

# Knowledge, attitude and performance of academic members regarding effective communication skills in education

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## ABSTRACT

**Background:** Communication is the most important part of any educational process, the aim of which is to transfer or exchange ideas and thoughts. It would be provided appropriately if academic members had the communication skills. Considering the important role of academic members in the educational process, in this study, the knowledge, attitude and performance of academic members of School of Health, Isfahan University of Medical Sciences, were investigated with regard to effective communication skills. **Materials and Methods:** In this descriptive-analytic study, all academic members of the School of Public Health, Isfahan University of Medical Sciences, were studied during the second academic semester of 2006-2007. The data were collected by a valid and reliable three-part questionnaire including knowledge (8 questions and maximum score of 8), attitude (31 questions and maximum score of 155) and observational communication skills checklist (20 questions and maximum score of 20). The obtained data were analyzed by calculating central indices using SPSS software. **Findings:** The mean knowledge score of studied people in terms of communicational skills, attitude and performance were 4.1 out of 8, 114.4 out of 155 and 16.3 out of 20, respectively. **Conclusion:** Although the information of the participants of this study in terms of communication skills was not sufficient, they seemed to have a positive attitude and relatively acceptable performance in communication skills.

**Key words:** Academic members, attitude, communication skills, knowledge, performance

## INTRODUCTION

“Communication” means sending, giving, transferring, making aware, having and being engaged in a conversation.<sup>[1]</sup> Scientists have presented a special definition for “communication”

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based on their special viewpoints; some have considered it technology transfer of human behaviors, information and thoughts<sup>[2]</sup> and another group has considered the word of communication as the indicator of all the currents, through which a thought can be influenced by another thought.<sup>[3]</sup> Experts of social sciences use communication as the social interaction and consider it as the origin of culture and a factor for human improvement; they have mentioned that its lack means relative inactivity in human sensitivity which prevents from any kind of social excellence.<sup>[4]</sup>

In educational processes, “communication” includes establishing a relationship between two people, two issues, two thoughts or more; in other words, it means understanding and sharing thoughts between the teacher and student (s) which includes understanding and sharing at the level of knowledge, culture and the values governing the two people who are establishing a relationship.<sup>[5]</sup> In simple terms,

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communication means the process of message transfer from the sender to the recipient, provided that the transferred content is transferred from the sender to the recipient or vice versa.<sup>[6]</sup> Humans are inherently searching for establishing relationships with others. We communicate with others in our families, educational environments, playing groups and other places. We use communication for persuading others and sharing our thoughts via this process.<sup>[7]</sup>

Interpersonal relationship simply means the process of exchanging information, feelings and thoughts through verbal and non-verbal messages of people.<sup>[8]</sup> Any interpersonal communication includes the application of four main skills of probing, listening, observing and telling.<sup>[9]</sup> One of the main features for establishing a relationship for an effective communication is to have proper communication skills.<sup>[10]</sup> In every communication pattern, there are people, institutes or groups as the source or sender of message for establishing a relationship, the existence of which is essential and necessary for the relationship, and can have an important role in the efficacy of the communication; this role is on the shoulder of teachers in classrooms or educational activities.<sup>[5]</sup>

Effective communication means correct understanding and it is very important for the communication establisher to transfer his/her ideas so that the recipient understands the nature and generality of the message;<sup>[11]</sup> if teaching is not considered equal to the concept of communication, then, at least, communication should be considered the necessary provision of teaching in educational processes. Therefore, in the teaching process, only the scientific viewpoints and experiences of the teachers are not effective. No acquisition or behavioral change is obtained in the teaching process unless the teacher establishes a good relationship with his/her students.<sup>[5]</sup> Even some studies have expressed that communication skills reveal a good or a bad teacher.<sup>[12]</sup>

The characteristics of faculty members have important roles in educational activities of students. The most well-known study is the study by Dr. Fox or "seduction education". In this study, a Hollywood actor was asked to make a lecture, as a visiting professor, under the pseudonym of Dr. Mayron Fox. He was asked to use contradictory statements, fake words and irrational and irrelevant materials in his lecture. This lecture was presented along with dramatic movements of head and hands, joking and implied jokes and meaningless gestures to irrelevant issues. In sum, the lecture was very amusing but without content. At the end of the lecture, the listeners who were experienced lecturers filled out an eight-question questionnaire and evaluated Dr. Fox's lecture as a very good and informative one.<sup>[13]</sup>

During more than several decades, ineffectiveness of communication and existence of failures in the teaching of communication skills for nurses have been considered.<sup>[14]</sup> Moreover, some failures have been identified in the training of communication skills and communication capabilities for taking care of the elderly.<sup>[15]</sup> The study by Iranfar *et al.*

demonstrated that communication skills have a role in the educational performance of professors and introduction of teaching skills including communication skills for professors seems to be essential.<sup>[16]</sup> The results of study by Liyaghatdar *et al.* showed that group discussion teaching method was more effective than lecturing for increasing the educational progress and communication skills of students.<sup>[17]</sup> Kholdi and Sheykhani concluded that there were significant differences between professors' and students' ideas with regard to the teaching skills; as far as professors' ideas were concerned, if the evaluation by students were correctly implemented and its feedback were given to the professors, it could be a good instrument for improving educational quality.<sup>[18]</sup> The study by Soltani *et al.* revealed that holding educational workshops increased the mean scores of educational skills, communication skills, role play, feedback presentation, student relationships, evaluation and professional characteristics of physician assistants.<sup>[19]</sup> In a study by Tavakol *et al.*, university professors had good class control, were affable and observed class respect while their verbal power was a little less than desired and was not satisfactory in terms of letting students express their ideas and having friendly relationships with students.<sup>[13]</sup>

The importance of communication skills in educational processes and sensitivity of education in university environments developed the necessity for precise consideration of communication skills in faculty environments in order to move forward in terms of obtaining the fundamental objective of communication, i.e. exchanging ideas and thoughts via effective communication. Therefore, considering the important role of university professors in educational process, this study investigated knowledge, attitude and performance of professors at School of Health, Isfahan University of Medical Sciences, in terms of effective educational communication skills.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

This cross-sectional study was conducted in the second semester of 2006-2007 academic year at School of Health, Isfahan University of Medical Sciences. The studied population included all professors of School of Health, Isfahan University of Medical Sciences. The inclusion criteria were being engaged in teaching at the time of study and signing the informed consent form. Twenty-one people participated in all research stages and their information was gathered.

The information collection instrument was questionnaires on knowledge (including 8 five-option questions and maximum score of 8), attitude (including 31 five-option questions and maximum score of 155) and observational communication skills checklist (including 20 two-option questions with maximum score of 20).

The research instruments were prepared after studying valid local and international references and the required modifications were done using the ideas of expert professors; thus, the reliability was obtained. The validity of the

information collection tool was calculated by Cronbach's alpha coefficient ( $\alpha = 0.75$ ). The knowledge and attitude questionnaires were filled out by professors and observational communication skills checklist was filled out after attending the professors' classes. Data analyses were done using SPSS software version 14 by calculation of central indices.

## FINDINGS

The findings of the current research are presented in Tables 1, 2 and 3. 28.6% of participants of this study were the professors of Department of Statistics and Epidemiology; Departments of Environmental Health, Health Services, Nutrition and Professional Health constituted 33.3, 14.3, 14.3 and 9.5% of the sample size, respectively.

The mean age of the studied people was 46.6 years old and 71.4% of them were males. The mean of teaching experience of the studied people was 16.7 years and mean number of educational units was 11.2. Some 23.8% of the participants had the experience of attending in educational workshops of communication skills.

The findings of this study revealed that the mean knowledge score of the studied people in terms of communication skills, attitude and performance were 4.1 out of 8, 114.4 out of 155 and 16.3 out of 20 scores, respectively. Furthermore, 66.7, 52.4 and 57.1% of participants had lower scores than the mean scores of knowledge, attitude and performance of the total participants.

## DISCUSSION

The most important teaching skill is to establish relationship between teacher and student; the conducted studies with regard to the situation of communication messages have shown that the message sender should not only know the topic of communication and have enough information about it, but also have information about how to present it.<sup>[5]</sup> The results of this study on knowledge with regard to communication skills demonstrated that, although the majority of obtained scores on knowledge was less than the mean knowledge score of all the people, most studied people had knowledge about effective factors for behavioral change including physical, reasoning and emotional skills, individual and family networks and social structures,<sup>[9]</sup> components of communication

including sender, recipient, canal, message and feedback,<sup>[6]</sup> goals of communication including making aware, motivating, persuading and interpersonal communication methods including counseling, conversation and interview.<sup>[9]</sup>

It is known that hearing is a biological practice which includes receiving messages from sensory canals; listening is only one part of hearing which includes receiving, understanding, considering, meaning making and responding by the recipient of the presented message;<sup>[20]</sup> in this study, the concept and importance of active listening as one of the fundamental skills for establishing effective communication was considered and most of participants correctly stated that, in every interpersonal communication, active listening is something more than simple hearing which includes observing and understanding the recipient, which encourages people to speak freely and state their feelings.

The results of this study showed that most participants had less information about feedback definition (any reaction or response which is given to or received from a person on his/her thoughts and practices)<sup>[5]</sup> and principles of interpersonal skills including questioning, listening, observing and presenting information. In the study by Fariba on the communication skills of family health staff, mean knowledge score percentage of case and control groups before the educational intervention was more than the mean knowledge score percentage in the present study.<sup>[21]</sup> It is essential to consider that understanding the taught concepts depends on the desirable relationship of teacher with students and teachers are the key factors for controlling and conducting the behavior of students and the effective forces for establishing a relationship and its efficiency.<sup>[5]</sup> Although the information of people from specialized topics is at an excellent level, having communication skills is necessary and essential for its effective transfer.

The investigation of mean score of attitude on the communication skills reveals that, although most obtained scores were less than the mean attitude score by total people, the mean attitude score percentage on communication skills was higher than the mean attitude score percentage among family health staff (case and control before the educational intervention) in Fariba's study.<sup>[21]</sup> In sum, although professor's information in terms of communication skills did not seem to be enough, they had a positive attitude in this regard.

**Table 1: Relative frequency distribution of knowledge status of professors in terms of dimensions of communication skills**

Dimensions of communication skills	Effective factors for behavioral change	Communication goals	Communication components	Feedback definition	Importance of active listening	Definition of active listening	Principles of interpersonal skills	Methods of interpersonal communication
Having knowledge (percent)	52.4	52.4	76.2	33.3	61.9	76.2	4.8	57.1
Not having knowledge (percent)	47.6	47.6	23.8	66.7	38.1	23.8	95.2	42.9

**Table 2: Relative frequency distribution of attitude status of professors in terms of dimensions of communication skills**

Communication skills	Totally agree (percent)	Agree (percent)	No idea (percent)	Disagree (percent)	Totally disagree (percent)
Identifying the feeling of self	33.3	61.9	0	4.8	0
Identifying the feeling of students	9.5	66.7	14.3	9.5	0
Being able to express feelings	4.8	71.4	9.5	14.3	0
Having good feelings toward others	38.1	38.1	14.3	9.5	0
Accepting limitations with tranquility	9.5	61.9	23.8	4.8	0
Identifying and stating negative feelings of self	4.8	66.6	14.3	9.5	0
Accepting positive feedback	4.8	66.7	14.3	14.3	0
Accepting negative feedback	4.8	38.1	33.3	23.8	0
Receiving non-verbal messages	9.5	62	19	9.5	0
Replicating students' feelings	0	71.4	23.8	4.8	0
Clearly expressing goals and objectives	19	57.2	19	4.8	0
Establishing effective communication with the sent messages	19	66.7	14.3	0	0
Being calm in stressing conditions	9.5	47.6	4.8	38.1	0
Sending positive feedback	19	71.4	4.8	4.8	0
Sending negative feedback	4.8	52.4	19	23.8	0
Expressing feelings without words	4.8	57.2	19	19	0
Accepting students as they are	14.3	57.2	19	9.5	0
Describing behavior without judgment	4.8	61.9	14.3	19	0
Accepting students' ideas	14.3	66.7	9.5	9.5	0
Non-biased behavior relative to new experiences, values and ideas	19	62	9.5	9.5	0
Not getting communication skills with increased teaching experience	14.3	23.8	14.3	47.6	0
Importance of student ideas in teaching	28.6	61.8	4.8	4.8	0
Not accepting decisive ideas	9.5	33.3	14.3	38.1	4.8
Developing a friendly environment with students	19	81	0	0	0
Not applying communication skills while the class is crowded	4.8	9.5	9.5	61.9	14.3
Effect of first meeting in developing a proper relationship	28.6	61.8	4.8	4.8	0
Effect of being from the same gender in developing a proper relationship	4.8	14.3	19	52.4	9.5
Effect of educational status of students in developing a proper relationship	23.8	42.9	19	14.3	0
Effect of professor's teaching method in developing a proper relationship	33.3	57.1	4.8	4.8	0
Effect of having the same school as that of students in developing a proper relationship	4.8	23.7	28.6	38.1	4.8

In spite of all this, about a-quarter of participants stated that they could not accept any negative feedback without discomfort and defensive state; as far as feedback presentation was concerned, about one quarter of people expressed that they could not give negative feedback at the right time. Since both sender and recipient have the same shares in establishing an effective relationship and the process of communication leads to mutual understanding,<sup>[7]</sup> it is required for the sender and recipient to pay enough attention to each others' verbal and non-verbal feedback during the communication. These feedbacks should act toward strengthening the relationship.<sup>[20]</sup> In fact, the following communication is improved after reviewing the reactions of the opposite party<sup>[21]</sup> and a proper communication is established when the image formed on the

addressee's mind is understood<sup>[7]</sup> and this image is revealed by the feedback of the addressee. Therefore, presenting and receiving proper and correct positive or negative feedback have an important role in establishing an effective communication.<sup>[22]</sup>

According to more than one-third of the participants, when the level of stress was high, they could not maintain their tranquility. It is recommended that people maintain their tranquility in unrest conditions. Knowing that non-verbal messages strongly depend on verbal messages and can strengthen, regulate and adjust, emphasize, contradict or move meaning of applied words,<sup>[7]</sup> a teacher needs to evaluate his/her power as a message sender<sup>[5]</sup> and, while maintaining

**Table 3: Relative frequency distribution of performance status of professors in terms of communication skills**

Dimensions of communication skills	Yes (percent)	No (percent)
Starting communication by eye contact	85.7	14.3
Maintaining eye contact during the session	100	0
Considering the mutual attention of students	85.7	14.3
Using simple words for expressing one's mean	95.2	4.8
Not using rejecting words	90.5	9.5
Warm and friendly tone of speech	95.2	4.8
Repeating important information	66.7	33.3
Asking questions about what is being stated	61.9	38.1
Giving opportunity for student questions	95.2	4.8
Listening to the students	90.5	9.5
Encouraging students while they give positive ideas	66.7	33.3
Accepting criticism and recommendations	66.7	33.3
Using teaching aids	81	19
Using enough examples	100	0
Participating students in discussion	71.4	28.6
Establishing a friendly relationship	90.5	9.5
Feedback from students	85.7	14.3
Clarity of visual instrument	81	19
Hearing professor's voice	100	0

his/her tranquility, s/he should prevent from any internal excitement in behavior and speech; thus, s/he should help in the maintenance of communication flow.

In terms of authoritarian speaking with students, more than two-fifths of participants believed that it had much worse results. The same number of people opposed this belief. The idea of the first group seemed fairer since one important recommendation for improving communication skills is to put aside the prejudgments about the opposite side.<sup>[20]</sup> In fact, in order to succeed in materials presentation, they should be presented considering the requirements and desires of the addressee relative to the message presentation.<sup>[7]</sup> Since the message itself has no aim, the aim of any message directly depends on the conditions of message sender and recipient.<sup>[5]</sup> Considering the conditions of the student, a teacher can properly present the considered content and reach a desirable result via communication.

About a-half of studied people believed that communication skills which increase with teaching experience are spontaneously obtained. A classroom is full of verbal and non-verbal interactions between students and the teacher and among students themselves; in these interactions, in a world of expanding information and diversity of cultures, acquisition power requires establishing desirable relationships.<sup>[20]</sup> The establishment of such relationships require skills, a part of which may be obtained via experience; however, enough authority on these skills definitely need special attention to this issue, obtaining information from different sources and practical drills of these skills.

The results of this study also revealed that, considering the maximum possible score, mean performance score had better status compared with the knowledge and attitude of

communication skills so that the minimum obtained mean performance score was almost 75% of the mean performance score (74.5%). Additionally, performance percentage of mean scores on communication skills was more than the performance scores of family health staff in the study by Fariba.<sup>[21]</sup>

According to the results, most professors repeat key and important points in the classroom and about a-quarter of them do not repeat information. Since most disorders in communication establishment originate from the meaning misunderstanding of exchanged messages,<sup>[7]</sup> repetition of important points of messages enables the sender to clearly transfer his/her desired content to the addressee one more time and to avoid misunderstanding in messages. The best method for starting and continuing a conversation is asking. This activity encourages others to speak more easily and helps them to discover and understand others' viewpoints and ideas. Asking questions ensures the sender that his/her meaning has been correctly received; also, s/he can receive the addressee's feedback immediately after asking questions.<sup>[20]</sup> The results of this investigation showed that fortunately, around two-thirds of professors ask questions of students about what they have stated; however, more than one-third of them do not do this.

An important component of emotional environment which can affect the amount of student acquisition is the relationship between the teacher and students; teachers should always consider their students' reaction and response,<sup>[5]</sup> strengthen positive points and motivating factors and achieve successful training and effective and desirable communication via downplaying communication obstacles.

Most professors who participated in this study encouraged students while they gave positive ideas. Verbal communication



resulted from encouragement is full of words and sentences which encourage students and, as a result, make the class free from boredom which usually dominates the classroom;<sup>[6]</sup> nevertheless, a-quarter of professors considered this issue less important. While asking for others' ideas, they are encouraged to state the viewpoints identified by them. Also, to develop acquisition as stated by Aristotle (humans learn everything by doing it), the active involvement of student with the issue and educational flow is essential.

The findings of this study demonstrated that about three-quarters of professors ask students to participate in the class discussion. The research on education has demonstrated that the information that students obtain via participation in class discussion is more remembered by them compared with the professors' lectures.<sup>[23]</sup> Moreover, when the recipient is only the listener and does not discuss the class topic, acquisition is slower and insufficient.<sup>[24]</sup>

Finally, it can be concluded that although the information of participants did not seem enough in terms of communication skills, they had positive attitudes toward communication skills and their mean performance score was at a relatively desirable level considering the maximum possible score. Therefore, considering the point that almost a-quarter of participants had the history of participation in educational workshops of communication skills, it is recommended to hold such workshops for the target population.

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