

A Discourse Analysis of Student Perceptions of Their Communication Competence

Eugenie P. Almeida

Discourse regarding student perceptions of their communication competence was collected from students in geographically diverse university systems in the U.S. These student discourses were analyzed for patterns that revealed shared topics, ideas, and values regarding communication competence in a variety of situations. Three characteristics of student understanding of communication competence emerged from the discourse analysis: (1) a conception of communication competence as quality of performance, (2) conceptions of communication competence that vary from the purely physical to the purely intellectual, and (3) a conception of communication competence as a form of sociality. Discourse analysis, an interpretative methodology in the tradition of constructivism and ethnography, is a demonstrably useful approach to the study of communication competence.

Keywords: communication competence; discourse analysis; performance

This paper reports a study of lay understandings of communication competence, specifically, the understandings of students enrolled in introductory level courses in communication. Understanding the notions that students bring to communication classes about what constitutes communication competence has potential for enhancing instructional practice. To that end, a large body of student discourse was collected and analyzed using a discourse analytical methodology. The adoption of a discourse analytic approach to the study of communication competence places this

Eugenie P. Almeida (PhD, 1991, University of Buffalo) is assistant professor in the Department of Performing and Fine Arts at Fayetteville State University, North Carolina, 28301. An earlier version of this paper was presented at the 2002 Southern Speech Communication Association Conference, Winston-Salem, NC. Eugenie Almeida can be contacted at epalmeida@apcnet.com

study in the tradition of constructivism (Delia, O'Keefe, & O'Keefe, 1982) and the ethnography of speaking (Hymes, 1972).

Communication Competence: Knowledge or Performance?

The term "communication competence" originated from the sociolinguistic work of Hymes (1972) who considered it "to be dependent on two things: (tacit) knowledge and (ability for) use" (p. 282). Wiemann and Backlund (1980) later argued for an interpretation of Hymes that incorporated both cognition and behavior into the study of communication competence. From Wiemann and Backlund's perspective, the study of cognition alone ignores the performative aspects of competence, which includes ability or skill. Wiemann and Backlund's perspective was echoed within cognitive psychology by Zimmerman and Whitehurst (1979), who also argued for the incorporation of the study of function (behavior) along with the study of structure (cognition). At this period of time, the study of linguistic competence was dominated by structuralists such as Chomsky and Piaget, whose theories of language ignored the performative aspects which Hymes, Wieman and Backlund, and other analysts of communication competence, wished to study. In his comparison of foci in structural and functional linguistics, Hymes (1972) concluded that as long as "the goal of explanation in linguistics is set as universal properties of the human mind" (p. 77), the relevance of a functional perspective is rejected including notions of "stylistic or social functions," "functional (adaptive) differentiation of languages, varieties, styles," and "speech community as matrix of code-repertoires, or speech styles" (p. 79). In an article critiquing theories of communication competence, McCroskey (1982) labeled the definitions of communication competence posited by Wiemann and Backlund (1980) and other scholars as "behaviorist" and claimed that their theories diminished the significance of the cognitive domain, especially the affective domain. McCroskey elided mention of the debate between functionalists and structuralists within linguistic theory, although this debate was central to Wiemann and Backlund's theorization and continues to inform theoretical research on communication competence.

Most current competence research tends to focus on the behavioral components of communication competence. According to Duran and Spitzberg (1995), "Most research in the area of communication competence has focused on the psycho-motor and, to a lesser extent, the affective domain (e.g., communication apprehension, willingness to communicate)" (p. 259). Coker and Burgoon (1987), Milhouse (1993), and Spitzberg and Cupach (1984, 1989) provide extensive summaries of research on behaviors associated with communication competence. Most of these studies rely upon objective tests of competence, for example surveys and experiments that focus on communication competence as a behavior but ignore the cognitive dimensions of competence.

In contrast to these behavioral studies are research efforts within constructivism and the ethnography of communication which approach the study of communication competence from a structural/functional perspective (e.g., Delia et al., 1982).

Free-response data collection techniques are preferred methodologies for constructivists as they “facilitate the preservation of persons’ spontaneous neutral attitude orientations by allowing them to respond in their own terms to realistic tasks” (Delia et al., 1982, p. 173). Within the ethnography of communication, Katriel and Phillipsen (1990) used Hymes’ (1972) sociolinguistic categories to develop the notion of culturally patterned conceptions of communication competence.

Discourse Analytic Methodology

The traditions of constructivism (e.g., Fowler, Hodge, Kress, & Trew, 1979; Potter, 1996; Schiffrin, 1994) and ethnography of communication have shaped the field of discourse analysis. Like ethnographers of communication (e.g., Katriel & Phillipsen, 1990), discourse analysts work with naturally occurring in situ discourse rather than with the artificially constructed communication induced in experiments and surveys. In the approach to discourse analysis adopted for this study, discourse analysis examines three aspects of discourse highlighted by Van Dijk (1997): (1) language use, (2) the communication of beliefs or cognitions, and (3) social interaction. A basic method is to identify characteristic thematic structures, repetitive patterns of phrasing and clustering of concepts in order to discover “underlying levels of form, meaning and action” (p. 6).

Methods

Participants and Procedures

Participants were 931 undergraduate students—males and females in equal proportion, primarily freshmen and sophomores—taking communication courses for the first time. Students were enrolled in introductory classes in communication at nine (four MA level graduate programs, four BA programs, one community college) universities within the Northeastern, Midwestern and Southern United States during the 1990s. On the first day of class, each student was given the following instructions:

I am interested in what you hope to learn from the course. Write an essay in which you describe your expectations of the course. You will not be graded, and all essays will be considered confidential. I will read your essays to get information about what you hope the course will be like, and, depending on what you write, I may modify some aspects of the course syllabus.

Students were then given 10–15 minutes to write their essays and were also told that they would receive class participation points for their essay. With this incentive, every student wrote a one- to three-page essay. Permission to use these essays was given by review boards at each of the universities for the purposes of this research project. All student essays discussed in this paper have been coded to protect student confidentiality. Discourse analysis can assume a variety of forms, ranging from highly detailed lexical analyses to more global content analyses (Wetherell, Taylor, & Yates, 2001). In the present study, each student essay was treated as a single unit and

coded according to its dominant conceptions of communication competence. In that sense, this study was inspired by the work of Katriel and Phillipsen (1990). As in that previous research, student discourse data in the present study became a way of accessing lay understandings of what constitutes communication competence.

Discourse Analytic Findings

Although informed by previous studies of communication competence, the present study did not utilize any a priori discourse analytic scheme. Rather, categories of responses emerged during the analysis using the constant comparative method of data processing originally described by Glaser and Strauss (1967) and later refined by Lincoln and Guba (1985). According to Lincoln and Guba, data are "the constructions offered by or in the sources" and "data analysis leads to a reconstruction of those constructions" (p. 332). Each essay could only be counted once in any given category, although essays could be counted in multiple categories. Intercoder reliability agreement was not employed in the study, as this requirement "does not apply in qualitative content coding" (Lindlof, 1995, p. 221).

Even though they were given a rather open-ended prompt, practically all of the students answered in similar ways. Three dominant themes of student understanding of communication competence emerged from the discourse analysis:

1. Communication competence was often construed as quality of performance.
2. Conceptions of communication competence varied from the purely physical to the purely intellectual.
3. Communication competence was often conceived as a form of sociality.

Dimension 1: Communication Competence as Performance

Many student evaluations of their communication competence focused on Hymes' (1972) notion of performance, that is, "whether (and to what degree) something is in fact done, actually performed, and what its doing entails" (p. 281). Often, these assessments were positive, as in the following examples.

- (a) As a communicator I feel that my personal communication skills are strong. I have no problems voicing my opinion on subjects that I feel strong and confident about.
- (b) I have good communication skills ... I can walk up to someone and just start talking ... I like to work in groups so everyone can say what's on their minds and I know where they stand.

These students regarded their competence as a matter of "performing well," often with positive outcomes. Others, in contrast, discussed their competence in terms of deficiencies.

- (c) Somehow I can never find the words when I am talking to someone. Especially if the topic is highly important. And I'm definitely not good with groups of people.

- (d) Communicating verbally has always been a problem for me. I never much liked talking in front of a small group of people, especially people my age or younger. It always made me feel uncomfortable. I seem to have a crack in my voice.

Student discourse formed a continuum along this evaluative dimension, but the tendency for them to judge their performance was prevalent. Students frequently use the term "skill" to evaluate their communication competence. They also use the terms "ability," "able to," "confidence," and "comfort," as in "I would like to learn to feel comfortable while speaking" or "I would like to have more self confidence and be able to communicate."

Dimension 2: Communication Competence as Physical/Intellectual

Statements that describe the student's communication competence in physical terms used expressions and phrases that referred to the student's physical person, such as body, clothes, movements, and appearance.

- (e) Communication abilities that I would like to improve are speaking in front of an audience and not being nervous or fidgety ... All the questions go into my head like "Do they think my clothes are ugly or are they staring at a certain part of me?"

- (f) ... when I am put into a situation where I do not know anyone or when I am in a room filled with older adults I get very quiet. I have trouble getting my words out and I get very fidgety ... Often I look down and play with my hands or mess with the clothes I am wearing (anything so I do not have to look directly into the person's eyes).

What distinguishes some of these descriptions is the fear of being regarded as an unattractive person, as well as the fear of intruding on the audience in some unseemly, physical fashion. Contrasting with these physical descriptions of self as communicator are descriptions of communication as an intellectual endeavor.

- (g) I would like to improve my ability (or inability) to constrain myself to the original subject I began speaking about. I have a tendency to allow myself to be overcome by thought association bandits that attempt to make off with my original line of thinking leaving me with some other idea that the original idea reminded me of. I can go off on tangents indefinitely.

- (h) Some of the communication skills that I would like to attain by the end of this class would be firstly to make others understand my point of view of things in life in general, especially because I am a foreign student and haven't been in the United States for too long.

The student in excerpt (g), above, was interested in intellectual discipline and organization, whereas student (h) was interested in self-expression. Other topics discussed by students reflecting competence conceived as an intellectual endeavor included increasing persuasiveness, becoming more assertive, and learning to respond appropriately in different communication situations.

Dimension 3: Communication Competence as Sociality

Some student expressions of communication competence as social bonding were optimistic, hopeful, or in other ways positively predisposed towards interaction with their fellow students or with others.

- (i) I am basically an outgoing person and have no trouble meeting people. I would like to learn to “shoot the shit” so to speak, in order to keep the conversation going.
- (j) ...when it comes to being a good listener or when one needs my view or suggestions on a matter, I am all ears and open-minded. I am very sympathetic to one's needs, so I make them feel comfortable when we are conversing with each other.

In contrast to those positive self-assessments, other statements manifesting a concept of competence as sociality were pessimistic or negative regarding social interactions.

- (k) I am shy and I really have no clue how to start or continue a conversation. I would like to overcome this.
- (l) Approaching new people my age or age group has always made me a little nervous. Depending on the people and/or situation, I can feel intimidated.
- (m) I am somewhat of an introvert when it comes to group discussions or simply when having to mingle with others. My fears are receiving rejectful comments or signs, body language, that the audience is not acknowledging my input in the conversation.

Many students wrote that they hoped that the course would “improve their social life” by helping them “learn how to talk to their peers,” “speak up in a group,” or “start a conversation with a stranger.” Other students expressed fear and anxiety that they might be expected to converse with their fellow students or say much about themselves to the group. Taken as a whole, responses in the sociality mode were arrayed along a dimension whereby communication competence was regarded as spanning a continuum of interpersonal bonding to interpersonal alienation.

Discussion

Student conceptions of communication competence appear to be based on a mixture of perspectives aligned with varying theoretic positions. On the one hand, communication competence is viewed very much as a performance (Dimension 1). Abstract knowledge that might be rendered explicit in theories, concepts, and rules does not appear in student evaluations of themselves. On the other hand, physical performance is not equivalent to behavior in their view. Students who describe communication competence in physical/intellectual (Dimension 2) terms might be said to view communication as a trait, like physical attractiveness or mathematical aptitude. The existing research literature on this subject rarely acknowledges this tendency to describe communication competence in terms of physical or intellectual traits. The consequence of such a physical or intellectual trait-like view of competence might be that students holding it are unlikely to view their own competence as amenable to modification. They might harbor especially low expectations regarding the impact of

communication skills training. The sociality dimension—competence construed as bondedness or alienation (Dimension 3)—has been discussed primarily by scholars analyzing the communication perceptions of foreign-born students, such as in the work of McDermott (1992). Martin and Hammer's (1989) research distinguishes a variety of communicative behaviors that indicate desires for social bonding, such as being friendly, making the other comfortable, showing interest, and being responsive. The participants in the present study were primarily native-U.S. students, however. Apparently, this notion of competence as sociality is not limited to international sojourners.

Conclusions

This analysis of student discourse illustrates how student conceptualizations of communication competence are both similar to, and different from, scholarly conceptions (e.g., Hymes, 1972; McCroskey, 1982; Spitzberg & Cupach, 1984; Wiemann & Backlund, 1980). Students tend to see communication competence as a performance that they evaluate in positive and negative terms. Some students characterize competence as a primarily physical activity, whereas other students characterize competence as a primarily intellectual activity. Communication competence is also strongly associated with social bondedness or alienation.

Three general heuristic implications arise from this study. First, more research should be done on discourses about communication competence, because these can be a rich source of information about subjects' feelings, concepts, beliefs, and judgments. Second, the self-consciousness of students was explicit in their discourse about communication competence. This self-consciousness on the part of most students should be taken into account by communication educators who have a responsibility to learn how their students are conceptualizing their communication. Third, the notion of communication as primarily a function of physical or intellectual traits was a striking aspect of some student discourses. Trait conceptions of competence pose a threat to communication educators involved in skills courses, because students' perceptions of especially their physical traits may prevent them from being influenced by their instructor's evaluation of their communication abilities and potentials.

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