COMMUNICATION SKILLS IN STUDENTS: A COMPARISON OF REPORTS BEFORE AND AFTER COVID-19

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ABSTRACT

**Purpose:** In order to contrast the trends in the literature regarding the subject of communication skills in higher-level students, main themes were identified that were emphasized before the pandemic and that, during and after it, ceased to be the subject of discussion.

**Methods:** There was a qualitative approach. It used the narrative documentary review method and Boolean search engines in online indexed databases. From 421 identified articles, 20 were selected for analysis in the "before pandemic" condition and 24 for the "during and post-pandemic" ones, classifying them by type of Intervention and diagnosis and by research focus: qualitative and quantitative.

**Results and Conclusion:** The pre-pandemic studies focused on elucidating the aspects associated with communication skills and academic performance, trying to design tools and implement strategies to improve communication performance in students. Finally, it is expected that educational institutions consider the relevance of implementing plans to reinforce and develop these soft skills in young people, maximizing technological resources as allies in improving their development in this globalized social context.

**Research implications:** On the other hand, in the During and post-pandemic stages, they came together to explain the causes linked to the withdrawal of the expressive ability of the students, reconsidering the use of virtuality and highlighting the need to use traditional strategies as the best alternative to promote communicative skills.

**Originality/value:** Study in the face of the overwhelming irruption of remote education as the only option for academic interaction.

**Keywords:** Social Skills, Communication, Pandemic, Remote Education.

HABILIDADES DE COMUNICACIÓN EN ESTUDIANTES: COMPARACIÓN DE RELATÓRIOS ANTES DEPÓS DEL COVID-19

RESUMO

**Objetivo:** Para contrastar as tendências da literatura no que diz respeito ao tema das competências de comunicação em estudantes de nível superior, foram identificados principais temas que eram enfatizados antes da pandemia e que, durante e depois dela, deixaram de ser objeto de discussão.

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INTRODUCTION

The Covid-19 pandemic completely transformed the lifestyles of human beings, affecting the ways we work, study, and even interact with one another. In the field of education, activities were shifted from the classroom to a home environment, revealing both technological advantages and disadvantages in terms of expected learning outcomes (Moise et al., 2021). It is undeniable that this abrupt transformation revolutionized the use of communication platforms, leading to the establishment not only of effective employment protocols but also norms and codes of good practices (Jurakovic et al., 2022; Selvaraj et al., 2021). Additionally, there were reports pointing out the inefficiency in the interaction between students and teachers, which were often experienced as feelings of isolation and boredom by both academic parties (Alawamleh et al., 2022). However, in some cases, these challenges were overcome through creative use of technology for communication (Schiavio et al., 2021), albeit only in specific instances.

One of the relevant aspects addressed in this article is related to the topics concerning communication skills that were discussed as primary themes both before and after the pandemic. This is because in the Latin American context, the use of these disruptive technological strategies was not widely spread before the beginning of 2020. However, their subsequent usage intensified, leading to issues of opportunities that translated into significant digital divides that, unfortunately, are still not being addressed by local authorities (Cechinel et al., 2020; Romero-Hall, 2021). Daily face-to-face communication has ceased to be essential in today's context.

Thus, the associations of behaviors aimed at increasing closeness among friends and family with students have been replaced by a condition of greater autonomy that involves remote communication mediated by mobile devices or computers (Manago et al., 2020). In this perspective, some researchers have reported that e-learning has negatively impacted communication skills and social competencies (Alawamleh et al., 2022; Ariebowo, 2021; Bączek et al., 2021; Nicolaou, 2021). However, the literature is not conclusive on this matter.
because in some areas, such as language learning, positive results have been observed in these same skills (Zhai et al., 2021).

In this regard, the research aims to contrast the trends in the literature regarding the topic of communication skills in higher education students, seeking to identify key themes that were emphasized before the pandemic and that, during and after it, ceased to be the subject of study due to the overwhelming emergence of remote education as the only option for academic interaction. The findings will allow us to visualize those themes that, while important to address, may have taken a back seat, and to identify emerging topics that started to gain greater relevance in the new virtual context. This analysis will help assess the subtopics within this variable concerning the development of a generation that embraces new modes of communication and favors the depersonalization of relationships, placing greater importance on the electronic media and devices that enable these human interactions.

According to Sánchez (1993), Tejera & Cardoso (2015), the analysis of communication skills is based on people's communication, specifying three main skills within pedagogical contexts. These skills include: the management of processes for the transmission and exchange of graphic, written, and oral information while using linguistic expression resources correctly. The establishment of proper communication on a solid foundation of mutual understanding and respect among individuals, and the process of interactions between the teacher and students within the framework of everyday academic interaction.

On the other hand, Álvarez (1997), agreed with Sánchez regarding the number of communication skills, although the wording of these skills is different. Namely: observational skills, which involve aspects of behavioral orientation during communication, such as attentive listening and perceptible emotional states. Expressive skills, which encompass factors like argumentation, fluency, clarity in information transmission, providing examples for better explanation, formulating questions, the ability to synthesize ideas, and expressing feelings, often accompanied by the use of gestural resources (Álvarez, 2001). Finally, empathetic relationship skills, which consist of actions involving emotional closeness, personalization of relationships, and interactions based on the trust generated during the dialogue. It also includes the option for participants to engage without interruptions and with full respect for opinions and the expression of ideas.

Within these definitions, communication skills contribute to the quality of information transmission in various settings, especially in academia, where curriculum activities require interaction not only between the teacher and students but also among the students themselves. In this context, the higher education teaching and learning process is an excellent environment for the analysis of these skills because, as Álvarez (1998), pointed out, it allows for the typification of essential characteristics, their components, and underlying principles, taking into account the peculiarities of the human group that operates in higher education.

2 METHOD

The research follows a qualitative approach. The method of narrative document review (Aguilera, 2014) was employed, which involves collecting and systematizing literature related to the study's purpose (Hernández-Sampieri & Mendoza, 2018). Boolean search operators (AND, OR) were used with keywords ["communication skills" / "communication abilities" / "communication competencies"]. Filtering criteria were determined by the context in which the analysis is framed [higher education], and the collected information was segmented into two time periods: (1) from 2015 – 2019 (before the pandemic) and (2) from 2020 – 2023 (during and post-pandemic). The PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic reviews and Meta-Analyses) methodology was used to select articles with the most relevant themes related to the proposed study topic (Yepes-Nuñez et al., 2021).
3 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

As a result of the initial search, 421 articles were found that contained information in line with the methodological specifications of the research. However, after verifying the selection criteria [conducted in an educational context; focused on students as subjects of analysis, and original articles], 20 articles were selected for analysis in the "pre-pandemic" condition and 24 for those in the "during and post-pandemic" condition.

These articles were categorized by type: Intervention, which employed an experimental methodology, and Diagnostic, in which there was no active intervention, making it a non-experimental study. Additionally, the second classification aspect was the approach, which was qualitative when no quantifiable measurements were made and quantitative when they were.

An interesting detail in the findings was that in the period before the pandemic, there were no intervention-type articles with a qualitative approach that met the selection requirements, in contrast to what was found during and after the pandemic. It is possible that, up until then, due to the ease of physical contact, researchers may have opted for quantitative approaches that allowed them to process information more effectively to produce results.

Table 1. Details of the number of articles classified by type and approach, according to the publication time (before // during and post-pandemic).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Approach</th>
<th>Before the pandemic</th>
<th>Before and post the pandemic</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>f</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>f</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intervention</td>
<td>Qualitative</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Quantitative</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>35.0</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diagnostic</td>
<td>Qualitative</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>40.0</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Quantitative</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>25.0</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td></td>
<td>20</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


On the other hand, it is relevant to note that in terms of quantity, there was not much difference between diagnostic-type studies before and during and after the pandemic. The frequencies of studies with qualitative and quantitative approaches were very close, indicating that the trends in the proposal and execution of these types of studies did not change in these two evaluated stages. In contrast, there were differences in intervention-type studies with qualitative approaches, with a higher number found during and after the pandemic, while quantitative studies remained the same in quantity.

Table 2 provides a systematic overview of the analyzed literature. In intervention-type articles with a quantitative approach selected for the period before the pandemic, the common theme was the application of strategies to improve communication skills, with a focus on students in professions related to applied or medical sciences (Divan & Mason, 2015; Aguilar-Vargas et al., 2016; Garcia et al., 2018). There was also concern for the improvement of verbal expression in other languages, primarily in English (Pomino & Gil-Salom, 2016; Melnichuk et al., 2017). Some aimed to enhance verbal and written expressiveness as a requirement for academic promotion (Salamonson et al., 2019; McLaren, 2019). A common aspect was the proposal of tools and improvement systems based on interaction and the practice of expression, yielding interesting results compared to the initial conditions of the participants (Salazar et al., 2023).

In diagnostic-type studies during this same time period, a distinction was made between qualitative and quantitative approaches. Qualitative studies focused on highlighting...
communication skills and academic performance in various subjects, with a particular emphasis on two professional fields: Education and medical sciences. The former was justified because teachers have classrooms as their study environment, where they engage in continuous lectures. The latter group was highlighted because healthcare personnel interact continuously with patients and need assertive and precise communication competencies (Shir et al., 2016; Heron, 2019; Kutbiddinova et al., 2016; Harter & Jacobi, 2018; Braun & Mishra, 2016; Li et al., 2017; Oliver & Jorre de St Jorre, 2018; Khamidovna et al., 2019).

In quantitative studies, the concern expressed in the articles was associated with the employment scenarios of university graduates. These studies focused on the labor market, from which they extracted the communication competencies required. Consequently, they modified their educational management documents and pedagogical strategies to implement these competencies and ensure the graduates’ job placement. In this perspective, they assumed that with this input, they would be significant in shaping their proposals. However, the studies also discussed the difficulties observed in these young individuals during their academic performance in pre-professional practices (Mercer-Mapstone & Matthews, 2015; Bozic & Pintarić, 2018; Matthews & Mercer-Mapstone, 2016; Jaafar, 2018; Kapinga & Amani, 2016).

<p>| Table 2. Thematic breakdown of the selected articles categorized by condition, study type, and research approach. |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Condition</th>
<th>Type of study</th>
<th>Approach</th>
<th>Main themes</th>
<th>Prominent sources</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Before the pandemic [2015 – 2019]</td>
<td>Intervention studies</td>
<td>Quantitative</td>
<td>Improvements in scientific communication skills</td>
<td>(Divan &amp; Mason, 2015); (Aguilar-Vargas et al., 2016); (García et al., 2018)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Improvements in communication skills in other languages</td>
<td>(Pomino &amp; Gil-Salom, 2016); (Melnichuk et al., 2017)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Enhancements in expressive skills</td>
<td>(Salamonson et al., 2019); (McLaren, 2019)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Before the pandemic [2015 – 2019]</td>
<td>Diagnostic</td>
<td>Qualitative</td>
<td>Communication skills stand out in improving academic development</td>
<td>(Shir et al., 2016); (Heron, 2019); (Kutbiddinova et al., 2016); (Harter &amp; Jacobi, 2018); (Braun &amp; Mishra, 2016); (Li et al., 2017); (Oliver &amp; Jorre de St Jorre, 2018); (Khamidovna et al., 2019)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Before and post the pandemic [2020 – 2023]</td>
<td>Intervention studies</td>
<td>Qualitative</td>
<td>Communication skills and demonstrated competencies in the workplace</td>
<td>(Mercer-Mapstone &amp; Matthews, 2015); (Bozic &amp; Pintarić, 2018); (Matthews &amp; Mercer-Mapstone, 2016); (Jaafar, 2018); (Kapinga &amp; Amani, 2016)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Before and post the pandemic [2020 – 2023]</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>The platforms emphasize cognitive knowledge and do not favor the development of communicative interaction</td>
<td>(Holik &amp; Sanda, 2020); (Sholihah et al., 2022)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
It was evidenced that training with neuro-educational tools improves communication skills. (Fragkaki et al., 2022; Bobkina & Domínguez, 2023; Vasiliou et al., 2023)

Low effectiveness of verbal interaction through platforms. (Alcalde & García, 2021; Punjani & Mahadevan, 2022)

Interventions of emotional intelligence strengthening programs are necessary to improve communication skills. Collaborative work allows students to enhance their knowledge and achieve greater academic effectiveness. (Vlachopoulos et al., 2020; Zhoc et al., 2022; Banisi et al., 2022; MacEvilly & Brosnan, 2022)

Studies on the association between communication skills and post-pandemic behaviors. (Zoppi & Epstein, 2021; Eskicümali et al., 2020; Holik & Sanda, 2020)

Technology & In-Person: Greater disadvantages of remote education on verbal expression skills in in-person settings. (Peña-Ayala, 2021; King & Bailey, 2021; Alhammadi, 2021)

Use of tools to strengthen soft skills with an emphasis on communication and expressive skills. (Kholikova, 2021; Volkov et al., 2022)

Verbal skills are lower in students who began their studies with virtual learning. (Braun, 2021; Machado et al., 2022)

Direct communication applications are noted as the best for the development of expressive skills. (Chan et al., 2020; Gutiérrez, 2022)


In the case of selected studies during and after the pandemic, a peculiar aspect was observed: interventional research proposals with a qualitative approach that analyzed interesting aspects. These studies found that the effectiveness of the platforms used in virtual education only favors the acquisition of theoretical knowledge but limits the development of communication skills (Holik & Sanda, 2020; Sholihah et al., 2022).

On the other hand, quantitative reports were related to measurements of results and opinions regarding the effectiveness of interactions and verbal expressiveness through electronic media (Alcalde & García, 2021; Punjani & Mahadevan, 2022), as well as perceptions regarding the use of psycho-neuro-pedagogical tools and integration strategies through virtual
applications (Vlachopoulos et al., 2020; Zhoc et al., 2020; Toirovna, 2022; Banisi et al., 2022; MacEvilly & Brosnan, 2022).

In the group of diagnostic-type studies, for this second evaluation stage, it was observed that a significant portion of the published studies had a greater diversity in qualitative approaches. These studies linked communication skills with some behaviors of social interaction withdrawal accentuated during the pandemic (Zoppi & Epstein, 2021; Eskicumali et al., 2020; Holik & Sanda, 2020). Others analyzed the advantages and disadvantages of virtual education regarding the development and strengthening of social skills, determining that the greatest strengths are in cognitive thinking. However, due to the vast amount of information, student distraction is higher.

Furthermore, for the development of soft skills, including communication skills, the contribution of virtual learning is very low (Peña-Ayala, 2021; King & Bailey, 2021; Alhammadi, 2021). However, this latter aspect, which was identified as a significant problem, led to research proposals that aim to provide tools and strategies to reverse inhibition and social withdrawal (Kholikova, 2021; Volkov et al., 2022).

In this regard, quantitative studies emphasized descriptions, comparisons, and correlations related to expressive communication skills and other soft skills in order to determine the deficiencies of virtual learning in these competencies (Braun, 2021; Machado et al., 2022), pointing out that face-to-face direct interaction yields better results in the development of students' communication skills (Chan et al., 2020; Gutiérrez, 2022).

This description led to summarizing the dominant themes of the selected articles, observing that both before and during and after the pandemic, for intervention-type works, the common theme was focused on designing and implementing strategies and tools to enhance students' communicative development (Pereira et al., 2023).

However, the peculiarity before the pandemic was that virtual tools were considered a good option, while in the later assessments, traditional teaching methods were considered more effective. For diagnostic-type studies, the common aspect translated into the affirmation of the role of communication skills in academic development and subsequent success in the job market. Although the learning environment may vary, it was clearly distinguished that learning styles are crucial in strengthening students' social skills and critical thinking (Figure 1).

In terms of particularities, diagnostic studies during the During and post-pandemic phase stood out. These studies focused on the limitation of virtual education in the development of students' soft skills, a situation resulting from events that occurred simultaneously. The anxiety caused by the impact of the deadly virus and the necessity to adapt to an educational model that had not been effectively tested before led to a series of interconnected difficulties. Concerns about the competencies that would lead to the post-pandemic employability of university graduates have not been completely forgotten. However, it is undeniable that the requirements for post-pandemic employability have undergone significant transformation.
4 CONCLUSION

In conclusion, pre-pandemic studies focused on elucidating the aspects associated with communication skills and how they determine academic performance. They aimed to design tools and implement strategies that were used to enhance verbal and written communication performance in students. In contrast, during the During and post-pandemic phase, the selected studies converged on explaining the causality linked to the withdrawal of expressive skills in students, reconsidering the use of virtual learning as an ally in strengthening these skills, and the need for traditional strategies as a better alternative to promote social skills with an emphasis on communication.

Finally, there is a possibility that in this post-pandemic stage, where a gradual return to in-person education is taking place, educational institutions may consider the relevance of implementing plans to reinforce and develop communication skills. Starting from these skills, they can begin to strengthen other soft skills in young people, maximizing technological resources as allies in the process rather than obstacles. It should be remembered that humans are inherently socially active and require ongoing interactions to confirm their development in this globalized social context.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Our gratitude to colleagues who contributed with suggestions and recommendations during the elaboration and analysis stages.

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