

A Case Study: On the Relationship between Learners' Academic Language Achievement and Their Communication Styles in ELT

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Abstract

Factors affecting language learning have been discussed for many years to enhance the academic achievement of learners. As a crucial element, learners' individual differences can be taken into account as a factor affecting language achievement. Learning a foreign language may get harder when learners' needs and individual differences are ignored, so the effect of communication styles of learners as a part of their individual differences on language learning cannot be underestimated since it constitutes a significant part of individual differences. However, there cannot be found much research in this area, so in order to meet this deficit, this study has been conducted to reveal the possible statistical relationship between learners' academic achievement and their communication styles (assertive behavior, passive behavior, openly aggressive behavior and concealed aggressive behavior) so as to increase success in language learning. The main purpose of this study is to determine whether or not or to what extent students' communication styles affect their academic language achievement. For this aim, the research was carried out in the Higher School of Foreign Languages at the University of Gaziantep. A pilot test was applied to 63 students to find out the reliability of the questionnaire and the result was defined as; $r = .718$. Total population was 466 students who were administered a questionnaire of Interpersonal Influence Inventory involving 40 statements which were put forth to improve the performance of individuals, teams and organizations by HRDQ (2004), the developer of soft-skills learning solutions. Data were analyzed via SPSS 15.0 and the reliability of the data was calculated as .714. Then, the results were discussed in the light of findings and the result between the communication styles of learners and their academic language achievement was found as; $r = .038$ ($r = .038 > p = .01$).

Keywords: Communication styles, assertive behavior, passive behavior, openly aggressive behavior, concealed aggressive behavior, academic language achievement..

Introduction

The main aim of this study is to find out the relationship between the styles of communication of learners and their academic language achievement in English to enhance their success in language learning. Communication styles and behaviors of individuals are linked to each other so strongly that one cannot comprise and reflect itself alone without the other. That is, communication style of each individual also gives clues about the attitude of the learners towards different situations and by the way also about their behavior towards specific situations. Because of the reason stated above, to understand the communication styles of learners, importance of communication should be known since education, especially language education, takes place in places like schools and classes where individuals come together and interact each other.

Communication has always been an indispensable part of social communities in that human beings are creatures living together in social contexts. Without it, communities cannot improve neither socially nor economically since development cannot realize in places where no interaction takes place.

Simply, communication is giving and receiving verbal or nonverbal messages (Stremel, 2008). It means exchanging information in means of opinions, messages, thoughts and feelings via interaction. Moreover, communication is an on-going, dynamic, ever-changing and continuous sharing of experience (Berlo, 1960). Miller (2001) explained that from complex to even simple interactions, all of them are influenced in complicated ways by the past and will have effective implications for the future. Mortensen (1972) suggested that communication does not realize at any single time yet it is an ongoing process in the perception of the physical world (cited in Shultz, 2010). Also, it isn't thought as a simple information transmission. It involves multiple aspects of the message like verbal, nonverbal and behavioral aspects, the setting and the situation that interaction occurs and the characteristics of the speaker and the audience and the relationship between them. All of these variables affect the entire communication (Pearson, Nelson, Titsworth & Harter, 2003).

Undoubtedly, the main issue beyond communication is language. As humans, people live in social contexts and being an inseparable part of life, language and communication have always been crucial and indispensable since the beginning of human life. Language is an on-going process and complicated activity that are formed by various units. It involves cultural, psychological, interpersonal aspects regarding its acquisition and use. As a whole, it is a set of sounds and symbols and the connection between sounds and sequences is arbitrary and unpredictable but systematic (Akmajian, 2001). As Wilkins stated (1974) in order to understand the process by which men communicate, human capacity for language should be looked at closely (cited in Fiske, Gilbert & Lindzey, 2010). Language is an indispensable tool used in every phase of life while speaking, listening, writing and even thinking. It is a means of message transmission and the two types of communication (e.g. verbal and nonverbal communication) are used to express these messages; feelings and thoughts. As Luhmann (1992) stated that "only communication can communicate and that only within such a network of communication is what we understand as action created" (p.251) and the action is created mainly by means of two types of communication; verbal and nonverbal communication. Although communication is thought to occur mostly by use of verbal symbols, verbal and nonverbal codes are used together, so as a symbolic system, language includes both of the aspects. Verbal communication primarily including sounds, words, speaking and language can be sub grouped into language and para-language. That is, as stated by Dökmen (1996) "in communication by para-language "what is said" is important whereas in communication by para-language, "how it is said" is important" (p.28). Via verbal communication feelings, thoughts and ideas are conveyed directly by use of words, sounds and by means of speaking. Verbal communication for some people is the most effective way of communication when combined with other forms of communication like body language and gestures since in different cultures and even different settings non-verbal forms can be misunderstood (Types of communication, n.d.). Besides, It can be defined as the most effective way of explaining intangible concepts, as problem areas can be obviously addressed and explained. However, nonverbal communication may provide much more meaning than people realize.

Nonverbal codes like facial expressions, gestures or posture that put forth and intensify the real meaning of verbal communication are considered as nonverbal communication. As a part of language, nonverbal communication is the process of communication through conveying information or messages between people without using words and sounds. It is also assumed as the expression of basic affective or emotive states. In detail, Pearson et al (2003) explain nonverbal communication as "the behaviors of people, other than their use of words, which have socially shared meaning and intentionally sent or interpreted and consciously received messages, have the potential for feedback from the receiver" (p.102). The expression of emotions like interest, excitement, joy, surprise, fear, anger, shame and derivatives can be expressed by nonverbal cues. Without nonverbal communication, communication would be hard because of the lack of opportunity to see the people to be communicated, hear their voices or sense their presence. Nonverbal communication has important functions in social interactions. For example, by looking at one's facial expression, tone of voice or gestures, a great deal of information can be obtained about his/her character. Another example is that an individual can use nonverbal cues to intensify or support ideas.

As it is indicated above both types of communication are used to support, intensify and express feelings, emotions and thoughts. So in class, students use both verbal and nonverbal communication. They interact with each other and also with their teachers not only orally but also behaviorally and additionally different communication types include both verbal and nonverbal communication types. In this study, in each style, both verbal and nonverbal types will be correlated shortly according to the interpersonal influence inventory of HRDQ (2004).

According to the interpersonal influence inventory of HRDQ (2004), individuals show four influence styles. These are openly aggressive behavior, assertive behavior, concealed aggressive behavior and passive behavior. These four influence styles resulting from openness in communication and consideration for others can be described by four indicators of influence style: thoughts, emotions, nonverbal behavior, and verbal behavior. All styles of communication given below are cited in interpersonal influence inventory of HRDQ (2004). To start with, assertive behavior is accompanied by thoughts of self-confidence and a belief that all individuals have rights. Individuals who behave assertively believe that their desires should not be denied or pursued at the expense of others. Individuals behaving assertively are even-tempered. Any anger or frustration they feel is recognized and directed with control at the behavior or situation that produced it, not at other people. Assertive nonverbal behavior consists of an upright, comfortable posture; direct eye contact; and appropriate tone of voice. Assertive verbal behavior is clear, direct, and concise. Individuals speak in the first person and express themselves in an assertive manner. Their speech directly expresses their views while leaving an opening for alternative points of view. Individuals who behave passively believe that they should not speak their minds, either because they do not have confidence in themselves or they do not want to disturb the relationship. They do not wish to disagree, and they believe that they are inadequate. Passive individuals have concluded that others have rights but they do not. Passive behavior entails hiding one's feelings from others. Feelings of victimization and depression are common. Resentment and anger held inside may eventually build to a breaking point, at which time the passive person may become aggressive. The nonverbal passive style consists of slumped posture, downcast eyes, nervous gestures, and similar behaviors. The passive style of behavior is expressed with many qualifiers such as, "I am probably wrong, but ..." or "If you wouldn't mind ..." A weak voice or stilted speech may be used. Passive verbal behavior puts down the speaker by belittling his or her opinion.

Concealed aggressive behavior is accompanied by hostile thoughts that are also found in openly aggressive behavior. The difference between the two styles is only in the expression of those thoughts. Concealed aggressive behavior involves thoughts about getting back at the other person in a devious fashion. Concealed aggressive behavior is accompanied by hostility, anger, and tension, similar to openly aggressive behaviors. Rigid posture and glaring eye contact are characteristic of concealed aggressive behavior. The nonverbal behavior is controlled and icy as opposed to the more physical, openly aggressive behavior. Concealed aggressive behavior includes insults and threats, but they are aimed indirectly at others. Full and direct expression of anger is suppressed, but indirect anger is evident. Gossip and even sabotage are likely. People who behave aggressively believe that they have rights, but others do not. They think that they should always be in control and that they are never wrong. They worry about themselves, but are not afraid of hurting others. The feelings accompanying openly aggressive behavior are those of anger, hostility, and resentment. Individuals who behave aggressively feel that the world is against them. They are under stress and feel frustrated. Aggressive behavior is usually accompanied by a fighting stance. Individuals glare at others, maintain rigid and tense posture, and point and shake their fists. Individuals behaving aggressively speak in a loud and haughty tone of voice. They use insults and derogatory comments. Verbal abuse is common. Openly aggressive behavior involves direct, forceful, and rude interactions with others. All these influence styles are thought to have great importance in learners' academic achievement since communication styles of individuals as a part of individual differences affect lives of people and learning is something that cannot be considered apart from natural life fluency and social interactions.

Methods

Participants

Research population consists of 466 students at Higher School of Foreign Languages at the University of Gaziantep. The population at the Higher School of Foreign Languages consists of 1900 students.. The students are mainly from the faculty of engineering but there are also students from other departments; English language and literature, faculty of economics and administrative sciences and medical faculty. Totally 166 female and 287 male students attended to the research and the ages of the students vary between 17-26.

Measures

To investigate the correlation between learners' academic achievement in language learning and their communication styles, quantitative descriptive research analysis was applied. The main aim of descriptive research is to give a detailed picture of the phenomenon by describing the variables (Johnson and Christensen, 2008).

After setting research topic, the research design is defined and a pilot study is applied, so that the reliability of the instruments can be proved. Collecting data and analyzing it are the following actions to take. In reporting the results different reporting formats like journals, articles, executive summaries and oral reports can be used (Goodwin and Goodwin, 1996).

A questionnaire was used to measure the relationship between the communication styles of students which was categorized with a 40-item questionnaire by Interpersonal Influence Inventory of HRDQ (2004) and their academic language achievement that was calculated as their end of year scores at the Preparatory School at the University of Gaziantep. To investigate the relationship correlation research design by Pearson-Correlation style was applied. As Mackey and Gass stated (2005) “correlation can be used to test the relationship between variables or among variables” (p.145).

40 items were developed by the expert panel method (HRDQ, 2004) “which are used often when the issue is highly contentious and decisions are likely to have possible legal ramifications or where the best possible results (based on expertise) are required” (Department of Sustainability and Environment, 2005, p.36). The 40 items were grouped into four scales of 10 items each that measure assertive, passive, concealed aggressive, and openly aggressive styles of communication. 40 statements in the questionnaire utter four styles of communication, 10 statements for each style are shown in the table below.

Table 1: Interpersonal Influence Inventory Dimensions; the Styles of Communication

Scales	Number of Items
Assertive Behavior	1, 5, 6, 13, 17, 22, 28, 32, 38, 40
Passive Behavior	3, 9, 10, 15, 19, 24, 26, 30, 35, 37
Openly Aggressive Behavior	2, 11, 12, 14, 18, 23, 27, 31, 34, 39
Concealed Aggressive Behavior	4, 7, 8, 16, 20, 21, 25, 29, 33, 36

5 Likert-scale (Likert, 1932) ranging from “never” to “always” was used in the questionnaire. Point five was referred to “always” while four points was labeled as “usually”. Three points was defined as “sometimes” and two points as “rarely”. Lastly, one point was qualified as “never”. The choice of the participants increased the probability of having one communication style. That is, if the score of one influence style is high whilst the other scores are low, the participant’s communication style probably has the same or similar characteristic of the style with his or her highest score. According to the interpretations of Interpersonal Influence Inventory of HRDQ (2004) that can be concluded from the participants scores, if one style is preferred yet the other is a back-up style, any of them can be used when the preferred style fails to achieve the desired results. Also, the highest two scores can be in contrast with each other and lead to considerable tension and personal conflict for the respondent. What’s more, the respondent can act differently in a given situation according to his/her perceptions to be the demands of that situation. Respondents may behave inconsistently as a response to different situations or she/he may not have a clear understanding of how he or she behaves. Finally, the scores of respondents reveal differences regarding their choices.

The score of the questionnaire was calculated compared to minimum score of 40 attained by multiplying 1 point with 40 items and maximum score of 200 obtained by multiplying 4 point with 40 items. The score manifests the influence styles on the respondents’ communication styles.

Findings

Applied questionnaires were collected and students’ communication styles were found out and their final scores were correlated with their styles of communication. All data analyses were carried out using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) 15 and Cronbach’s Alpha was used to measure the reliability of the questionnaire. The results of Cronbach’s Alpha analysis reveal the reliability of the questionnaire as .714. The frequencies and percentages of each item were calculated. Communication styles of each student is defined and correlated with their final scores.

As the second step, the correlation between each communication style and students’ academic achievement was put forth. As an answer to each research question the correlation between the variables was studied. Namely, to present the influence of students’ communication styles on their academic achievement, the data gathered from the results was analyzed. According to the results obtained, it can be inferred there is no significant relationship between the assertive behavior and students’ academic achievement ($r=-0.054$, $p<.01$).

That is to say, there is a negative relationship between the students' showing assertive behavior and their academic achievement but at a low level and since if "r value" is between 0-.3 there is a low relationship, when r: .4-.6, there is moderate relationship and if "r value" is between .7-1, there is a high relationship between the variables (Turan, 2012). The result indicates that when the probability of showing assertive behavior increases, the language achievement may decrease.

Table 2: Correlations between Assertive Behavior and Academic Language Achievement

		Academic Language Achievement	Assertive Behavior
Academic Language Achievement	Pearson Correlation	1	-.054
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.466	.249
	N	466	451
Assertive Behavior	Pearson Correlation	-.054	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.249	
	N	451	451

In contrast to the present result, according to Heinström (2000) individuals showing openness in their behaviors have broader interests, are liberal and novelty, which means they have an educational aptitude and creativity. Also, assertiveness makes people aware of their needs and open to change and assertive people avoid frustrations. They always try to find solutions to the problems that prevent them from becoming successful which increases their achievement level.

Even if results reveal that there is no relationship between the two variables, people showing assertive behavior are known as more extrovert. Namely, they are more social and have more self-confidence and self-esteem. They are more open to communication with others and communicatively competent. Furthermore, individuals with assertive behavior "may be able to become better at critical thinking, which is central to achievement in education because they are more willing to engage in it and to express themselves" (Moon, 2009, p.12). Since assertive people can evaluate the things around them better, it is also easy to understand the world around them. A person who has a good philosophy of life may learn easier and is more open to learn and assess the things she/he learns. In contrast to these views, if a person who does not internalize the assertive behavior or change his/her behaviors according to the circumstances may not be academically successful or an assertive person may be open to communication and has good social relationships yet unsuccessful. Also, if an individual is overconfident, this may also lead to failure. Rawson and Dunlosky (2012) suggested that "students who are overconfident in their evaluations of learning may fall short of their learning goals, whereas accurate evaluations of one's own learning can be used to more effectively guide further study (p.271).

As it is apparently and surprisingly seen in the table above, the value $r = .132$ ($r = .132, p > .01$) which means there is a significant relationship between the passive behavior and academic language achievement. According to the information mentioned above, this relationship is not very high yet it is accurate. Also, it is in a positive way.

Table 3: Correlations between Passive Behavior and Academic Language Achievement

		Academic Achievement	Passive Behavior
Academic Achievement	Pearson Correlation	1	.132(**)
	N	466	451
Passive Behavior	Pearson Correlation	.132(**)	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.005	
	N	451	451

**Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

In contrast to assumptions, it can be concluded from the results that students showing passive behavior has a tendency to be more successful in language learning. For instance, according to the research done by Webb (1982) on the student interaction and learning, there found a negative relationship between passive behavior and achievement. Yet it should be noticed that the achievement here was not related with language learning.

Students with passive behavior are generally supposed to be less successful since they have poor communication skills. However, this study reveals that in contrast to assertive behavior and all other communication styles, there is a correlation with students' showing passive behavior and language learning achievement. That is to say, students with passive behavior have a tendency to be successful. Thirdly, it was found out that relationship between openly aggressive behavior and academic language achievement was found as $r = -.011$ ($r = -0.011 < p = .01$) which indicated that there is no significant correlation between openly aggressive behavior and students' academic achievement. But it revealed a negative relationship.

Table 4: Correlations between Openly Aggressive Behavior and Academic Language Achievement

		Academic Achievement	Openly Aggressive Behavior
Academic Achievement	Pearson Correlation	1	-.011
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.815
	N	466	453
Openly Aggressive Behavior	Pearson Correlation	-.011	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.815	
	N	453	453

While the result in this research reveals that there is no correlation with openly aggressive behavior and academic achievement, early studies show that aggressive students have less tendency to be successful. A study conducted by Mccann (2012) on behavior and academic achievement in kindergarten revealed that students who demonstrated aggressive behavior were substantially less disadvantaged academically than those with attention problems. However, it should be noticed that the sample population was the students in kindergarten.

The results obtained from the correlation between the concealed aggressive behavior and students' academic achievement was studied. There found a relationship $r = .038$ ($r = .038 > p = .01$) but at a low level. However, in contrast to openly aggressive behavior the result is not negative.

Table 5: Correlations between Concealed Aggressive Behavior and Academic Language Achievement

		Academic Achievement	Concealed Aggressive Behavior
Academic Achievement	Pearson Correlation	1	.038
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.420
	N	466	443
Concealed Aggressive Behavior	Pearson Correlation	.038	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.420	
	N	443	443

Whether behavior is openly aggressive or concealed aggressive, there is no significant relationship, yet it can be seen that while the relationship between openly aggressive behavior and academic language achievement have negative tendency, the relationship between concealed aggressive behavior and academic language achievement has a positive tendency. That is, it more probable that when openly aggressive behavior emerges, the language success may decrease. On the other hand, students with concealed aggressive behavior are likely to become more successful. Lastly, 4 styles of communication and academic achievement correlated. As the table depicting the results reveal, there is no significant relationship between the four styles of communication and learners' academic language achievement.

Table 6: Correlations between 4 Styles of Communication and Students' Academic Language Achievement

			Academic Language Achievement	Four Styles of Communication
Academic Achievement	Language	Pearson Correlation	1	.038
		Sig. (2-tailed)		.438
		N	466	414
Four Styles of Communication		Pearson Correlation	.038	1
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.438	
		N	414	414

The result $r: .038$ ($r:.038 > p:.01$) indicates that there is a low relationship between the four styles of communication and students' academic achievement. This means that the styles of communications of students and their academic language achievement are not very related. Yet, it is obvious that there is relationship even if it is not very significant. Regarding the percentage, it can be assumed that academic achievement cannot be estimated by the presence of communication styles. It is apparent that since communication styles can be improved and altered, their effectiveness on the academic achievement is argumentative.

Conclusion

There many factors that affect and form communication. Communication styles are factors affecting the interpersonal communication and as it is mentioned in this study there are some influence styles that consist of specific behaviors. These influence styles defines people's communication styles. One aim of this study is to identify learners' different communication styles and the main aim is to find out the relationship between learners' academic language achievement and styles of communication. When the main focus of language becomes communication, learners' communication preferences largely depend on their communication styles. The communication styles that learners use are formed with some influence styles that they have in their behaviors. "These influence styles consist of specific behaviors that individuals choose to use (Interpersonal Influence Inventory Facilitator Guide, 2004, p.18)."According to the interpersonal influence inventory, these influence styles can be affected by two factors: individual and situational factors. Past experience, attitudes and beliefs, and self confidence form individual factors. On the other hand, rewards in environment, costs of influence style and lastly rules and laws form the situational factors.

Also there are some factors affecting L2 learning. Learning strategies like cognitive, metacognitive, memory-related, compensatory, affective and social factors have been identified by Oxford (1990) (as cited in Oxford, 2003). "Learning strategies are specific behaviors or thought processes that students use to enhance their own L2 learning (Oxford, 2003 p:8)." These strategies are one of the factors that affect academic achievement of students in L2 learning. By using correct strategies, the students may enhance their L2 learning. To conclude, there are many factors affecting communication styles of learners and their academic achievement. As it is deduced from this research, there is a relationship between the academic achievements of students and their communication styles.

Suggestions and Recommendations

Since this study was conducted to university students between the age of 17-26, it can be thought that younger group of students may give more sincere answers to the questionnaire for younger students cannot hide their behaviors easily. By using the correct strategies, academic achievement of the learners may be enhanced. Learners' communication styles can be improved and they can be used properly in order to ease L2 learning. Learners can get psychological consultation and counseling service to improve their communication styles. Moreover, learners' individual differences should be taken into account and a more learner-centered education can be given to the learners to enhance their academic language achievement.

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