significant body of literature highlights the current state of communication skills among Sri Lankan university students. Perera and Koralage (2022) conducted a study that revealed a disconnect between students' perceptions of the importance of communication skills and their actual proficiency. While students acknowledge the necessity of these skills, many report feeling underprepared for professional environments. Only 45% of students in their research felt confident in their communication abilities, echoing findings from other studies that suggest a prevalent skills gap among graduates (Fernando & Wickramasinghe, 2022).

Several barriers hinder the development of effective communication skills among Sri Lankan undergraduates. Language proficiency, particularly in English, is a significant concern. Many students, despite being educated in English, struggle with fluency and vocabulary in professional contexts (Jayasinghe, 2021). Cultural factors also play a role; Sri Lankan communication styles often favor indirectness, which can lead to misunderstandings in professional settings (Seneviratne

& Perera, 2023). Additionally, the lack of practical experience and opportunities to practice communication skills in real-world scenarios is frequently cited as a barrier (Perera & Koralage, 2022).

Undergraduates express a variety of preferences for enhancing their communication skills. Interactive workshops and seminars led by industry professionals are highly favored, as they provide valuable insights and practical knowledge (Gamage & Gunawardena, 2021). Role-playing exercises and simulations are also seen as effective methods for practicing communication in a safe environment, allowing students to build confidence (Bandara, 2023). Moreover, peer feedback is highlighted as a crucial component of skill development, as students value constructive criticism from their peers (Fernando & Wickramasinghe, 2022).

However, university administration also plays a pivotal role in shaping the communication skills of their students. The existing literature indicates that while many universities offer formal communication courses, there is a need for more integrated approaches that embed communication skills training across various disciplines (Jayasinghe, 2021). Perera and Koralage (2022) advocate universities to create more opportunities for practical experience, such as internships and networking events, which can significantly enhance students' professional communication competencies.

The integration of technology into education has opened new avenues for enhancing communication skills. Research indicates that undergraduates are increasingly interested in online learning platforms that offer courses focused on professional communication (Seneviratne & Perera, 2023). The use of social media for professional networking, particularly platforms like LinkedIn, is also gaining traction among students as a means of improving their communication skills and expanding their professional networks (Fernando & Wickramasinghe, 2022).

Research Methodology

This study utilized a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative surveys and qualitative interviews. A sample of three hundred undergraduates from various universities across Sri Lanka participated in the survey, while thirty students were selected for in-depth interviews. The survey included questions on communication preferences, perceived importance of communication skills, and current levels of competence. The interviews aimed to gather deeper insights into individual

experiences and perceptions regarding professional communication. Randomly selected three hundred undergraduates representing all subject disciplines across four universities in Sri Lanka were asked to complete the online survey on their perspectives about learning professional communication in their second year in 2023.

Results

The survey results indicated that a significant majority of undergraduates (85%) recognized the importance of professional communication skills in their future careers. Many students expressed that effective communication is essential for collaboration, networking, and building professional relationships. However, only 45% felt confident in their current communication abilities. This gap highlights a critical area for intervention in educational programs.

When asked about barriers to effective communication, students identified several factors such as Language Proficiency, Cultural Factors and Lack of Practical Experience.

Many (77%) students reported that their proficiency in English, the language of business in Sri Lanka, was a significant barrier. While most undergraduates are taught in English, they often struggle with fluency and vocabulary in professional contexts. Sri Lankan students also mentioned cultural influences that affect communication styles. The preference for indirect communication in some cultural contexts can hinder assertiveness and clarity in professional settings. However, a common concern among students was the lack of opportunities to practice communication skills in real-world settings. Many felt that classroom learning was insufficient, and that practical experience was vital for skill development.

In addition to the above, the undergraduates expressed various preferences for enhancing their communication skills such as participating in Workshops and Seminars, Role-Playing and Simulations and getting some Peer Feedback. The majority (n=282) favored interactive workshops and seminars led by industry professionals. They believed that learning from experienced communicators would provide valuable insights and tips.

Students (n=188) also showed interest in role-playing exercises and simulations, which they felt could help them practice communication in a safe environment. This hands-on approach was seen as a way to build confidence. Many students (n=211) emphasized the importance of peer feedback

in improving communication skills. They valued constructive criticism from classmates and believed it could help them identify areas for improvement.

The research revealed that the majority of the students (n=263) hold universities accountable for providing adequate training in communication skills. While most universities offer communication courses, students expressed a desire for more practical, experiential learning opportunities. They suggested that universities could enhance their curricula by integrating communication skills into all courses, offering internship programs and creating networking opportunities, Offering Internship Programs and Creating Networking Opportunities.

Students (77%) recommended that communication skills be a part of all subjects, not just dedicated courses. This integration would help them understand the importance of communication within their specific fields. Many undergraduates (81%) believed that internships could provide essential real-world experience. They advocated for university partnerships with businesses to facilitate internships that focus on communication skills. Students (92%) expressed a desire for more networking events with industry professionals. They believed that these events would not only help them practice their skills but also provide valuable contacts for future employment.

The study also explored the role of technology in enhancing communication skills. With the rise of digital communication platforms, students recognized the need to adapt to new forms of communication. They expressed a strong interest in using technology to improve their skills through Online Courses and Webinars and Social Media for Professional Networking.

Some undergraduates (48%) indicated a preference for online learning platforms that offer courses focused on professional communication. They appreciated the flexibility and accessibility of online resources. A few students (16%) acknowledged the importance of platforms like LinkedIn for professional networking and communication. They expressed the need for guidance on how to effectively use these platforms to enhance their professional presence.

Conclusion

The perspectives of Sri Lankan undergraduates on enhancing professional communication skills reveal a complex interplay of factors, including cultural influences, educational gaps, and technological advancements. While students recognize the importance of these skills, they also

identify significant barriers to effective communication. To bridge this gap, universities must take proactive steps to enhance their communication training programs. By integrating communication skills into all aspects of education, offering practical experiences, and leveraging technology, universities can equip students with the necessary tools to succeed in the professional world.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are proposed:

1. **Curriculum Development:** Universities should revise their curricula to include communication skills training across all disciplines, ensuring that students understand the relevance of these skills in their specific fields.
2. **Practical Training:** Institutions should prioritize practical training through workshops, role-playing, and internships to give students hands-on experience in professional communication.
3. **Industry Collaboration:** Universities should collaborate with industries to create networking opportunities and mentorship programs that connect students with professionals in their fields.
4. **Leveraging Technology:** Educational institutions should utilize technology to provide online resources and courses that focus on enhancing communication skills, making them accessible to all students.
5. **Feedback Mechanisms:** Establishing peer feedback sessions can provide students with constructive criticism and help them identify areas for improvement in their communication skills.

By implementing these recommendations, Sri Lankan universities can play a vital role in preparing their students for the challenges of the professional world, ensuring that they are equipped with the necessary communication skills to excel in their careers.

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