

Exploring the Significance of the Communication Skills Module on Student Teacher Professional Development

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ABSTRACT: Effective communication skills are fundamental to teacher professionalism, directly influencing pedagogy, classroom dynamics, and collaborative practice. Within South Africa's diverse, multilingual educational setting, dedicated communication training is critical. This study investigated the significance of the Communication Skills Module (CSM) in shaping student teachers' professional development, utilizing Bandura's Social Learning Theory and Habermas's Theory of Communicative Action as theoretical lenses. A qualitative case study design was employed, and thematic analysis was conducted on interview responses from student teachers at a South African university. Key findings revealed five critical dimensions where the CSM impacts teaching: effective lesson delivery, relationship-building, adaptability to diversity, fostering student engagement, and enhancing professional confidence. Participants consistently emphasized communication as an indispensable pedagogical tool and a core professional competency. The CSM bridges theoretical knowledge with practical classroom application in complex environments. This study provides empirical evidence of communication's multifaceted role and recommends integrating comprehensive, culturally responsive communication training into all teacher education curricula.

Keywords: communication skills, multilingual education, professional development, South Africa, student teachers, teacher education.

ABSTRAK: Keterampilan komunikasi yang efektif merupakan dasar dari profesionalisme guru, yang secara langsung memengaruhi pedagogi, dinamika kelas, dan praktik kolaboratif. Dalam konteks pendidikan Afrika Selatan yang beragam dan multibahasa, pelatihan komunikasi yang terarah menjadi sangat penting. Penelitian ini menyelidiki signifikansi Communication Skills Module (CSM) dalam membentuk pengembangan profesional calon guru, dengan menggunakan Social Learning Theory dari Bandura dan Theory of Communicative Action dari Habermas sebagai landasan teoretis. Desain penelitian studi kasus kualitatif digunakan, dan analisis tematik dilakukan terhadap hasil wawancara dengan calon guru di salah satu universitas di Afrika Selatan. Temuan utama mengungkapkan lima dimensi penting di mana CSM berdampak pada pengajaran, yaitu: efektivitas penyampaian pelajaran, pembangunan hubungan, kemampuan beradaptasi terhadap keberagaman, peningkatan keterlibatan siswa, dan penguatan kepercayaan diri profesional. Para partisipan secara konsisten menekankan komunikasi sebagai alat pedagogis yang tak tergantikan dan kompetensi inti dalam profesionalisme guru. CSM menjembatani pengetahuan teoretis dengan penerapan praktis di ruang kelas yang kompleks. Penelitian ini memberikan bukti empiris tentang peran multifaset komunikasi dan merekomendasikan integrasi pelatihan komunikasi yang komprehensif dan responsif terhadap budaya ke dalam seluruh kurikulum pendidikan guru.

Kata kunci: Afrika Selatan, calon guru, keterampilan komunikasi, pendidikan multibahasa, pengembangan profesional, pendidikan guru.

INTRODUCTION

One of the key factors that can influence a country's development is education. Teachers' efficacy determines an educational program's outcome and the advancement of educational standards. The art of teaching is a means of transmitting attitude, skills, and knowledge to learners to cause a desirable and observable change in them. The Communication Skills Module (CSM) is fundamental to the professional development of student teachers, especially in South Africa's linguistically and culturally diverse educational context (Mahdi, 2023). This module is within teacher education programmes aiming to equip student teachers with the verbal and non-verbal competencies necessary for managing classrooms, delivering explicit teaching, and engaging with learners and colleagues (Florence, et al., 2022). This training prepares student teachers to navigate complex multilingual classrooms and foster inclusive learning environments.

Despite their importance, the literature reveals persistent gaps regarding the long-term impact and contextual relevance of communication skills modules in South African education programmes (Thornhill-Miller, et al., 2023). While some studies highlight improvements in student teachers' confidence and teacher efficacy following communication training (Luo & Li, 2024), empirical evidence remains limited on how these modules translate into practice amid challenges such as language barriers, resource constraints, and diverse learner needs (Monib, et al., 2025).

A research gap exists in exploring student teachers' direct perceptions of how communication skills modules affect their professional growth. Many student teachers still report struggling with articulating ideas clearly, managing classroom discourse, and engaging effectively with diverse learners, which raises concerns about the adequacy and relevance of current training. Understanding their lived experiences is essential to tailor curricula that effectively address skills development and the contextual challenges unique to the South African education system. This study seeks to fill this critical gap.

This study addresses the central question: How do student teachers perceive the significance and impact of a communication skills module on their professional development within a South African university context? The study aims to explore and illuminate student teachers' perspectives on the relevance and outcomes of a dedicated communication skills module within their teacher education programme. It examines how these skills influence their confidence, adaptability, and instructional competence, and identifies barriers and enablers within their training and practicum experiences (Andersson, et al., 2022). This research aims to inform future curriculum development in South African teacher education by focusing on qualitative insights from student teachers. Such insights are vital for designing communication modules that improve teacher competencies and address the linguistic and cultural complexities inherent in South African teaching (Spoelstra & Collins, 2023). The study seeks to contribute to policy and practice improvements that support the holistic professional development of future teachers.

Literature Review

Effective communication is a cornerstone of successful teaching, influencing classroom dynamics, student engagement, and professional collaboration (Darling-Hammond, et al., 2021). In South Africa, where diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds intersect, communicating clearly and empathetically is crucial for student teachers (Tariq & Ullah, 2024). The Communication Skills Module (CSM) in teacher education programmes equips student teachers with the necessary verbal, nonverbal, and written communication competencies. The extent to which this module impacts their professional development remains under-researched, particularly within the specific, multifaceted context of South Africa (Diko & Celliers, 2024). This literature review explores the significance of the CSM by examining existing scholarship, theoretical underpinnings, and the module's perceived effectiveness.

The Role of Communication in Teacher Professionalism

Good communication skills are essential for learners' academic success and teachers' professional efficacy. The teacher communicates numerous instructions orally to the learners in the classroom, and this practice extends to delivering explicit explanations and making subject matter relevant to everyday lives (Mahdi, 2023). Effective communication is what the existing literature often refers to as "effective teaching" (Florence, et al., 2022). It helps teachers collect feedback from students regarding their learning and provide performance feedback, enhancing students' comprehension and creating a favourable learning environment (Mahdi, 2023). Teachers who apply strong communication strategies can achieve educational goals more effectively (Fredericks & Alexander, 2021).

However, Fredericks and Alexander (2021) point out that the knowledge transfer process is complex, often hampered by communication barriers such as poor listening, lack of attention, and differing viewpoints. Research indicates that while teachers with strong communication skills are better at explaining concepts and managing behavioural challenges (Mahdi, 2023), those identified as unskilled communicators tend to encounter more problems in the sector (AbdulRab, 2023; Florence et al., 2022). This highlights a critical link: a teacher's efficacy is greatly influenced by their communication abilities (Tariq & Ullah, 2024). Effective teaching hinges on conveying knowledge, managing classroom interactions, and fostering inclusive learning environments (Debasu & Yitayew, 2024). This necessity extends beyond classroom teaching, requiring student teachers to develop strong interpersonal and presentation skills for collaboration with colleagues and parents, ensuring a smoother transition into professional roles (AbdulRab, 2023).

Challenges in Communication Skills Development in South Africa

Despite the recognised importance of communication skills, South African student teachers face unique challenges, primarily rooted in the legacy of apartheid, which resulted in disparities in language proficiency (Diko & Celliers, 2024). Many students learn and teach in English, which may not be their first language, creating a linguistic gap that can severely limit confidence and practical classroom discourse.

The literature presents mixed evidence regarding the effectiveness of dedicated communication modules. Some studies, such as those by Florence et al. (2022), see teacher effectiveness as a multi-dimensional concept where the ability to communicate and clarify things is a key component. Research on the CSM highlights significant improvements in student teachers' confidence and classroom interaction skills, particularly when modules employ active learning strategies like role-playing and peer feedback (Remacle et al., 2023).

Conversely, many critics argue that these standalone modules may not suffice, stressing that practical communication training should be integrated across the entire curriculum rather than isolated (Darling-Hammond, et al., 2021). This critique is particularly relevant in South African universities, where limited resources and the need for alignment with broader teacher development goals influence the module's ultimate impact (Sithole & Mbukanma, 2024). Thus, while the CSM is effective at building foundational skills, its isolated delivery has a recognized weakness and limited integration into subject-specific pedagogy.

Understanding how student teachers experience and internalise communication training is central to evaluating its impact. Qualitative studies consistently suggest that student teachers perceive improved communication as a pathway to enhanced self-confidence, classroom control, and learner engagement (Teane & Gombwe, 2022; Mokikwa & Mokhele-Ramulumo, 2024). The literature suffers from a significant conceptual gap: Most existing studies fail to capture the nuanced ways in which student teachers from historically disadvantaged institutions in South Africa experience and apply such modules. For example, those coming from multilingual or rural backgrounds may have fundamentally different perceptions of what constitutes "effective communication" compared to their urban, first-language English peers (Woldegiorgis & Chiramba, 2025).

While studies acknowledge that communication influences student academic performance (Remacle et al., 2023), limited research focuses specifically on how contextual factors (like resource constraints and linguistic complexity) influence the uptake and relevance of communication skills for student teachers during their practical teaching experience. By focusing on student teachers' lived perceptions, this study aims to bridge this contextual and perceptual gap.

Theoretical Framework

This study strategically integrates Bandura's Social Learning Theory (SLT) (Bandura & Walters, 1977) and Habermas's Theory of Communicative Action (TCA) (Habermas, 1984) to comprehensively analyse how South African student teachers develop professional communication skills. SLT explains the behavioural dimension of this development, emphasizing that skills are acquired through observation, imitation, and modelling, such as learning from mentor teachers or practising via role-play. SLT alone overlooks the essential ethical and contextual communication challenges, particularly in post-apartheid classrooms where power imbalances, historical inequities, and rampant multilingualism persist (Debasu & Yitayew, 2024). Habermas's TCA addresses this gap by defining ideal communication as dialogic, inclusive, and power-sensitive, urging teachers to

balance their necessary authority with democratic participation (Habermas, 1984). Together, these theories provide a powerful dual lens: SLT reveals the practical process of *how* communication skills are learned. At the same time, TCA evaluates the ethical and social quality of *certain communicative practices and why they* are pedagogically just.

This integrated framework was not merely interpretive but provided the foundational structure for the study's qualitative design, data collection, and thematic analysis. The interpretivist approach and semi-structured interviews align directly with TCA, which seeks to understand subjective meaning in social action. The interview protocol was designed with explicit prompts derived from both theoretical perspectives. SLT-driven questions targeted practical outcomes and learning processes (e.g., asking participants to describe how observing their mentor teacher impacted their communication self-efficacy). In contrast, TCA-driven questions explored ethical challenges and the negotiation of meaning (e.g., how they manage disagreements or language barriers to ensure all students participate equitably).

The theoretical synthesis guided the thematic analysis and coding process. SLT guided the coding of practical outcomes, focusing on themes related to behavioural acquisition, skill transfer from the module to the classroom, and enhanced professional confidence or self-efficacy. Conversely, TCA guided the coding of critical consciousness, focusing on themes related to dialogic practice, the negotiation of classroom power dynamics, and the pursuit of communicative validity (comprehensibility, sincerity, legitimacy) within the multilingual classroom discourse. This operationalization ensures that the study's findings move beyond simply documenting skill acquisition to critically assessing the quality and ethicality of professional communication in a complex South African teaching environment (Diko & Celliers, 2024). The framework ultimately underscores the necessity for the Communication Skills Module to successfully blend practical skill-building (SLT) with the critical consciousness needed to communicate ethically in an unequal society (TCA).

RESEARCH METHOD

This research is anchored in the interpretivist paradigm (Omodan, 2022), selected for its emphasis on understanding student teachers' subjective meanings and lived experiences within their specific social and professional contexts. This framework mandated using a qualitative approach (Lim, 2025) to effectively capture diverse and nuanced perspectives on how communication skills influence professional growth. A case study design was utilized because it allowed for an in-depth investigation of a single, bounded phenomenon, the impact of the Communication Skills Module (CSM) within a South African university's real-life setting, yielding rich, detailed, and contextualized insights.

The target population consisted of first-year student teachers enrolled in a Bachelor of Education (B.Ed.) programme at a South African university who had recently completed the CSM. This specific group was essential as they possessed both the theoretical knowledge from the module and sufficient practical teaching

experience to reflect critically on the module's relevance. We employed purposive sampling (Omodan, 2022) to select information-rich participants. The study proceeded with 15 participants; a size justified by the necessity of achieving data saturation. Data collection ceased when subsequent interviews failed to generate new themes or insights regarding the CSM's impact, confirming that theoretical saturation had been reached for this qualitative inquiry.

The primary data collection instrument was semi-structured interviews (Debasu & Yitayew, 2024). This method allowed the researcher to follow guiding questions while giving participants the flexibility to expand freely on their experiences, ensuring the collection of rich data. Data collection occurred over one week. The interviews were structured around the dual theoretical framework, exploring three main areas: Skills Acquisition (SLT), such as describing the application and outcome of a module technique; Professional Impact, such as how the module affected classroom discipline and confidence; and Critical Reflection (TCA), such as how participants ensured equitable participation in a multilingual class.

The research strictly observed all ethical guidelines. Given that the data was collected as part of a module survey and teaching and learning exercise, formal Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval was not required; however, all core ethical considerations were strictly adhered to. Informed consent was obtained from all participants after they were fully briefed on the study's purpose and the use of their data for research. Participation was voluntary, and participants could withdraw their data at any point. Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained throughout the process by assigning pseudonyms to all transcripts and securing all data to ensure no responses could be linked to individual students. The collected data was then analysed using thematic analysis (Andersson, et al., 2022), a systematic six-step process used to generate trustworthy and valid themes by aligning initial coding with the theoretical lenses of SLT and TCA.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents a detailed thematic analysis of the data collected from student teachers, exploring their perspectives on the significance of communication skills for their professional development. It delineates key themes from the data, providing empirical insights into how student teachers perceive the relevance of the effectiveness of the communication skills module in their pedagogical journey. The subsequent discussion section will then interpret these findings through the theoretical lenses of Bandura's Social Learning Theory (SLT) (Bandura & Walters, 1977) and Habermas's Theory of Communicative Action (TCA) (Habermas, 1984). By integrating these theoretical perspectives, this chapter aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the multifaceted significance of communication skills, moving beyond a mere instrumental view to encompass their profound impact on pedagogical effectiveness, classroom dynamics, interpersonal relationships, and the student teachers' evolving professional identities.

Theme 1: Communication as Foundational to Effective Teaching and Learning

Participants consistently emphasized that clear communication is the basic mechanism for transmitting knowledge and ensuring accessibility in a diverse classroom.

“Communication skills help me convey complex ideas to learners in simple ways so everyone can understand.”

“Explaining content clearly in class makes me feel more confident that my learners understand what is expected of them.”

“In a class where not everyone speaks the same language, I need to break down concepts as simply as possible so no one is left behind.”

These findings confirm literature that identifies communication as essential for effective teaching and lesson delivery (Florence et al., 2022). The emphasis on breaking down complex ideas speaks directly to the TCA concept of comprehensibility. In the multilingual South African context, effective teaching is seen as successful communicative action aimed at achieving mutual understanding, where teachers must constantly monitor and modify their delivery to bridge linguistic differences. The confidence derived from successful explanation ("makes me feel more confident") is linked to SLT, where enactive mastery, the experience of successfully executing a skill, reinforces the teacher's self-efficacy regarding instructional competence.

Theme 2: Communication for Relationship-Building and Classroom Management

A significant number of responses linked strong communication to creating a positive classroom environment, which is a prerequisite for effective management. Participants frequently noted that effective communication is.

“Builds trust and rapport with students” and “Creates a positive learning environment.”

Other responses highlighted its role in understanding needs:

“It helps understand students’ needs and avoids conflict before it starts.”

Student teachers view communication as essential for establishing rapport with students, colleagues, and parents, aligning with Fredericks and Alexander (2021), who stress the difficulties posed by communication barriers. Classroom management is thus viewed not simply as a matter of control, but as a dialogic process. Through the lens of TCA, effective management is achieved by establishing consensus and mutual respect, framed by legitimate classroom norms agreed upon via ongoing, clear communication. From an SLT perspective, building trust and resolving conflict is often acquired through observing and imitating

effective communicators (Dawadi, 2020), enabling student teachers to model positive interpersonal behaviours crucial for navigating South Africa's demanding educational settings.

Theme 3: Adaptability and Responsiveness to Diverse Learner Needs

Responses consistently highlighted the necessity of flexible communication styles to accommodate South Africa's cultural and linguistic diversity.

"I had to change my approach depending on whether the student was shy, outspoken, or spoke a different first language."

"Flexibility in communication is necessary in a diverse classroom like we have in South Africa."

"It is good because you will deal with different learners in school that will need you to communicate in different ways for them to understand."

The ability to adjust one's message to different learner profiles is a direct requirement of TCA, which demands that communication be inclusive and transcend the limitations of a singular lifeworld. Successfully communicating across language barriers provides a strong enactive mastery experience (SLT), which fundamentally strengthens the student teacher's belief in their ability to manage a diverse classroom effectively. This adaptability, often learned through vicarious experience (Mahdi, 2023), shifts the teacher's role from a simple knowledge transmitter to a reflective facilitator of comprehension, a necessary skill given the nation's pervasive multilingualism.

Theme 4: Student Engagement and Participation

Student teachers saw communication skills as the driving force for actively involving learners and fostering a democratic classroom environment. Participants noted that communication helps in:

"Encouraging student participation, discussion, and engagement".

Other contributions stressed that it

"Keeps learners interested and involved in learning" and "Motivates them to participate in the classroom."

Student engagement is significantly enhanced when teachers employ effective communication strategies, such as asking open-ended questions and actively listening (Khuman, 2024). This pedagogical practice is a practical realization of Habermas's call for movement toward an ideal speech situation, where all students can contribute to the discourse and knowledge is constructed collaboratively. When teachers model active participation and provide positive

reinforcement, they apply the principles of SLT, where vicarious reinforcement motivates students to join the dialogue. Therefore, the CSM prepares student teachers to utilize communicative action to promote intellectual development and democratic participation.

Theme 5: Professional Collaboration and Confidence

The data revealed that the CSM's impact extends beyond the classroom, shaping the student teachers' professional identity, confidence, and ability to collaborate. Participants highlighted the importance of:

“Confidence enough to speak publicly,” and the ability to “Collaborate with colleagues and parents.”

They also noted feeling

“well spoken” and “getting used to people” professionally.

This theme highlights the holistic impact on professional identity. Professional confidence is a precise measure of self-efficacy (SLT) built and sustained through repeated successful communicative interactions, such as delivering a presentation or leading a discussion (Mokikwa & Mokhele-Ramulumo, 2024). Effective collaboration with colleagues exemplifies a form of communicative action in the public sphere of the school. Successful collaboration requires participants to engage in rational discourse to achieve consensus on teaching strategies or school policies. Thus, the CSM trains student teachers in technical skills and the ethical, communicative processes required to contribute meaningfully to the broader educational institution.

This thematic analysis has revealed the profound and multifaceted significance that student teachers in a South African university attribute to communication skills in their future professional development. These perceptions deeply resonate with Bandura's Social Learning Theory (Bandura & Walters, 1977), which highlights how student teachers acquire and refine their communicative repertoire through observation, modelling, and the development of self-efficacy, driven by the anticipation of positive outcomes.

While Habermas's Theory of Communicative Action provides a robust framework for understanding how these communication skills facilitate mutual understanding, the establishment of legitimate classroom norms, and build authentic relationships free from distortion. In the diverse and often multilingual South African context, the student teachers' emphasis on adaptable and inclusive communication strategies aligns with Habermas's call for ensuring comprehensibility across different lifeworld. These findings suggest that a comprehensive communication skills module is indispensable for equipping future educators to navigate the complexities of the teaching profession, fostering supportive learning environments, and contributing effectively to the broader educational community.

CONCLUSION

This study successfully investigated the impact of the Communication Skills Module (CSM) on the professional development of student teachers at a South African university, using qualitative analysis framed by Bandura's Social Learning Theory (SLT) and Habermas's Theory of Communicative Action (TCA). The findings comprehensively revealed that the module significantly enhanced student teachers' abilities to communicate clearly, build constructive relationships, adapt to diverse learner needs, collaborate effectively with school stakeholders, provide constructive feedback, and develop a strong professional confidence and identity. These outcomes confirm the module's critical significance in equipping future educators to navigate the complex multilingual and multicultural realities of South African classrooms and professional environments.

By highlighting communication as both a learned behaviour (SLT) and a dialogic practice (TCA) essential for teaching effectiveness, the study contributes valuable empirical insights to teacher education literature. It underscores the critical role of communication competence not merely as a language skill, but as a core dimension of teacher professionalism essential for improving educational quality and learner engagement, particularly in diverse South African settings. The evidence supports prioritizing comprehensive communication teaching beyond simple language proficiency, including adaptive, intercultural, and dialogical communication skills.

It is recommended that teacher education programs continue to emphasize and integrate comprehensive communication training across the curriculum. Practical, scenario-based learning opportunities and sustained mentorship should be integrated to enable student teachers to observe and practice these competencies in real settings. Furthermore, schools and educational institutions must foster supportive environments that model effective communication and collaboration to reinforce this learning.

Despite the rich insights gathered, this study has limitations inherent to its design: it focuses on the perceptions of a small case study sample at a single South African university, limiting the generalizability of the findings. Data was collected shortly after the module's completion and practical experience, providing only a short-term view. Therefore, future research should focus on large-scale quantitative studies across multiple institutions to test the generalizability of these themes. Crucially, long-term longitudinal studies are needed to investigate the retention and application of these communication skills years later in professional practice and directly correlate them with tangible learner outcomes.

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