

The development of communicative abilities within small group contexts: a cross cultural perspective

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Abstract

As higher education institutions throughout Europe continually search for innovative approaches to teaching and learning, not least as they seek to maximise increasingly scarce resources, students are likely to be encouraged, even obliged, to take more responsibility for their own learning. This will be manifested through such activities as the negotiation of learning experiences with their tutors, completion of projects through collaborative efforts with their contemporaries etc. They will carry out many of these activities in small groups. Furthermore, group activity is likely to be a vital part of almost every job that students graduating from higher education are likely to enter irrespective of the country in which they have studied or subsequently work; they will probably be expected to engage in the co-ordination of tasks with others, to share information, solve problems and make decisions. Communicative ability is clearly central to such activities. It is now seen in the UK as a priority skill in national education and training (*National Skills Agenda*, 1998).

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For three generations, Polish citizens lived within a communist system of economic and political control, one that according to our colleagues at the University of Lodz, influenced all domains of public life. They suggest that this resulted in citizens developing coping strategies often characterised by conformism, passiveness, an absence of engagement with economic life and an apparent lack of responsibility for planning and managing their daily lives. Engagement in such strategies may be associated with the emergence of psychological barriers that can frustrate the process of economic transformation that is currently taking place in Poland. It seems likely that as Poland embraces capitalist economic and political systems, its citizens will be become obliged to develop a greater sense of personal responsibility. The ability to communicate will be central to this.

As part of the collaboration between staff at Manchester Metropolitan University (MMU) and the University of Lodz over the past five years, we have often questioned whether students at our respective universities enter their chosen courses of study with similar beliefs in their perceived abilities to relate to others in a range of interpersonal settings. In particular, we have suspected that many are uncertain about their ability to contribute to and manage discussions in groups, an increasingly common teaching and learning forum in higher education institutions; we have wondered whether students in Poland differ in this respect from their English counterparts and the extent to which this may be related to their different cultural experiences.

We have recently deliberated upon the concept of procedural and declarative knowledge proposed by Anderson (1982) specifically in terms of its relevance to the development of communicative ability; we have begun to question whether students from the two countries differ in terms of the extent to which they are equipped to understand and explain these abilities. If they perform well in interpersonal settings but are unable to articulate this to others or unaware of this ability, they can be described as possessing a level of procedural knowledge, this being in part a function of their cultural experience. In contrast, they may indeed be able to express their knowledge and abilities. In this instance we would describe them as possessing a degree of declarative knowledge. We recognise that procedural and declarative knowledge can correspond, but suggest that this may not always be the case. For example, an individual may know how to successfully demonstrate a psychomotor skill such as riding a bicycle, but be unable to explain the nature of this ability to someone else. In respect of communicative ability in groups therefore, a

person may be very proficient at managing group social encounters, but may fail to express this ability verbally if asked to do so.

One marked characteristic of Polish citizens who have lived within a communist political system and planned economy could be that they, in developing the kind of 'learned helplessness' inferred above, may have learned skills and developed abilities at the procedural level only. That is, they perform skilfully, but do not know that this is the case. Indeed, they may not believe that they can do so even if this is pointed out to them. This could present a serious barrier to skill enhancement as a result of experience of the kind of CST that may be adapted from western European countries and in particular, those currently used at MMU.

We are particularly concerned that the acquisition of specific communication abilities deemed functional in one culture may not be so in another. Even if we accept that certain communication abilities such as empathy, respect, non-judgmentalness, and decision making can be defined, we cannot assume that these transcend cultural boundaries; the way these are expressed behaviourally (skills) and interpreted by oneself and others, may vary considerably from one culture to another. This necessarily brings us to the notion of communication competence, a challenging concept that can be described as a kind of **social attribution**, one that permits communication skill assessments to be made from both the 'self' and 'other' perspective; this emphasises the dynamic nature of interpersonal communication and the complexity of its context. In essence we are drawn to what is described in the intercultural literature as the culture-general versus the culture specific controversy (for a fuller examination of this see Wiseman and Abe, 1984:11-16). Importantly, communicative competence and ability must be seen as much more than simply the acquisition and employment of a range of universal demonstrable **behaviours**.

We have begun to explore the usefulness of an MMU designed programme for use with Polish students. An integral part of this package is the assumption that increased self-awareness is an essential component of communicative ability and that this can be raised 'as appropriate'. Given our discussion thus far, this may be an inappropriate assumption; we suspect that participants' learning styles, their knowledge of self and others and the impact of cultural imperatives will be of profound importance in the process of skill acquisition and differ significantly across the two cultures.

In our attempts to explore the role and contribution of aspects of self belief to the development of communicative ability within the small group, we have constructed three working hypotheses which formally stated are;

1. Before experience of CST the correspondence between perceived self efficacy expectations and performance in respect of the ability to manage small group discussion will be higher for MMU students than those from the University of Lodz;
2. this correspondence will not change significantly for the Polish students as a result of exposure to the CST programme adapted from MMU;
3. MMU students will demonstrate a significantly more enhanced level of declarative knowledge on completion of CST than their Polish contemporaries.

We now provide an account of what we mean by communicative ability in the group context; we follow this with a brief description of the theoretical principles and defining features of the CST programme that we are using; we continue by outlining the first part of our empirical study, designed to measure the participants' self estimates of skill; and finally, we present and discuss some initial findings.

Communicative abilities in the group context

Although it may be tempting to develop programmes that simply train people to **do** things, we suggest that this is likely to be insufficient irrespective of the cultural context. We view such performance as one element of communicative ability or skill, this being concerned with much more than a person's demonstration of a range of behaviours used in specific social situations. In our view, any description of communicative ability must stress the central importance of the individual's **knowledge of how to behave** in any given social context (and therefore groups) and his/her **ability to select appropriate behavioural responses**. This necessarily demands the skill of recognition of culturally determined,

socially acceptable behaviour patterns. It demands that the individual possesses a heightened awareness of self, others and contextual influences that impinge upon the communication process.

Our approach to the classification and development of communication abilities in the group setting is influenced by the work of Hollander (1978), from his efforts to understand leadership effectiveness. This included two basic ideas; firstly, that **any** member of the group may become a leader by taking actions that assist the group to complete its task and maintain effective relationships; and, secondly, that **any leadership function** may be fulfilled by any member of the group. At this point it is relevant to state more explicitly what we mean by the group context; we see group discussion as a form of structured meeting of a small number of individuals who come together to work on a task of some kind. We accept the definition of guided group discussion presented by Turney et al. (1976), who describe it as a kind of orderly process which involves a group of individuals in informal face to face communication for the purpose of sharing information, decision making or problem solving.

These ideas have led staff at MMU to develop courses in which they attempt to embrace the notion of "empowering" their students, enabling them to become more effective members of any group to which they may belong. We appreciate that there are many ways of describing styles of leadership and the roles that individuals may play in group meetings such as that presented by Belbin (1981), but the programme used at MMU and adapted for use in Poland utilises a procedure described as microtraining.

Microtraining: theoretical principles and defining features

Microtraining was first introduced at Stanford University in 1963, in a programme of training for student teachers termed microteaching. Its success inspired trainers and educators in many other fields to adopt a similar strategy in preparation for professional practice and led to the introduction of the term microtraining. This was used to describe the approach where core skills involved in professional interaction are identified separately and trainees provided with the opportunity to acquire these skills in a safe training environment (Hargie 1997a: 474).

The method has subsequently been applied to skill development in a range of contexts in western societies; several researchers have reported that microtraining is of proven usefulness in improving presentation and communication skills generally (e.g. Powell & Andresen 1985:79-90) and in improving the communication skills of students in higher education (Cronin & Glenn 1991:356-367). It has then potential application within the wide range of academic courses offered within universities and colleges both in the UK and Poland.

The microtraining programme used at MMU has been further developed from the theoretical perspectives on skills acquisition and analyses of social situations pioneered by Argyle (1967). It remains in part consistent with this, but now focuses more upon a recent derivative developed by Hargie (1997b). Both these models emphasise the importance of perceptual sensitivity and cognitive (information) processing within the communication process. In the programme we use the practice and analysis of behaviour simply as a **vehicle** for access to both the refinement of overt behavioural performance **and** the development of information processing and perceptual dimensions of skill or ability. We are concerned here as much with the students "knowledge of" and "ability to" perform as much as their demonstrable behaviours. We stress Hargie's (1997b) concept of thought processes as mediating factors which impinge upon the communication dynamic. Indeed, they arguably define it within any social context although, as we have suggested earlier, there may be marked differences in the ways in which individuals from different cultures process this information!

Four distinct phases of training are highlighted in the programme; the first phase is concerned with staff research efforts to identify key abilities and behaviours, the products of which are used in the didactic elements of the programme; the second phase is a classroom based examination of these research findings whereby students are encouraged to reflect upon these in relation to their own life experiences; thirdly, all participants are subsequently involved in the **practice** and **analysis** of task related simulated group discussions in the university; and finally all participate in supervised practice in a community setting. A detailed description of these phases and an examination of research evidence concerning the effectiveness of CST are available from the authors and described in more detail in Martin, D.I. & Campbell, W. (1999).

The Empirical Study: phase 1

In this part of the project we seek to explore the self-efficacy beliefs of students at MMU and the University of Lodz. Initially, we hope to establish whether differences in these exist between students from the two cultures before exposure to CST; in due course we will attempt to measure the extent and nature of change that may occur as a result of CST experience. This will be done immediately following CST and after a period of supervised practice of the skill(s) in a community setting.

Essentially, our study thus far has been an examination of MMU students' experience of participation in behaviourally based CST. This ostensibly focuses upon the demonstrable skills of guiding and participating in small group discussion but as mentioned earlier, is concerned with changes in cognitions and cognitive structure. The programme consisted of two elements; the university based training programme and a supervised period of practice where the students demonstrate their communicative abilities by managing small group discussions in secondary schools with teenage pupils.

Method

Although a common empirical research design is that based on a control group (or comparison group) and an experimental group, but as Nelson-Jones (1991) points out, there are ethical issues entailed in withholding treatment from control groups. In view of this, we decided to carry out a pretest-posttest study, one group design.

Design

Subjects were 22 students undertaking the one year full time course leading to the award of the Postgraduate Diploma in Careers Guidance (the professional training course for career guidance practitioners in the UK).

There were sixteen females and six males. While the microtraining group discussion programme formed a compulsory element of their course and attendance was therefore mandatory, involvement in the research project was voluntary. In the event, all students volunteered to take part. However, due to illness only 20 students were present at the pre-test and post-test 2 sessions (after practical experience), and 19 were present at the first post-test session (immediately following the university based training programme).

Procedure

The subjects undertook a ten-session microtraining course concerned with the skill associated with guided group discussion. Each session lasted for three hours. Identified sub skills considered were 'set induction', 'focusing', 'encouraging contributions', 'gatekeeping', 'clarifying', 'summarising' and 'closure'. The programme involved elements of sensitisation, practice and feedback whereby trainees were given the chance to learn the theoretical background to each skill dimension, to practice the skill in question and obtain feedback on their performance from tutors and their peers. For further details of the training process please refer to Martin & Campbell (op cit, 1999).

Upon completion of the microtraining programme the students then practised their skills in a school setting. For a period of six weeks they worked in pairs delivering a one-hour guided group discussion session in a local school each week. Each person was responsible for leading and participating in every discussion. Fifty percent of the sessions were supervised by tutors from the university. This is the regular practice.

Measures

The Guided Group Discussion-Self Estimate Inventory (GGD-SEI), developed by Martin & Campbell (1998b) was administered to subjects both before and after the microtraining programme and again at the end of their period of practical experience.

The GGD-SEI is a 19 item self-efficacy self report measure which asks respondents to consider their chances of successful skill performance when making their **best effort** at guiding a small group in a

discussion of a topic that they had previously researched.

On a scale ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (6), participants rated the 19 Likert items according to the extent to which they agreed that the items reflected their actual estimate of how they would perform. The response scores were added to give a total score. Higher scores on the GGD-SEI reflect stronger percepts of self-efficacy. For evidence of the validity and reliability of this instrument the reader is directed to Martin and Campbell (op cit 1998b).

Results

The Wilcoxon matched pairs signed-rank test was used to assess the significance of the difference between GGD-SEI scores pre-training (pre-test) and post-training (post-test 1) and after a period of practice in schools (post-test 2). Differences for total and sub-scale scores were examined.

As is indicated in Table 1, there were highly significant ($p < 0.01$) differences between the total scores of the pre-test and post-test 1 and between pre-test and post-test 2. Inspection of the means shows that on both occasions, the participants developed their self-beliefs.

There was also a significant ($p < 0.05$) difference between the total scores post-test 1 and post-test 2. Again, inspection of the means suggests that participants developed a greater sense of their own communicative abilities in the group context.

Table 1. A comparison between the means of the pre-test, post-test 1 and post-test 2 GGD-SEI scores.

 N Mean SD z p

Pre-test 18 74.17 11.52 -2.84 .0045**

Post-test 1 18 83.83 11.24

Pre-test 19 73.53 11.31 -3.08 .0021**

Post-test 2 19 88.37 12.13

Post-test 1 18 83.33 10.71 -2.51 .0121*

Post-test 2 18 89.33 12.12

* $p < 0.05$ ** $p < 0.01$

The GGD-SEI consists of four sub-scales each measuring self-belief in respect of specified categories of skill (Summarising, Encouraging Contributions and Distributing Participation, Confidence and Contracting). The results indicate significant improvements on some of the sub-scales both at the end of the microtraining programme and following a period of practice in the community;

On the 'Summarising' sub-scale, which consists of 8 items, there was a highly significant change between pre-test and post-test 1 and between pre-test and post-test 2 ($p < 0.01$ respectively). As the means illustrate, expectations of the ability to summarise discussion in the small group setting were enhanced.

Table 2. A comparison between the means of the pre-test, post-test 1 and post-test 2 on the GGD-SEI **Summarising** sub-scale scores.

N Mean SD z p

Pre-test 18 32.56 5.20 -2.83 .0046**

Post-test 1 18 31.72 4.06

Pre-test 19 32.37 5.04 -2.74 .0062**

Post-test 2 19 37.68 5.92

Post-test 1 18 31.67 4.02 -1.30 .1930*

Post-test 2 18 37.89 5.92

* $p < 0.05$ ** $p < 0.01$

On the 'Encouraging Contributions and Distributing Participation' sub-scale between pre-test and post-test 2 and between post-test 1 and post-test 2 there were also highly significant changes ($p < .01$). Mean scores suggest that expectations of successful performance in this dimension of communicative skill increased. The change between pre-test and post-test 1 marginally failed to reach significance at the .05 level. See table 3.

Table 3. A comparison between the means of the pre-test, post-test 1 and post-test 2 on the GGD-SEI **Encouraging Contributions and Distributing Participation** sub-scale scores.

N Mean SD z p

Pre-test 18 27.44 4.34 -1.96 .0501

Post-test 1 18 30.17 4.50

Pre-test 19 27.00 4.42 -2.89 .0039**

Post-test 2 19 32.26 4.01

 Post-test 1 18 30.00 4.33 -2.96 .0031**

Post-test 2 18 32.89 4.17

 * $p < 0.05$ ** $p < 0.01$

 On the 'Confidence' sub-scale between pre-test and post-test 2 and between post-test 1 and post-test 2 there were again highly significant changes ($p < .01$). The change between pre-test and post-test 1 was also significant ($p < .05$). Mean performance on each of these testing occasions increased, suggesting an enhanced level of self-belief amongst the participants. See table 4.

Table 4. A comparison between the means of the pre-test, post-test 1 and post-test 2 on the GGD-SEI Confidence sub-scale scores.

 N Mean SD z p

 Pre-test 18 6.44 2.15 -2.56 .0105*

Post-test 1 18 8.11 1.50

 Pre-test 19 6.53 2.17 -3.29 .0010**

Post-test 2 19 9.42 1.50

 Post-test 1 18 8.00 1.33 -3.18 .0015**

Post-test 2 18 9.50 1.50

 * $p < 0.05$ ** $p < 0.01$

 The final sub-scale was 'Contracting'. Once more there were highly significant changes; in this instance between pre-test and post-test 1 ($p < .01$) and between pre-test and post-test 2 ($p < .01$). And there was a significant change ($p < .05$) between post-test 1 and post-test 2 responses. Mean scores suggest that on each occasion participants raised their levels of expectation of successfully contracting with others in small group activities. See table 5.

Table 5. A comparison between the means of the pre-test, post-test 1 and post-test 2 on the GGD-SEI Contracting sub-scale scores.

	<i>N</i>	Mean	<i>SD</i>	<i>z</i>	<i>p</i>
Pre-test	18	7.72	1.64	-3.04	.0023**
Post-test 1	18	8.89	1.45		
Pre-test	19	7.63	1.57	-3.46	.0005**
Post-test 2	19	9.32	1.38		
Post-test 1	18	8.72	1.23	-2.12	.0342*
Post-test 2	18	9.33	1.41		

Discussion

There is then, some clear evidence that the combination of CST and subsequent community based practice is associated with a significant increase in levels of self-efficacy in students at MMU. There was highly significant change suggesting that the participants raised their levels of self-belief both in relation to each of the dimensions of skill measured by the GGD-SEI and the overall ability. We suggest that their level of declarative knowledge may have been enhanced although we recognise that the GGD-SEI instrument only **samples** self-expectation of performance.

With regard to the effect of microtraining without practice in a community setting, there is again evidence to suggest that this is positively associated with changes in self-efficacy; the scores for the total scale and sub-scales for Summarising and Contracting produced a highly significant change ($p < .01$). In addition, those for the Confidence sub-scale also showed significant change ($p < .05$).

However, the scores on the sub-scale Encouraging Contributions and Distributing Participation just failed to reach significance at the 5% level. Informal discussions with the subjects after their CST produced further useful data; most subjects suggested that on commencement of the training, they were not fully aware of how complex some of the skills were. They suggested that it was only after practice attempts that they had a much better idea as to what was involved. They felt that this increased knowledge often resulted in feelings of less ability and lower levels of self belief. It is possible that this may have affected scores on the Encouraging Contributions and Distributing Participation sub-scale.

Interestingly, the subjects' beliefs in their abilities to successfully encourage contributions and distribute participation following a period of supervised practice of the skill, did significantly improve ($p < .01$). Perhaps this is associated with rising levels of self confidence as measured by the Confidence sub-scale when comparing expectation of own performance at the end of the CST with that after the practice phase ($p < .01$). The scores for the total scale and the Contracting sub scale also indicated a significant positive change ($p < .05$) over the same period.

It is important to point out that due to the exploratory nature of the study thus far, its design and in particular the small sample under consideration, interpretations of data collected must be made with

caution.

A 'ceiling effect' may have influenced some of the results obtained; only a certain amount of change could be measured over the training and practice period since the scale employed only permitted responses to items within a 6 point range. Consequently, it is possible that respondents could not indicate the degree of change in perceived self-efficacy if they responded with 'high' overall and sub-scale scores either before CST or supervised practice in the community.

A further important methodological problem must also be acknowledged, namely the difficulty associated with evaluating what is in effect a training programme of professional development for the participants. This prevented us from introducing a control group to the initial part of the study since all students completing the Postgraduate Diploma in Careers Guidance were required to undertake the training programme as part of their course requirements. We could not deny the training to some course members in order to create a control group.

Further stages of the project will begin with the replication of the procedure, data collection method and analysis outlined above but with larger groups of participants from MMU and the University of Lodz. This will begin in Autumn '99 when we will introduce in Poland the CST programme outlined above with Master's degree students of Occupational Counselling. The GGD-SEI is currently being translated into Polish and revalidated. It will be administered as in phase 1. A further cohort of MMU Postgraduate Diploma/ MA Career Guidance students will join this second phase of the study.

Importantly, we also intend to select a comparison group from the MMU student population. These will be students from the BA (Hons) Human Communication course, all of whom undertake training in the skills of managing small groups but without any specific focus upon the helping community and its professions (e.g. guidance and counselling). We will seek a similar arrangement with students from a cognate discipline at the University of Lodz. Presampling equivalence between the groups will be as similar as availability permits.

In conclusion

The CST programme used does seem to be associated with positive change in self-efficacy beliefs for English students. We hope, as we develop our research strategy and collect more and varied forms of data, that we will develop a greater understanding of the nature of self-efficacy and its function in communicative acts. Most importantly, we hope to present research findings which will help us to decide whether intraculturally derived CST can contribute to the development of communication competence in other cultures. Indeed, these findings may offer a signpost for further research into the development of intercultural communication competence, but that's another story!

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