



Fostering Critical Thinking Skills: The Case for Academic Communication Skills Learning at Women's University in Africa

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Abstract: *The aim of the study is to establish how the Communication Skills course assists undergraduate students at Women's University in Africa (WUA) to enhance critical thinking skills. The current study adopts a qualitative research, approach which is hinged on the interpretivist paradigm. The study uses a single case study research design with a sample of five students who were purposively chosen. The study is framed under the reconstructionist philosophy. The study found that Communication Skills as a course helps to develop students critical thinking skills. These critical thinking skills are developed through covering the four language macro-skills which are speaking, listening, reading and writing. These macro skills are taught to every student who is in their first year and doing the first semester. The study recommends that since critical thinking skills are not obtained at once but are developed over time, it would be prudent for Women's University in Africa to instruct its students in Communication Skills as a course during their tenure at university.*

Keywords: *Communication, Communication skills, Critical thinking, Macro-skills*

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1. Introduction

Communication skills is one of the courses that was made compulsory by the Ministry of Higher and Tertiary Education, Innovation, Science and Technology Development (MHTEISTD) for all first-year students in different fields at tertiary institutions in Zimbabwe (Nyamayedenga, 2021; Mhindu, & Chindedza, 2018). Communication Skills is necessary to students because it may assist them to have critical thinking and communication skills that they will need as they carry on with their studies at all levels at the university and when they get employed in the market (Ihmeideh, Ahmad & Dababneh, 2010). The Women's University in Africa, just like any other University, strives to produce students who have not just achieved academically but are equipped with both soft and critical thinking skills to suit the global market (Kementerian Pengajian Tinggi

Malaysia, 2006; Iksan, Zakaria, Meerah, Osman, Lian, Mahmud, & Krish, 2012). Students who are not good in communication skills may not perform well in interviews and may not qualify for a job where there is stiff competition. Usually, organisations consider candidates who are competent in the four language skills namely reading, speaking, writing and listening. The capability to think critically and communicate effectually and extensively is important at university, at work and in social settings, hence the need for students to do the Communication Skills course. Critical thinking skills is defined by Tuzlukova (2018:40) as “an intellectually disciplined process of actively and skilfully conceptualising, applying, analysing, synthesising, and/or evaluating information. The information may be gathered from observations, experience, reflection, reasoning, communication, to guide one's action and beliefs.” This means if students have critical thinking skills, they have the ability to use knowledge, facts and

data and communicate effectively to solve problems. They will have the ability to develop a well thought out solution within a reasonable time frame. Communication Skills is therefore a prerequisite course that all university students should go through, to produce critical thinkers who are holders of the future of a country. It is the researcher's argument that academic achievement that does not constitute critical thinking may not be applied in work and social settings. The research is guided by the following research question:

How do the four macro skills (reading, speaking, listening and writing) of language taught in the Communication Skills course foster critical thinking skills to undergraduate students at Women's University in Africa?

2. Literature Review

Seiler & Beall, (2005), Fatimayin, (2018) define communication as the exchange of meaning between people through symbolic relations. Idris (2010) defines communication as a nonverbal skill that allows students to respond, confer thoughts verbally and in written form. It allows students to make oral presentations during lectures and negotiate meaning. Communication therefore can be viewed as an exercise where two or more interlocutors exchange feelings, knowledge, and information using verbal or nonverbal cues. Communication begins when a message or information is moved from the source to the recipient through a medium or channel. The recipient responds and followed by the receiver making sense of the information and giving feedback. Centred on the above definitions, for communication to take place there has to be the following elements namely, source, channel, recipient and feedback. When all these elements come into play during the communication process, knowledge is developed (Kapur, 2020; Harlak, Gemalmaz, Gurel, Dereboy, & Ertekin, 2008). For lecturers to develop their students' critical thinking skills they should motivate their students by lecturing according to their capacity and competence (Bee, 2012). Ehindero & Ajibade, (2000) specifies that effective lecturers should have good communication skills to deliver effective lessons. Morreale, Osborn and Pearson (2000) support the above scholar and states that lecturers who do not have effective communication skills may cause students to perform badly in their courses. Communication skills purpose is to equip students with cognitive and practical skills that may help students to basically cope with all types of situations (Khan, Khan, Zia-Ul-Islam, & Khan 2017).

As alluded to before, Communication Skills course is hinged on the four macro-skills, which are Listening, Speaking, Reading and Writing. Reading and listening are known as receptive skills while writing and speaking are productive (Surkamp, Yearwood, 2018; Hossain, 2015; Golkova, & Hubackova, 2014). At university

level, students usually receive information through listening and reading. The speaking skill is used to produce group or class presentations while they produce academic essays through writing. In the lecture room, students should listen to create new knowledge from what the lecturers will be saying. This assists students to make meaning of what the lecturers will be sharing. Thus, critical thinking starts with listening to the concepts shared during speaking. So, students will listen to comprehend and evaluate what is said. After listening comes the reading skill. Reading assists students to obtain facts and information in academic settings. Although some scholars argue that reading comes before listening, they are both important as students learn through reading. Students are equipped with skills that assist them to summarise, paraphrase and synthesise. Students are taught to read for different purposes. One of the reading skills that is handy to university students is the Survey-Question-Read-Recite-Review reading skill (SQ3R) (Mirafuentes, Lopez, & Diano, 2015). SQ3R reading skill assists learners to retain the content they read and it helps them to perform well. Writing is another skill that is taught in Communication Skills that enables students to communicate their ideas in a more lasting form than in speaking. Lecturers should be able to comprehend the contents of the essays written by students (Bowker, 2007). This is possible if students have developed good communication skills, which helps them with sound writing and research skills. Writing in Communication Skills is not about essay writing only. Students are taught how to take minutes in a meeting, how to write a memo, and how to write a notice among other writings at the workplace (Stowe, Parent, Schwartz & Sendall, 2012). Speaking skill is also very important to develop the learners' critical thinking skills. Students are expected to speak during presentations, discussions and tutorials. Robles (2012) states that communication is an essential interactive skill that is needed at the workplace. A critical thinker is able to speak to convince listeners as well as impart knowledge during interaction with peers in a class presentation and even at the work place. A good speaker and listener will always observe non-verbal cues that will assist in effective communication. Whether one is writing, listening, speaking, or attending meetings, communication skills are critical to one's success at university and in the future workplace.

This paper argues that Communication Skills as a course is very important and may assist students to become critical thinkers and effective communicators. The Communication Skills course offers students the preparation that they need in the society as no educated or accomplished person can function without critical thinking skills and effective communication. This paper therefore discusses how Communication Skills course can enhance critical thinking skills of students within the setting of Women's University in Africa, as expected by the MHTEISTD.

3. Methodology

The study is hinged on Reconstructionism that enhances cognitive change in the students at WUA who are doing Communication skills. This theory was propounded by Theodore Brameld (1904-1987). It stresses on addressing social questions and pursues the creation of a better society and worldwide democracy. The reconstruction theory resonates with this study because of its tenets, which state that society needs constant reconstruction or change and that the social change comprises a renovation of education and the utilisation of this education in reconstructing society (Hill, 2006). According to the Reconstructionist, students should take action on real situations using their experience. In this study the action to be taken by students is to develop into critical thinkers and effective communicators through learning Communication Skills. Using the Reconstructionist view this study aims to explore how the Communication Skills course at WUA impacts on students' cognition as it assists them in developing critical thinking skills.

The study used the qualitative approach which is interpretive in nature. The qualitative study explored an in-depth insights and rich descriptions of students at WUA on how Communication Skills course equips them with critical thinking skills. The study used a purposive sampling technique, to ensure that data was collected on the perceptions and experiences of students who are rightly involved in finding out how Communication Skills can assist them develop their critical thinking skills (Merriam, 2009). The advantage of purposive sampling was that it selected students who are information-rich cases and who are related to the central issues for in-depth analysis thus, the students who were enrolled in the course (Nieuwenhuis, 2007a). The sample for the study comprised of five undergraduate students enrolled at WUA who have already taken the Communication Skills course. The researcher chose the five students so as to get in-depth information on the phenomenon under study. The researcher made sure the participants selected were 'information-rich' (Vasileiou, Barnett, Thorpe, & Young, 2018).

Data were collected using semi structured interviews and document analysis. Analysed documents were the essays written in the Communication Skills course and PowerPoint presentations. Pseudonyms were used to refer to the students that formed the study and to protect their identities and uphold their anonymity. All interviews and the document analysis were conducted at the researcher's office. Two interviews were conducted and documents were analysed after the first interview, which raised questions that led to the second interview. Data were analysed using the inductive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Themes arose from the students' own words. The researcher followed Creswell's (2009) steps for qualitative data analysis. This means that the interview data as well as the data from documents were transcribed. The researcher went through the raw data to get a general understanding. Next

step was to highlight and code similar information. The coded data were organised into categories, to come up with themes. Finally, data was interpreted and new knowledge from the study was derived.

The study adhered to ethical considerations as recommended by Creswell (2013). The students were assured that as participants they remained anonymous through confidentiality and the use of pseudonyms. Participants were asked to sign consent forms and they were told they were free to discontinue at any stage of the study if they wanted. The researcher ensured that the study was thorough by making sure the study was credible and trustworthy (Marshall & Rossman, 2010). Guba's (1985) quality measures like transferability, credibility and dependability were followed. To achieve transferability the researcher provided a comprehensive description of the methodology and the settings of the study. For credibility the researcher made sure she prolonged her stay in the field, did member checking and crystallisation. In addition, for dependability the researcher made an audit trail of the audio recordings, field notes and the transcribed data.

4. Results and Discussion

Findings indicated that Communication Skills as a course developed the students thinking skills by making sure they grasped the four macro-skills, which are Listening, Speaking, Reading and Writing. As alluded to before, listening and reading were regarded as receptive skills since students received information through listening and reading. Writing and speaking were viewed as productive skills as students were required to make oral presentations and write assignments. The results were discussed under the productive and receptive skills as students indicated how these skills assisted them to be critical thinkers.

4.1 Speaking skill

Collected data found that students highlighted how the speaking skill assisted them to become critical thinkers.

- Participant 1: *Speaking skill assists us to adapt more from the learning process as well as go further to permit us to ask relevant questions.*
- Participant 3: *The speaking skill is very necessary in helping us to become critical thinkers because we are able to air our views through discussions.*
- Participant 4: *I have learnt through communication skills that talking is different from speaking. Speaking is a skill that needs one to be clear, concise and confident. This alone helps you to plan and to know the content you will speak about and answer questions when they are asked.*

The above findings indicate that students agree that Communication Skills assist them to become critical

thinkers. This finding agrees with Lucanus (2017) who found that Communication Skills empowers students to fit in discussions that are done during lectures as they interrogate and get answers on what they do not understand. Through the speaking skill, students are in a position not only to learn and think critically, but it assists them to impress themselves positively during interviews to get a job that they deserve. Still on the speaking skill, students had the following to say:

- Participant 2: *Through the speaking skill I became aware of my abilities and inabilities during communication. This assisted me to improve and work on my weaknesses. As a result, I am now able to communicate effectively, I do not fear to make presentations*
- Participant 5: *Speaking skill assisted me to be confident. I know I should have adequate content knowledge to help me to respond to my colleagues when they do not understand.*

This finding agrees with Ryan (2000), Allo and Priawan. (2019) who state that students without self-confidence cannot get knowledge. This means the speaking skill fosters critical thinking skills as they give students broad knowledge from the discussions that they would have with their peers.

From the findings, students also highlighted the importance of considering non-verbal communication when applying the speaking skill. They highlighted that the non-verbal cues during presentations and interaction assisted them to pick if they were making meaningful presentations or conversations. They indicated that their knowledge on non-verbal communication assisted them to become critical thinkers as they easily change the way they present to suit their audiences. This finding is buttressed by Iksan, Zakaria, Meerah, Osman, Lian, Mahmud and Krish (2012) who suggest that non-verbal communication assists students to give and get feedback, give ideas orally during interaction in a way to get agreement from the recipients.

4.2 Writing skill

Students highlighted how the writing skill assisted them to be critical thinkers. All the students agreed that critical thinking is a skill that is developed and gets better over time. The following excerpts indicate what students had to say

- Participant 3: *When I started doing my degree, I remember I could not even write an academic essay. As I was taught how to write one, I am now able to synthesise my sentences and even evaluate them to see if I am writing sensibly.*
- Participant 5: *Academic writing should be taught as it assists us to think critically. Writing an essay requires one to use their brain. If you are lazy to think then you may not write anything meaningful.*

The above excerpts support the idea that teaching students the writing skill assists them to become critical thinkers. This finding is supported by Defazio, Jones, Tennant and Hook (2010) who state that “writing is a skill that is grounded in the cognitive domain. It involves learning, comprehension, application and synthesis of new knowledge (p34). Writing also includes imagination motivation, analysis, and replication and review that results in a well written essay. Participants also went on to explain that writing is an arduous exercise where they try to put their opinions and views on paper while they are trying to master the rules of writing such as grammatically correct sentences. Participants had the following to say

- Participant 2: *Academic writing also equipped us with skills like citing and referencing.*
- Participant 4: *I also learnt how to hedge the language one used when writing an essay to protect claims made in the essay. Now I need to think how to protect my claims before I write.*
- Participant 5: *In academic writing sentences and paragraphs should hang together and this calls for one to use their reasoning skills. Learning how to hang our sentences together has assisted us to think before we put anything down,*

From the above snippets participants agreed that writing an academic essay can be laborious and it involves a lot of conventions to master. This finding is in agreement with Akkaya and Aydin, (2018) who affirm that academic writing contains different parts oscillating from referencing citations title writing and other characteristics that include language, expression and form. All the five participants agreed that after learning communication skills they were able to argue and counter argue a point. This implies that once they were able to argue and counter argue their critical thinking skills would have developed because it is difficult to present an argument. According to Toulmin (1958), Soiferman, (2019). McCarthy, Kaddoura, Ahmed, Buck, Thomas, Al-harthy, & Duran, (2021) students usually counter themselves when arguing and counter-arguing a point. Critical thinking skills are therefore needed by students in order for them to effectively communicate their ideas in writing to their lecturers.

From the analysed documents, the researcher noted that apart from argumentation skills there were other skills that went with writing assignments like citation and referencing skills that students needed to fully develop to become effective writers. Participants’ second essay indicated that there was a great improvement from the first assignments that they wrote. This was evidence to the fact that Communication Skills, when taught had an effect on the development of the students’ critical thinking skills

4.3 Listening

The researcher found that listening was a skill that most students took for granted. They did not see its significance at first when they were introduced to the communication skills course. Participants highlighted the following:

- Participant 1: *At first, I never paid attention to this skill. It was when I did not listen to the instruction given during the lectures that I did not present as I was told by the lecturer. The presentation marks contributed to my course work mark and I did not do well. It was then a wakeup call for me that I needed to listen to given instructions to make meaning of what I am expected to do.*
- Participant 3: *I had problems with differentiating listening and hearing. I later learnt during our lectures that listening was important and it was only achieved through focusing on what is said. That way it helped us to become critical thinkers in that when we listen and put together received information, we evaluate it and make meaning.*

Findings show that students acknowledge that although they did not understand the importance of listening, they later found out that it is an essential skill that helps them to develop their critical thinking skills. This finding is similar to Murawski (2014) who states that critical thinkers focus and avoid distractions. Misinterpretation of information is one of the main hindrances to communication and progress. Good listeners are usually good communicators. If students misunderstand what they are taught at university due to poor listening skills, the problem does not end there but they will eventually take it with them to their work places and to the world they live in.

4.4 Reading

From all the five students interviewed, they agreed that reading was an important skill that they required to help them develop their critical thinking skills. Students highlighted that as critical thinkers they needed to synthesise, summarise and even evaluate the content read. What the students highlighted concurs with Murawski (2014) who found that critical thinkers evaluated thoughts, ideas or judgments of the content they read with attentiveness, ingenuity and modification. The following excerpts show what the students said:

- Participant 4: *We have to read many texts for us to get information for writing assignments making reading very important.*
- Participant 5: *The use of all the reading skills in our course outline, especially the one that requires us to read intensively helped me to develop critical thinking skills and to understand the content that would be under discussion.*

The study confirms that reading may assist students to have thinking skills which are a prerequisite to studying for exams. For students to come up with a satisfactory summary of read content, they are required to produce the main points and adequate information during assignment writing or in an exam. When students develop reading skills, they are able to select the most important ideas that answer given assignments.

When asked how reading develops them to be critical thinkers, the students echoed the following sentiments

- Participant 3: *I found that when I used the SQ3R I was able to organise my text and it improved my memory and gave me a deep understanding.*
- Participant 2: *Using the SQ3R reading technique assisted me to read judgements, questioning the text using my point of view.*
- Participant 1: *SQ3R requires us to do a lot of activities which are surveying a text, questioning it, reading it reciting it and reviewing it. I found that these activities assisted me to hold back decisions until I proved right or wrong the information read in the text.*

The above findings are supported by Taglieber (2000) who asserts that SQ3R as a critical reading process may assist students to get a deep meaning of a text. Using the SQ3R reading skill may succour them to have an in-depth knowledge of the material read by developing in them skills like making judgements about read texts. During the process of reading students may be able to pick strengths and weaknesses of a text creating new knowledge during the process.

Participants also argued that skimming and scanning are important in developing their critical thinking skills. Their sentiments are echoed in following excerpts:

- Participant 4: *I found that skimming and scanning in a way can be used when I read for comprehension and it also helps me to think critically. By just going through a text looking either for the main points or specific information I am able to foretell what the passage is about, it's main topic and perhaps some auxiliary ideas.*
- Participant 5: *Skimming and scanning help me to read meaningfully while I look and get the information I want without wasting any time.*

The above sentiments are also echoed by Mahommed (2020) who proposes that skimming and scanning are skills which may be used by students for effective and meaningful reading.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

5.1 Conclusion

The findings of this study have revealed that the communication skills course is perceived by the majority

of university students as being crucial in developing their critical thinking skills. The paper has described how Communication Skills revolves around the four macro-skills of language that is writing and speaking which are productive, reading and listening which are receptive. These four skills assist students to be critical thinkers. Research findings indicate that when students are effective listeners, speakers, writers and readers their critical thinking skills are enhanced.

Moreover, the paper has argued that teaching of Communication Skills at WUA is a solution to producing quality graduates who are critical thinkers and are privy to effective communication. With regard to the findings of this study it is important to note that Communication Skills is taught to enable the learning of other courses while they are still in college as well as in their future workplaces. What is novel about this study is that no studies have been done in Zimbabwe to confirm or deny how Communication Skills as a course develops critical thinking skills through the four-macro skills which are reading, speaking, listening and writing.

The study demonstrates that at Women's University in Africa students use the SQ3R reading skills to understand a text, evaluate information objectively and develop autonomous decisions and come up with best solutions on read information. The SQ3R reading skills has assisted them to question, verify, validate information and use it for communicating effectively. Students highlighted that through the writing skill critical thinking skills were developed when students were doing the process of writing an assignment. The writing skill assisted students to explain, analyse, express opinion, compare, contrast and evaluate information. Students confirmed that listening skill assisted them to derive meaning from their peers through interaction. Students echoed that listening allowed them to concentrate during presentations making them good communicators thus developing critical thinking skills in the process. Communication skills as a course cannot be separated from critical thinking. Through learning to speak, read, write and listen, students are able to understand, evaluate, analyse and synthesise information making them critical thinkers.

5.2 Recommendations

It has been highlighted that Communication Skills as a course may assist in developing critical thinking skills. However, it is only taught to students who are in their first year first semester. The study recommends that since critical thinking skills are not attained at once but are developed on a continuous basis, students should therefore be taught Communication Skills as a course throughout their stay in university.

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