

Communication Skills of Undergraduate Students at Texas A&M University in Qatar: An Ethnography Study

Reflection:

I wrote this for my ENGL104 class as part of my learning to write research papers. I chose this topic because of its significance to me: I have been a student at a university before (for a year), and it felt nothing like here; students had better communication skills and were continuously interactive with other students and instructors. Therefore, I wanted to investigate different aspects of students' communication skills, which shifted me to focus on how university services are helpful to students in developing their communication abilities.

Abstract:

This research project addresses the issue of students' communication skills in terms of personal, face-to-face interaction, and virtual communication. This qualitative/quantitative research attempts to explore how students develop communication skills in their university years, particularly in relation to university services. The study was conducted by surveying over 50 students by asking them to describe their and others' communication skills and to evaluate university services that relate to these skills. It is found that there seems to be a slight pattern of students going less frequently to professors during their office hours as they progress through college. Also, results show that university events are the most helpful feature that supports the development of students' communication skills.

Introduction:

This research project aims to explore the development of undergraduate students' communication skills in different college levels. This research is an attempt to answer the key question: "To what extent do engineering students develop communication skills at Texas A&M University in Qatar?" This question does not only aim to identify student communication skills but also to find out whether university services help improve them. Results hope to highlight valuable university services, promote more resources, and indicate unhelpful services to reexamine their importance.

The primary services this research is trying to look at are Canvas, office hours, and university events. Canvas is a service designed to streamline the process of sharing files and announcements, but the aspect I am researching is the discussion feature. In this discussion tab, students can create issues and have discussions about them. Once students find a solution to issues, they label them "closed." But the conversation remains there in case another student stumbles on the same issue. Meanwhile, "office hours" refers to professors' offices being open to students to come for help, discussion, and guidance. And university events straightforwardly mean the wide variety of events coordinated and funded by the university to engage students in extra-curricular activities.

Since coming to Texas A&M, I found that no one is using the Canvas discussion tab. Moreover, many professors complain that no one comes to their offices. As for events, I am investigating student perceptions of them, but I have noticed that many students attend these events. Instead of regular interaction and communication, from most of what I have seen, students would always WhatsApp but

only in the last minutes from something due, which makes me believe that there is a tendency to interact with others only in urgent situations. All the aforementioned is the reason I am investigating this issue.

Background:

During college years, students are expected to master various competencies relevant to their majors and at the same time, develop a set of skills that would enable them to find jobs in a competitive market, including communication skills. University's role is to prepare students for their future careers by focusing not only on academic achievements but on acquiring "soft skills," including communication skills needed for competitiveness (Iksan, Zakaria, Meerah, Osman, Lian, Mahmud & Krish, 2012; Ansari, Kumar, Jain & Singh, 2022). Iksan et al. (2022, p. 104) describe communicating as "the activity of sharing knowledge from people supplying the knowledge to the individual involved in the communication using spoken and behavioral techniques." Successful communications entail giving a particular material evaluated by the receiver and giving an appropriate response.

Previous studies emphasize the role of universities in developing students' communication skills that would make them succeed in their chosen professions. Ihmeideh, Ahmad, and Dababneh (2010) state that a positive communication environment gives students a chance to learn and practice how to communicate and thus, strengthens their communication talents. Harlak, Gemalmaz, Gurel, Dereboy, and Ertekin (2008) propose exposing students to activities that help them develop their communication skills starting from their first year at university. Furthermore, Ihmeideh et al. (2010) have found that students' attitudes toward communication skills are high and positive which makes the fulfillment of the task easier. Universities need just to create appropriate, positive environments in which they provide appropriate activities that enable students to practice and boost their communication skills.

Therefore, the aim of this study is to explore the development of students' communication skills during study years, particularly in relation to services provided by the university.

Significance:

The significance of this research stems from the vitality of its topic. Communication skills, whether personal or digital, are essential for university students' success, and an important asset for them to secure jobs after graduation. This research serves to identify the extent to which students have problems communicating with their peers and instructors and whether further investigation is needed to address the issue. Besides, results could provide valuable insights to university administrators about university services that promote students' communication skills so as to give them more attention and time. By the same token, findings could help the university make decisions on how to improve services that do not serve this purpose or are counterproductive.

Methodologies:

For the purpose of fulfilling the research objective, a survey was developed (see Appendix) and sent to the emails of TAMUQ students. The number of students who willingly responded to the questions was 50. Survey questions addressed the following points

- Students were asked to provide data on their gender and their current college year.
- Four questions of different types were asked to explore students' skills in personal communication. These questions were about the tendency to make phone calls or have face-to-face conversations, the ability to understand unfamiliar accents, and conversation skills in general.

- Students were asked to evaluate services provided by the university – namely Canvas, office hours, and university events – by rating them on a 5-star scale.
- One question was designed to describe students’ perceptions of their and others’ communication skills. Students rated their level of dis/agreement with three statements about certain social behaviors on a 5-star scale.
- The last question was open-ended and aimed to collect advice on the best ways to help new students develop communication skills.

Results and Discussion:

The survey recorded more than 50 responses. They were evenly split into males and females. Among the responses, 40% were freshmen, 30% were sophomores, 15% were juniors, and 15% were seniors. To categorize the results, I will discuss them in four parts, focusing on students’ perception of social skills and each university service.

I. Communication skills of students:

Based on the data collected from students, it appears that my perception of students’ lack of social skills is shared by many students in the university. Figure 1 depicts that many students agree that students are missing social skills.

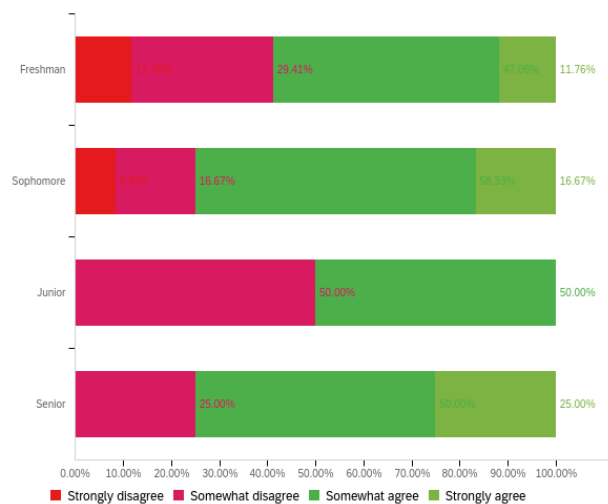


Figure 1 (“Students are missing social skills” response)

Figure 2 shows that students rated their ability to communicate with someone who has an unfamiliar accent with decent positivity. And, if results are compared in terms of college years, a slight pattern of improvement in that ability can be noticed over the course of students’ college years. The mean increases

from 3.25 with freshmen to 4.2 with seniors. This indicates that the university somehow helps improve this skill for students.

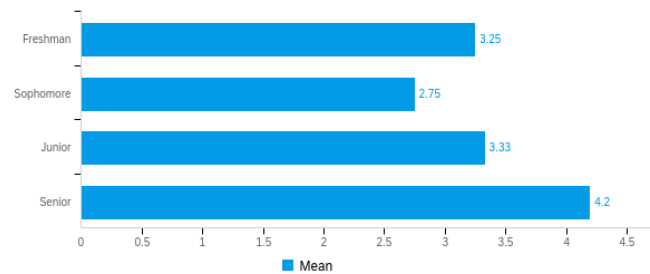


Figure 2 (ability to talk to someone with an unfamiliar accent)

Figure 3 indicates that three-quarters of students pointed out that many times they would use their phones to avoid face-to-face conversation with others. All juniors reported they had done so. This indicates students' unwillingness to communicate.

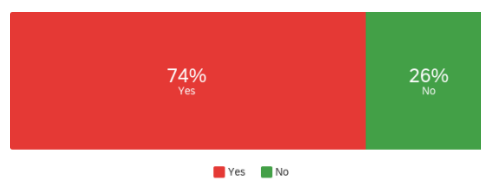


Figure 3 (use the phone to avoid conversation)

II. Professors Office Hours:

It can be observed from Figure 4 that, when asked about their preferred method of communicating with professors, most students picked "in office." This suggests that students are more willing to visit professors than write to them or conduct a virtual meeting via zoom.

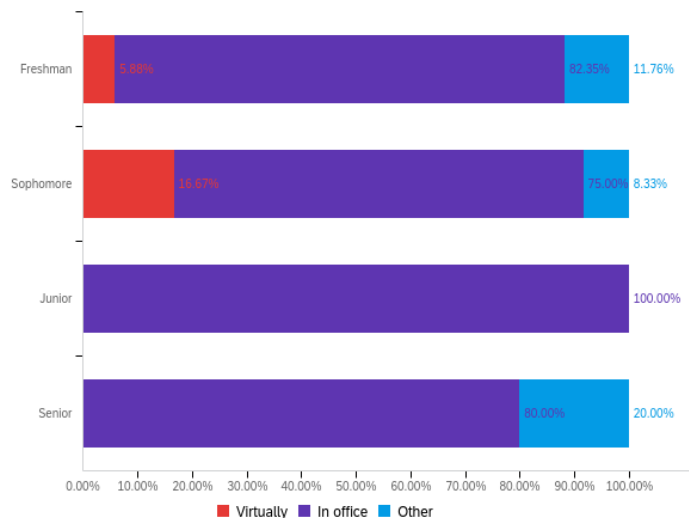


Figure 4 (method of communication with professors)

Yet, a contradiction can be seen in the following figure which shows a relatively low frequency of students' visits to professors' offices during office hours. The answers of over 83% were either "rare or never" or "somewhat low." Further, seniors and juniors are less frequent visitors to professors than their early counterparts. This is not what I expected as I thought that over time students realize the importance of their professors and will be more willing to communicate with them. This highlights that students are not incentivized to communicate with their professors over their course of study. It could be that professors do not encourage students to approach them, or students find this communication not useful.

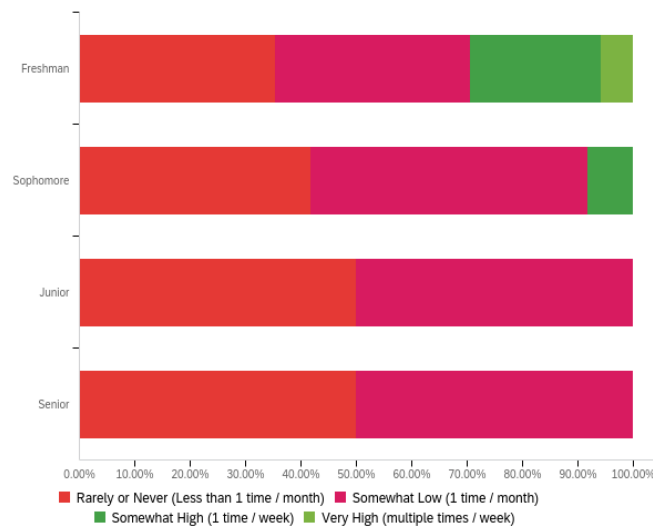


Figure 5 (visits to professors' offices)

III. Canvas:

It can be seen from Figure 6 that many students disagree that "canvas discussion tab is helpful." Among those students are seniors. All seniors disagree with the previous statement. This is another surprising result I did not expect. I thought that, as things go into more depth and material becomes more complex, students run into issues more frequently and need to communicate with other students, which is when they realize the usefulness of this tool. This indicates that either this service is not helpful, is not being promoted enough, or is too complex for students and they do not know how to use it.

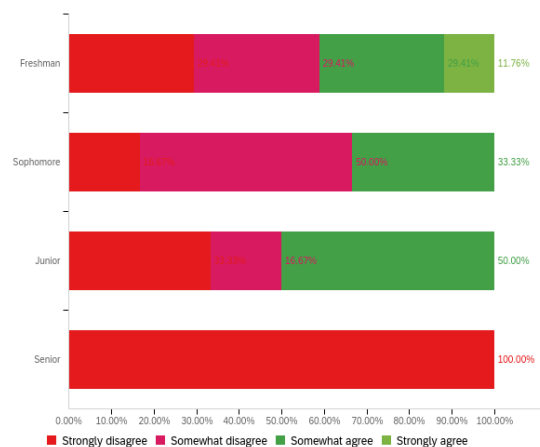


Figure 6 ("Canvas Discussion Tab is helpful" response)

IV. Events:

As can be seen in Figure 7, most students agree that university events help them establish good communication skills. This confirms my expectation that events are a prominent feature of campus services that help students with their communication skills. These events represent an encouraging communication context. Therefore, the university should focus on promoting these events and encouraging students' participation. These results are consistent with the suggestion provided by Harlak et al. (2008) and Ihmeideh et al. (2010) to create positive communication environments that get students engaged in different activities in which they use and develop their communication skills.

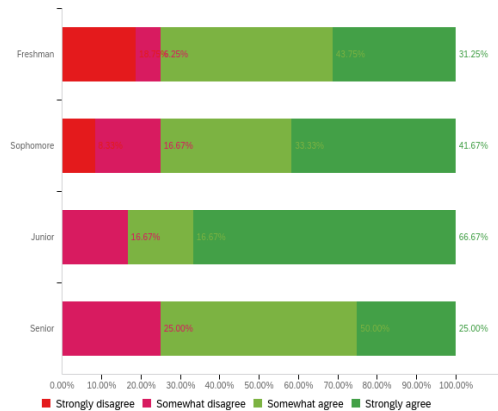


Figure 7 ("events help me develop my social skills" response)

The survey had an open-ended question for students to write a piece of advice to newcomer students. The data obtained from the inquiry was organized by the most frequent words in all responses, which was then put in a word cloud generator to visualize any trends in answers.

Studying the word cloud in Figure 8, it is possible to see that the most common response from students about advice for newcomers is that they should talk to people. Therefore, it seems that students believe that the reason behind the lack of communication skills is that students are used to being alone and do not interact with others. When students go out of their shells, they will interact with people and feel the need to practice and improve their communication skills. Moreover, students are advised to find many groups and clubs to join. They should also participate in different student events.



Figure 8 (student advice)

Error analysis:

Most survey respondents came from freshmen and sophomores; little input was provided from the senior students (15% juniors, 15% seniors), which might have affected the survey results.

Another factor is that the original survey had a different wording – namely, it asked for social skills rather than communication skills. This could have influenced the results of the research.

Moreover, this research doesn't consider the Covid-Pandemic, which arguably significantly affected students' ability to communicate.

Works Cited:

- Ansari, S., Kumar, P., Jain, V., & Singh, G. (2022). Communication skills among university students. *World Journal of English Language*, 12 (3), 103-109.
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- Ihmeideh, M., Ahmad, A., & Al-Dababneh, A., (2010). Attitude toward communication skills among students' teachers in Jordanian Public Universities. *Australian Journal of Teacher Education*, 35, 1-11.
- Iksan, Z., Zakaria, Z., Meerah, T., Osman, K., Lian, D., Mahmud, D., & Krish, P. (2012). Communication skills among university students. *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 59, 71-76.

Appendix: The survey that was handed out to students:

Communication Skills of Undergraduate Students

The long-term development of communication skills in university students.

I am a first-year international student researching for my English 104 Project. This is my first time in Qatar and my first time entering an institution where the medium is English.

It appears to me that many undergraduate students are disconnected from most students: they don't communicatively interact with others inside and outside of classes, they don't ask or answer during classes, and they seem to be absent in online discussion forums (Canvas). I am concerned about the communication skills of students, to what extent they are developed by entering university, and to what extent students are aware of this issue.

I appreciate your taking a few minutes to answer this survey.

Q1 What is your gender?

- Male
- Female
- Prefer not to say

Q2 I am a...

- Freshman
- Sophomore
- Junior
- Senior
- Other (please specify) _____

Q3 How difficult is it for you to understand someone with an unfamiliar accent?

- Very easy
- Easy
- Hard
- Very Hard

Q4 How comfortable are you communicating face-to-face with someone...

You know
previously (1)
New (2)



Q5 How would you describe your communication skills in conversation?

	Great (1)	Above Average (2)	Below Average (3)	Weak (4)
Start a conversation (1)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Continue a conversation (2)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
End a conversation (3)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Q6 Have you ever used your phone to avoid conversation with someone new?

- Yes
- No

Q7 How would you evaluate the engagement of Canvas Discussion Tab by...

You					
Your peers					
Your professors					

Q8 Do you prefer meeting professors virtually (Zoom or in writing) or during their office hours:

- Virtually
- In office
- Other (please specify) _____

Q9 How frequently do you visit professors during office hours?

- Rarely or Never (Less than 1 time / month)
- Somewhat Low (1 time / month)
- Somewhat High (1 time / week)
- Very High (multiple times / week)

Q10 Indicate your level of agreement:

	Strongly disagree (1)	Somewhat disagree (2)	Somewhat agree (3)	Strongly agree (4)
"Canvas Discussion Tab is helpful." (1)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
"Students are missing strong communication skills." (2)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
"Extra-curricular activities help me develop my communication skills." (3)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Q11 What advice would you give to next year's Freshmen students about developing their communication skills?
