Communication Skills among Arts and Science College Students: A Thematic Review

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Abstract

Communication skills shape how undergraduates learn, collaborate, and prepare for employment, yet they are frequently treated as a by-product of subject study rather than as a competence in their own right. This thematic paper synthesises scholarship on communication among arts and science college students under five themes: oral expression and apprehension, listening and interpersonal competence, writing and disciplinary discourse, digital communication, and institutional support. The review suggests that students in both streams face overlapping barriers, including anxiety, limited practice, and inconsistent feedback, while disciplinary cultures shape the form those barriers take. The paper concludes that integrated, practice-based, and discipline-sensitive approaches are more promising than isolated language courses.

Keywords: communication skills, undergraduate students, arts and science colleges, thematic review

Introduction

Communication is the means through which undergraduates take part in academic life. They ask questions in lectures, negotiate roles in group projects, write assignments and reports, present findings, and eventually explain their expertise to employers and the public. Spitzberg and Cupach (1984) describe communication competence as behaviour that is both effective in reaching goals and appropriate to the context, a view that treats communication as a set of learnable capacities rather than a fixed personality trait. For students in arts and science colleges, who often arrive from varied linguistic and school backgrounds, building such capacities is a practical concern as well as an academic one. The National Education Policy 2020 (Ministry of Human Resource Development, 2020) promotes multidisciplinary and holistic undergraduate education, which places communication alongside subject knowledge as an expected outcome. Employers reinforce this expectation; in a survey of business executives, Robles (2012) found that communication ranked among the soft skills most valued in the workplace. This paper organises the literature thematically rather than chronologically, and it examines how arts and science students experience five recurring areas of communication.

Oral Communication and Communication Apprehension

Speaking is the most visible communication skill and, for many students, the most stressful. McCroskey (1977) defined oral communication apprehension as the fear or anxiety linked to real or anticipated talk with others, and he reported that people high in apprehension tend to avoid communication situations. In classrooms this avoidance can appear as silence in seminars, reluctance to ask questions, or minimal contribution to group work. Horwitz et al. (1986) described a related pattern among language learners, noting that fear of negative evaluation can inhibit performance even when knowledge is adequate. Many college students study in English although their earlier schooling and home life were conducted in another language, so these findings are highly relevant to them.

Bandura's (1997) account of self-efficacy helps explain why the problem persists: students who doubt their speaking ability avoid practice, and the lack of practice appears to confirm the doubt. Arts students may meet this cycle in debates, viva voce examinations, and literature seminars, whereas science students meet it in laboratory vivas and project reviews, where technical vocabulary adds further pressure. Following Bandura's reasoning, repeated low-stakes speaking opportunities are likely to build confidence more effectively than a single high-stakes presentation at the end of a course.

Listening and Interpersonal Competence

Listening is often neglected in communication training, even though effective speaking depends on it. Bodie (2011) conceptualises active-empathic listening as a process of sensing a speaker's messages, processing their meaning, and responding in a way that shows understanding. In a lecture hall this involves following extended arguments and identifying key points; in group work it involves hearing a peer's reasoning before replying. Hargie (2011) presents interpersonal communication as a skilled activity made up of components such as questioning, reinforcement, explaining, and listening, each of which can be practised and improved.

Nonverbal behaviour forms part of this skill set. Burgoon et al. (2010) emphasise that eye contact, posture, gesture, and vocal tone carry meaning alongside words and can strengthen or contradict a spoken message. A correct answer delivered with averted eyes and a barely audible voice may therefore be judged less convincing than it deserves. Science students often work in laboratory teams where miscommunication has practical consequences, such as errors in procedure, while arts students rely on discussion to test interpretations; in both cases listening is what makes collaboration productive. Johnson and Johnson (2009) argue that cooperative learning, when it is built on shared goals and individual accountability, supports both achievement and positive peer relationships.

Writing and Disciplinary Discourse

Written communication presents a different challenge because conventions vary by discipline. Hyland (2009) argues that academic writing is not a single generic skill but a set of practices shaped by the communities that use them, so that what counts as persuasive evidence in one field may differ from another. Arts students are usually asked to produce interpretive essays and critical analyses in which stance, voice, and the development of an argument are central. Science students more often write laboratory reports, abstracts, and project dissertations that demand precision, objectivity, and a conventional structure.

Each stream may therefore under-develop the other's strengths: arts students may have less exposure to concise technical reporting, while science students may have fewer chances to practise sustained argument. Vygotsky's (1978) view that learning is mediated through social interaction suggests that feedback from teachers and peers is central to growth in writing. Kuh (2008) lists writing-intensive courses among high-impact educational practices, which he associates with deeper engagement when they demand sustained effort and provide frequent feedback. A single end-of-semester grade on an assignment offers little of this kind of guidance.

Digital Communication

Students now communicate through messaging applications, email, learning management systems, and video platforms, often in informal registers. Turkle (2015) argues that constant connectivity can weaken the capacity for sustained face-to-face conversation and empathy, because digital exchanges allow people to edit, delay, and avoid the discomfort of live talk. Her argument draws on a broader population than college students, but it raises a relevant concern for institutions that expect lively classroom discussion. At the same time, online discussion forums can give hesitant speakers a lower-pressure way to contribute, and shared documents make collaboration easier for project teams in both streams.

The central skill in digital settings is register awareness: knowing when a casual style is acceptable and when an email to a professor, a supervisor, or a prospective employer requires a formal tone, a clear subject line, and careful proofreading. This connects directly to the appropriateness criterion in Spitzberg and Cupach's (1984) definition of competence. Students who communicate fluently with friends online may still need explicit guidance to transfer that fluency to professional contexts.

Institutional Support and Employability

Crosling and Ward (2002) reported that business graduates used oral communication mostly in informal interactions with colleagues and clients, and they argued that university programmes should prepare students for these real settings. Although their sample was drawn from one field, the finding suggests that arts and science graduates also need communication practice that reflects everyday workplace talk rather than only formal

presentations. Colleges can respond in several ways. Communication tasks can be embedded in subject courses rather than confined to a separate language paper, so that students practise speaking, listening, and writing in the vocabulary of their own discipline. Peer feedback, clear assessment rubrics, and reflective journals help students notice their progress. Language laboratories, debate societies, and student clubs offer additional low-stakes practice.

Mixed-discipline projects, in which arts and science students solve a shared problem, may be especially valuable because they force each group to explain its ideas to an audience that does not share its assumptions. Teachers also act as models; when faculty members explain concepts clearly and invite questions respectfully, they demonstrate the competence they hope students will acquire.

Conclusion

The literature reviewed here suggests that communication skills among arts and science college students are shaped by anxiety and self-belief, by listening and interpersonal habits, by disciplinary writing conventions, by digital media, and by the opportunities institutions provide. Although the two streams differ in the genres they emphasise, they share a need for frequent practice, timely feedback, and an awareness of context. Colleges that treat communication as an integrated, discipline-sensitive outcome, rather than an isolated course, are better placed to support both academic success and employability. Future research could gather local data from arts and science students in the same institution to compare how these themes appear in practice.

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