

## SELF-PERCEIVED COMMUNICATION COMPETENCE OF ECONOMICS STUDENTS IN BUSINESS ENGLISH

### ABSTRACT

*The purpose of this research is to investigate self-perceived communication competence (SPCC) of Economics students in Business English. We conducted a longitudinal study starting with the first year students and repeated with the same sample of students during their second and third year of study. The results of the study indicated that differences in SPCC between the years do exist. The SPCC gradually improved between the first, the second and the third year.*

**Keywords:** *communication competence, self-perception, Business English*

### INTRODUCTION

For most people communication is simply talk. It is a natural event. The field of communication focuses on how people use messages to generate meanings within and across various contexts, cultures, channels, and media.

When we communicate we transmit (by speech, signals, writing, or behaviour) information (thoughts and emotions) so that it is satisfactorily received and understood. Human beings do not exchange data—we understand information. Communication researchers refer to the process as “sharing meaning” and prefer to define communication as “the management of messages for the purpose of creating meaning.” (Neuliep, 2000: 86)

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Communication is strategic in as much as it is goal-driven. Craig (1999:272) writes, "it would be pointless not to assume that discourse is in some sense and to some degree intentionally directed toward goals". This perspective is shared by many prominent communication researchers (Berger, 1995; Canary and Cody, 2000; Kellermann, 1992; Roloff, Soule and Carey, 2001).

But the question is how do we know if communication is competent? Initially, Spitzberg (1988:68) defined communication competence as "the ability to interact well with others". He explains, "the term 'well' refers to accuracy, clarity, comprehensibility, coherence, expertise, effectiveness and appropriateness". A much more complete operationalization is provided by Phillips (2000) when he suggests that communication competence is best understood as "a situational ability to set realistic and appropriate goals and to maximize their achievement by using knowledge of self, other, context, and communication theory to generate adaptive communication performances." Communicative competence is measured by determining if, and to what degree, the goals of interaction are achieved. As stated earlier, the function of communication is to maximize the achievement of "shared meaning."

Canary and Cody (2000) provide six criteria for assessing competence which include, but are not limited to, perceived appropriateness and effectiveness.

The criteria include:

1. Adaptability (the ability to change behaviours and goals to meet the needs of interaction)
2. Conversational Involvement (behavioural and cognitive activity, cognitive involvement demonstrated through interaction behaviours, assessed according to responsiveness, perceptiveness, attentiveness)
3. Conversational Management (how communicators regulate their interactions, adaptation and control of social situations, who controls the interaction ebb and flow and how smoothly the interaction proceeds, how topics proceed and change)
4. Empathy (the ability to demonstrate understanding and share emotional reactions to the situation, need not lead to "helping" the other persons cognitive understanding; parallel emotions)
5. Effectiveness (achieving the objectives of the conversation, achieving personal goals, a fundamental criteria for determining competence)
6. Appropriateness (upholding the expectations for a given situation, fundamental criteria for determining competence).

According to Canary and Cody (2000) communication competence is the ability to send messages which promote attainment of goals while maintaining social acceptability. Competent communicators attempt to align themselves with each other's goals and methods to produce a smooth, productive, and often enjoyable dialogue. The aim of our research is to investigate the self-perceived communication competence of Economics students in Business English during the first, the second and the third year of their studies.

## **METHODS**

A longitudinal study was carried out on a total of 107 subjects (58 females and 39 males), students majoring in tourism, marketing, informatics and finance at the Faculty of Economics and Tourism in Pula.

We started the research with a sample of 173 students, who were attending the first year of Faculty, but gradually, during the years, the number of students diminished and 107 students enrolled in the third year of studying. Participation was voluntary and took place during regular class time.

Instruments were completed with no personal identification (except sex and code) to insure anonymity and increase the probability of honest responses.

The measure was a self-report scale that was translated from English to Croatian and back-translated to insure accuracy.

### **Measures**

The measure of communication competence employed was the Self-perceived communication competence scale (McCroskey, J.C. and McCroskey, L.L., 1988b). The SPCC consists of 12 items. Twelve speaking situations, ranging from talking to a friend to presenting information to a large group of people, were listed. The items reflect four communication contexts (public speaking, talking in large meetings, talking in small groups, and talking in dyads) and three types of receivers (strangers, acquaintances, and friends). In earlier studies, internal (alpha) reliability estimates of .92 (McCroskey, J.C. and McCroskey, L.L. 1988b) and .93 (McCroskey and Richmond, 1990) have been observed. Subjects were asked to rate their perceived communication competence in each situation on a scale to 100, with 0 being completely incompetent and 100 being competent. Scores above 85 indicate high SPCC; scores below 59 indicate low SPCC.

The reliability of the scale in this investigation is .86.

### **Data analysis**

The results from the questionnaires were processed using SPSS for Windows (Statistical Package for Social Sciences). The difference between communication competences among the years was investigated by paired t-tests.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Communicative competence is how well people interact with others (Spitzberg and Cupach, 1984; Hargie, Dickson, D., Boohan, M. and Huges, K., 1998; Rubin, 1991). There are appropriate behaviours that are more effective in certain situations. Competence has to do with knowing these behaviours, when to use them, and actually using them.

During the Business English lessons students learn to apply communication skills of listening, perception, language usage, nonverbal communication, and conflict resolution. Emphasis is placed on effective communication and methods for overcoming barriers to communication (especially during presentation, meetings and negotiations).

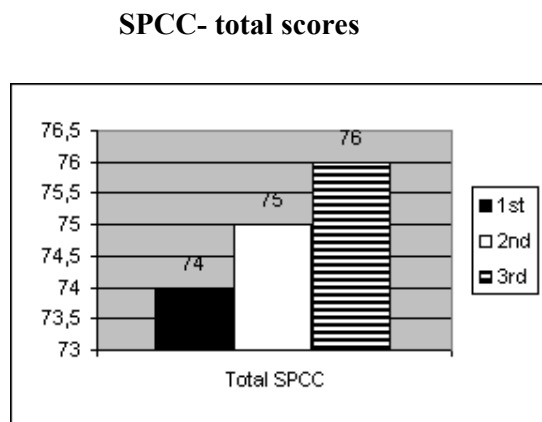
Table 1.

**Mean scores by years**

Measures	Range	1st	2nd	3rd
Public	0 - 100	49	55	67
Meeting	0 - 100	45	50	57
Group	0 - 100	54	60	69
Dyad	0 - 100	61	66	71
Stranger	0 - 100	72	71	73
Acquaintance	0 - 100	67	69	70
Friend	0 - 100	83	85	85
Total SPCC	0 - 100	74	75	76

An examination of the data reported in Table 1 indicates large differences in mean scores among the years studied.

Graph 1.



Norms for SPCC scores  
 > 85 High SPCC; < 59 Low SPCC

With regard to the total SPCC scores we may conclude that our students believe that their communicational competence is medium. In the third year the SPCC is higher than it was in the first and second. The third year students reported the higher communicational competence while the first year students reported the lowest. (Graph 1).

We wanted to investigate the difference in communication competence among the years and that's why we used paired t-tests. A paired samples t-test indicated that there is a statistically significant difference between the years.

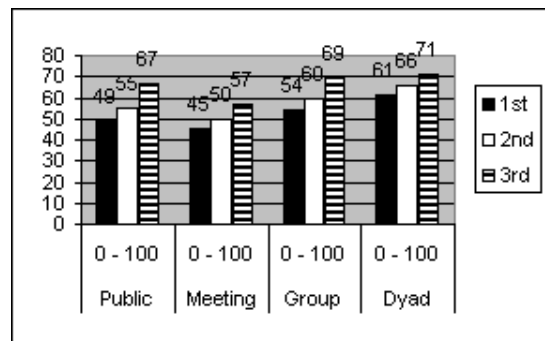
Second year students SPCC was significantly higher than the first year students,  $t(106) = 5,815$ ;  $p < .001$ .

Third year students SPCC was significantly higher than the second year students,  $t(106) = 10,225$ ;  $p < .001$ .

Third year students was significantly higher than the first year students,  $t(106) = 15,609$ ;  $p < .001$ .

Graph 2.

**SPCC- four communicational contexts**



Norms for SPCC scores  
 > 85 High SPCC; < 59 Low SPCC

From the graph no. 2 we can see that nowadays, the third year students believe they are more competent to communicate in all four communicational contexts in comparison to two and three years ago.

For all students talking in large meetings drew the least self-perceived communication competence while talking in a dyad the most.

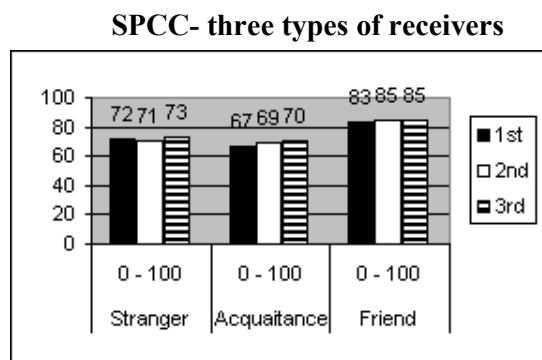
First year students reported low SPCC for public talking, talking in a meeting and group talking and medium SPCC in talking in a dyad. Only the first year students reported low SPCC for group talking. The primary goal of small group communication is to share meaning which leads to effective decision-making and problem-solving. Sorensen (1981) coined the term group hate to describe how many people hate working in groups. She showed a direct relationship between group hate and communication competence.

Most people are not trained in group work. When people lack the training and skills to function competently, people tend to avoid group membership. We can see that after learning to apply communicational skills our students, already in the second year, reported medium SPCC for group talking.

Second year students believe that they are not competent in talking in large meetings and public speaking but they believe that they may communicate in a group and talking in a dyad.

Third year students reported medium SPCC for all communicational situations except for talking in meetings where they reported low SPCC. A survey by Robert Half International found that executives spend approximately twenty- one weeks a year in meetings and six of those weeks worth of meetings were considered a total waste of time (Alexander, 1989). We suppose that our students may also agree with the results of the above mentioned survey.

Graph 3.



Norms for SPCC scores  
> 85 High SPCC; < 59 Low SPCC

According to the results presented in the graph no. 3, nowadays our students believe that they are more competent to communicate than two and three years ago.

All students reported a generally medium SPCC for talking to strangers and acquaintance but high SPCC for talking to friends.

It is interesting that our students reported higher SPCC for talking to strangers than acquaintances. The previous research (McCroskey and Richmond, 1990; Barracough, Christophel and McCroskey, 1998) reported different results. They reported low SPCC for talking to strangers. We assume that our students reported rather high SPCC for talking to strangers because of frequent contact with them. Lot of tourists, visitors and businessmen come to Istria (especially during summer) so they have opportunities to talk to them. The majority of students work during the summer as waitress, tourist guides, tourist animators and in that way they may practice their English.

## CONCLUSIONS

An examination of the data reported in the graphs indicates large differences in mean scores among the years studied.

According to the norms from the SPCC scores our students believe that their communicational competence is medium. They reported the higher communicational competence for talking with friends and lower for talking in meetings. When one speaks a language that is not their first language, it is likely they will see her/himself as less competent as a communicator.

Their SPCC gradually improved, the lowest was in the first year and the highest in the third.

However, the study has some limitations. SPCC is a self-assessment of competence. The danger of self assessments is that the relationship between actual competence and self perceived competence is dubious. Some people have very accurate perceptions of themselves. Others do not. Just as some people believe they are better at communication than they actually are, some believe they are worse. People who suffer from high levels of communication anxiety tend to report that they are poor communicators. Some are; just as many actually are not. People's abilities to communicate effectively vary a great deal, and sometimes the same person is more competent to communicate in one situation than in another.

Many people are highly critical of their own public speaking performances. They may believe that the speech they just gave was poor, they stuttered, stammered, shook, and knocked their knees together. However, to an audience, all of their “mistakes” seemed rather natural and may have gone unnoticed by everyone except the speaker.

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## **SAMOPROCJENA KOMUNIKACIJSKE KOMPETENCIJE STUDENATA EKONOMIJE PRI UPOTREBI POSLOVNOG ENGLESKOG JEZIKA**

### **SAŽETAK**

*U ovom istraživanju željeli smo istražiti kolika je samoprocjena komunikacijske kompetencije studenata ekonomije pri upotrebi poslovnog engleskog jezika. Proveli smo linearno istraživanje sa studentima prve godine ekonomije koje smo ponovili s istim uzorkom tijekom druge i treće godine. Rezultati istraživanja pokazali su da postoje razlike u samoprocjeni komunikacijske kompetencije. Samoprocjena komunikacijske kompetencije postepeno se povećala kroz godine.*

**Ključne riječi:** *komunikacijska kompetencija, samoprocjena, poslovni engleski jezik*