

Communication competence of ethnic Khmer students in VietNam: an evaluation and analysis

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Abstract: Communication competency of students is the ability to send messages to receivers which promote the attainment of goals establishing relationships in various contexts. The descriptive study aimed to evaluate and analyze communication competency of Khmer students. A total of 213 minority Khmer students from first to third year at Travinh University in Vietnam participated in this study. The results reveal that communication competencies of Khmer students are from adequate to good; there are significant differences in communication competency clusters of attentiveness, composure, coordination and expressiveness; and internal factors are positive predictors of communication competency of Khmer students. Therefore, it is essential for Khmer students to improve their communication competency in intercultural adaptation at universities.

Keywords: Communication competency, Khmer students, attentiveness, composure, coordination and expressiveness.

Introduction

Communication is essential in life and the process where in knowledge, ideas, information, attitudes, and feelings of people are transmitted (Flores, 1998). According to Pearce and Pearce (2000) communication is a primary social process of co-creating, maintaining and transforming social realities. Communication is a formative process, a mean to achieve certain goals; however, if people do not used with care, the goals may not achieve or break their relationship. Spitzberg (1988) defined communication competence as “the ability to interact well with others” (p.68) which refers to one person communicates with others with “accuracy, clarity, comprehensibility, coherence, expertise, effectiveness and appropriateness” (p.68). Thus, communicative competence is measured by the goals of interaction achieved. Canary and Cody (2000) claim that communicative competence is the ability to send messages which promote attainment of goals while maintaining social acceptability

For students, communication skills and knowledge are seemed to consider as obligatory components of modern professionalism; and thus, as an essential component of education at university. Researching communicative competence of students in higher education, Lukyanova, Daneykin & Daneikina (2015) defined communication competence as the ability of spectilalists to solve a certain class of professional tasks. The communicative component

of university is an important mean of formation of professionalism; it is a means to transform our social realities. Communicative competence manifests itself in an integrative combination of two components the ability to organize social and communicative functional space of management and the ability to identify and take into account established corporate features of the process of social communication in the activities (Lukyanova, Daneykin & Daneikina, 2015). In short, communicative competence can refer to the ability of speker needs to know to communicate effectively. Then, Lasala (2014) report that communication play an vital important in all areas of students' life which is used to persuade, influence relationships, inform and share and uncover information in all relationships.

Thus, all universities are aiming to enhance students' communicative competence, can use both training programs and specialized teaching methods. To foster the development of communicative qualities in individuals, methods should be employed that enable students to reflect on their behavior, understand the nuances of their motives, and recognize their attitudes.

In terms of cultural ethnicity, there are many researchers explain and predict the outcomes of in a term of intercultural communication using social network analysis. Chi & Suthers (2015) show that intercultural communication competence is distributed throughout members of a community

rather than being strictly an individual attribute. This means that a specific acculturation context plays an important role in one else's intercultural communication competence. elçuk and Fatih (2016) defined intercultural communication competence as the ability to understand and navigate the attitudes and behaviors of individuals from unfamiliar cultures. Intercultural communication competence focuses on communication process and perception role of communication of individuals. Solving of messages depends on cultural values of individuals who take the messages. However, when individuals who communicate in unfamiliar cultural environment do not know others' communication behavior, they give meaning others' attitude and behavior according to their cultural norms.

Context of the study

Vietnam is a multi-ethnic country with 54 official ethnic groups, each with its own language, lifestyle, and cultural heritage. Khmer people immigrated into Vietnam from at the end of 6th century and become an ethnic minority group in Vietnam. Khmer people have a population of about 1,260,640, which is roughly 1.4 % of the Vietnamese population (Vietnamese Population and Housing Census, 2009). Most ethnic Khmers live in the Mekong River Delta of Southern Vietnam. According to a survey conducted in rural areas of Vietnam (Canada Community College Project, 2003), most of Khmer people have more children than ethnic Vietnamese, own little tillable land, and suffer from unemployment. They are bilingual in their ethnic languages and Vietnamese. Given their relatively obscure status in university settings, Nguyen (2015) revealed that a number of freshmen Khmer students have struggled personally to adjust to university life. In addition, Khmer students have had having difficulties in expressing their thoughts and ideas in academic activities (Bui, 2016; Pham, 2017) and Khmer student outcomes are often lower than those of other students (Nguyen, 2015; Pham, 2015a). The academic background of minority students is poor and is related to socioeconomic status (Giacchino-Baker, 2007).

Methodology

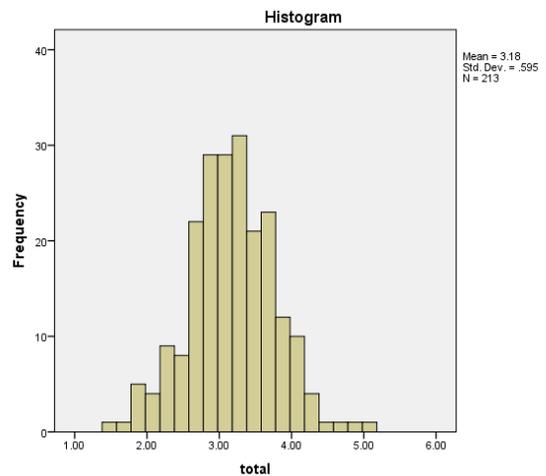
This descriptive study was used to evaluate and analyze Khmer communication competence in Vietnam. This study was conducted Tra vinh universities at Mekong delta of Vietnam. A total of 213 randomly selected Khmer students from first to third year participated in the study.

There are two types of instruments used in this study. One is the instrument that asked for the profile of the Khmer students while the second is a Likert-Type which asked for communication competency employed by Khmer students. Researchers used the conversational Skills Rating Scale (CSRS) (Spitzberg & Adams, 2007) in this study. CSRS consists of 25 behavioral items written are relatively microscopic levels, which comprise four skills clusters: Attentiveness, previously referred to as altercentrism (i.e., a tendency to be concerned with, interested in, and attentive to, a conversational partner), composure (i.e., avoidance of anxiety cues, and an assertive or confident manner), expressiveness (i.e., gestural and facial animation, topical verbosity, etc.), and coordination, previously often referred to an interaction management (i.e., coordinated entrance and exit from conversations, nondisruptive flow of conversational turns, topical innovation, etc.).

Mean, standard deviation, Pearson's, multilevel model was used to assessing communication competence and identify factors affecting the communication competency of Khmer students.

Results and discussion

Communication competence of Khmer students



Communication competence grouped four skills clusters: attentiveness, composure, expressiveness and coordination. As showed in the table 1, the communication competences of Khmer students are from adequate to good ($3.0 \leq \text{Mean} \leq 3.39$). The findings are consistent with Pham (2015). A One-ANOVA analysis showed that significant differences among these communication competences of Khmer students, $F = 33.815$, $p < 0.001$ in which Four communication competences represented by 25

behavioral items written at relatively microscopic levels as seen in the table 1.

Table 1. Communication competence of Khmer students

Group communicative competence	Items of communicative competence	Mean	SD	
Attentiveness M= 3.24 SD= 0.707	Lean toward partner (neither too forward nor too far back)	2.53	1.28	Fair
	Nodding of head response to partner statements	3.82	1.07	good
	Speaking about partner (involvement of partner as a topic of conversation)	3.44	0.96	Adequate
	Speaking about self (neither too much nor too little)	3.15	1.11	Adequate
	Encouragements or agreements (neither too passive nor aggressive)	3.38	1.01	Adequate
	Personal opinion expression (neither too passive nor aggressive)	3.09	1.02	Adequate
	Asking of questions	3.27	1.02	Adequate
Composure M=3.09 SD = 0.707	Speaking fluency	2.74	1.00	Adequate
	Vocal confidence (neither too tense/ nervous nor overly confident sounding)	2.88	1.09	Adequate
	Volume (neither too loud nor too soft)	3.58	0.95	Adequate
	Posture (neither too closed/ formal nor too open/informal)	3.27	0.91	Adequate
	Shaking or nervous twitches (aren't noticeable or distracting)	2.63	1.14	Adequate
	Unmotivated movement (tapping feet, fingers, hair-twirling, etc.)	2.92	1.00	Adequate
	Use of eye contact	3.62	0.98	Adequate
Expressiveness M= 3.39 SD = 0.637	Articulation (clarity of pronunciation and linguistic expression)	3.29	1.00	Adequate
	Vocal variety (neither overly monotone nor dramatic voice)	3.07	1.04	Adequate
	Facial expressiveness (neither blank nor exaggerated)	3.21	0.97	Adequate
	Use of gestures to emphasize what is being said	3.52	1.02	Adequate
	Use of humor and/or stories	3.25	1.16	Adequate
	Smiling and/or laughing	3.78	1.03	Adequate
	Use of eye contact	3.62	0.98	Adequate

Coordination M = 3.0 SD = 0.68	Speaking rate (neither too slow nor too fast)	3.52	0.86	Adequate
	Asking of questions	3.27	1.02	Adequate
	Initiation of new topic	2.73	1.14	Adequate
	Maintenance of topics and follow -up comments	2.84	1.08	Adequate
	Interruption of partner speaking turns	2.62	1.21	Adequate
	Use of time speaking relative to partner	3.25	1.02	Adequate
	Speaking fluency	2.74	1.00	Adequate

Note: 1.00 – 1.99 = Inadequate ; 2.0 – 2.59 = Fair; 2.60 – 3.78 = Adequate, 3.79 – 4,37 = Good; 4.38 – 5.00 = Excellent

Spitzberg (2013) states that attentiveness skills display attention to, interest in, and concern for the others in the situation. This competence of Khmer students in this study counted with the second mean among clusters in which nonverbal processes of listening, displaying empathy of moving their head in vertical arc (i.e., ‘yes’ motion) providing reinforcing feedback indicating comprehension, agreement, or acceptance was used the most frequent.

Expressiveness skills counted with highest mean. This result suggests that Khmer students often express their thoughts, ideas via nonverbal communication such as displaying smiles or laughter in response to humorous stimuli and/ or as positive reinforcement to partner; provide eye contact of brief duration at points of turn relevance as well as use of gestures to emphasize what is being said. Compared with their dominant language-speaking counterparts, minority language speakers are faced with a heavier language burden; while maintaining their own language while the former have to learn only one additional language with no burden of language maintenance (Nguyen & Hamit, 2016). This may lead Khmer students using better nonverbal in communicating with others.

Regarding to composure and coordination skills, using verbal communication and vocal confidence of Khmer students is quite lower than those of nonverbal communication in interacting process with others. They were occasional shake or nervous twitches. Also, they have not display appropriate use of time talking, interruptions, entering a conversation. They still display small number of over-talks or interruptions that are minimally disruptive to partner (mean = 2.62). This finding was consistent with researchers’ observations of the Khmer students.

In term of relationship among four communication skills clusters, there are high relationships among

them. However, in term of sex, research testing by T – Test, no difference found in communicative competency between male and female.

Relationship internal and external factors with communication competency

Table 2. Testing relationship internal and external factors with communication competency

Factor		r	p
internal factors	(AWR) Awareness about the importance of communication in study and career	0.372	.000
	(AA) Active attitude in participating activities in or outside class	0.484	.000
	(VP) Vietnamese proficiency	0.258	.000
ex-ternal factors	(TC) Attending training communicative competency courses	0.176	.010
	(OPE) Opportunities to participate in cultural exchanges in university	0.090	.191
	(CE) Good communicative environment	0.136	.048

As seen in table 2, internal factors have higher relationship than external factors. In the internal factors, awareness and active attitude in communication have positive moderate correlation with communication competency. This is in line with previous finds for students in university who also have positive attitudes towards learning communication skills will have better communication competency or skill (Nguyen, 2014; Svensberg, Brandlistuen, Björnsdotir, Sporrang, 2017). Low correlation between Vietnamese proficiency and communication competency was found, but it is significant.

In external factors, Champoux (2010) stressed that formal training in communication can improve a person effectiveness. Training communication competency and good communicative environment have significant correlation with communication competency, but this relationship is negligible. No correlation found between the opportunities with cultural exchanges and communication competency.

Factors affecting communication competency

The researchers were interested in if Khmer students ’s internal and external factors would predict communication competency. Multiple regression analyses were used to test whether communication competency was affected by these factors. The researchers checked the assumptions of normal error distributions and constant error variances as the primary step. The multicollinearity was also checked to assess the independence of the predictors included in the both models. The tolerance values in the both regression models ranged from .813 to .991, indicating the predictors used in the analyses carried

unique information to explain communication competency (CC). The multiple regression results are represented in the following model.

$$CC = 2.054 + 0.126 AWR^{**} + 0.219 AA^{**} + 0.225 VP^{**} + 0.063 TC$$

The model shows that AWR, AA, and VP positively contributed to communication competency by 0.126, 0.219, 0.225 units, respectively, per unit change in communication competence. But it should be noted that all of these three factors significantly contributed to communication competency (p<0.05). The value of r = 0.562 which means that there is a moderate relationship between the three independent variables (AWR, EA, and VP) and the R2 value is 0.316 which means that a unit change in communication competency is caused by AWR, EA, and VP by 31.6%. Humans are often good at certain competence with clear awareness or great enjoyment. Enjoyment or active attitude is considered to be a positive emotion that forms in conjunction with an experienced activity which motivate one person has achievement (Pekrun, 2006). As mentioned above, there is a significant relationship between TC and communicative competency, however, in this model this variable is not significantly predicting communication competency of students. The model created significantly shows predictors of communication competency. As educators, they should take a look into internal factors in order to encourage student improving their communication competency.

Conclusion

Communication competencies of Khmer students need improvement, especially verbal communication competency. It is true that internal factor plays a vital role in improving communication competency of Khmer students in cross – cultural communication process in university at Mekong data of Vietnam.

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