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Factors Impeding Communication Skills Proficiency among Higher Learning Students: Study of College of Business Education and Dar es Salaam Institute of Technology

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Abstract

Effective communication is essential for both academic and professional achievement in higher learning institutions. Although stakeholders in Tanzania have attempted several initiatives toward rectifying communication challenges, the difficulties students encounter in acquiring verbal and written competencies remain unresolved. This study investigates the main factors that impede the development of effective communication skills among students at two higher learning institutions. The study uses a qualitative design with in-depth interviews, focus group discussions, document reviews, and observations. Data were collected from 100 participants and analyzed using NVivo 12 software for thematic exploration. The findings identify four major barriers: teaching and learning methods; lecturer qualification; student-related behaviours; and poor English language proficiency. The findings offer practical insights for educators, curriculum planners, and policymakers aiming to enhance communication skills among Tanzanian students while contributing to the broader theoretical understanding of communication proficiency in multilingual, resource-constrained higher education contexts.

***Keywords*:** communication skills proficiency, verbal communication, written communication, higher education

1. Introduction

The most higher learning institutions particularly universities and colleges, focus on developing facilities for the students to enable a high level of proficiency in communication skills as it is essential for academic progress, career enhancement, and interactions in society after graduating. The human-readable communication process breaks down the basic facies of

human interaction into a textual format: Reading and writing need to remain core competencies throughout the whole teaching-learning process.

As used in this study, communication skills proficiency is a student's ability to effectively convey, interpret, and respond to messages in spoken and written forms, both academically and professionally. This includes aspects such as clarity of expression, coherence, tone, organization, and correct use of language. Verbal communication means communication by mouth, including speaking and listening, in classes like classroom talk, presentations, and interpersonal communication. In contrast, written communication includes academic writing assignments, including essays, reports, and research papers, as well as email correspondence. Together these two types make up what is commonly referred to as communicative competence which, in this sense, is the linguistic complement for pragmatic ability: knowing when to use language (or not) in the right communicative situations, in both speaking and writing.

These skills assist students not only with academic pursuits the capacity to participate actively in class conversations as well as academic presentations and assignments but also propel their confidence, voice and engagement with faculty, administrators, and peers inside, as well as outside, institutional context (Shishiwa, 2016). For instance, in oral presentations, teamwork and peer collaboration verbal communication is extremely important while written communication is vital in academic writing, assessment, documentation and also record keeping. Outside academia, strong communication abilities are considered by employers to be one of the most important employability competencies as it affects leadership, customer service, teamwork and problem-solving (Dauber & Spencer-Oatey, 2023).

Realizing this, Tanzania and other education stakeholders such as policy makers, curriculum developers and teachers have implemented a number of reforms that support communication skill development. Such tools range from curriculum changes and pedagogical training to linguistics-based course instructor deployment. Despite this, there continues to be, especially in the case of the verbal and written communication skills of graduates, low levels of communicative competence reported in numerous studies (Munishi 2016; Munishi 2022; NACTE, 2020; URT, 2018; World Bank, 2014).

According to available evidence, institutions in other countries, especially, in Sub-Saharan Africa and other developing regions track significant deficiencies in communication skills competence which ironically have reduced graduate employability and workplace readiness (UNICEF, 2019; World Bank, 2021). Such deficiencies appear with disengaged attendance of classes, poor-structured writing, and low performance in oral tasks, which decreases the growth level academically and in future jobs. Although the previous work notes these challenges, they typically view communication skills as a ubiquitous construct without disaggregation of verbal and written challenges or variation across institutional and academic disciplines. Numerous interventions have been decontextualized, failing to consider the socio-political, pedagogical and linguistic contexts of Tanzania's higher education environment.

This gap has been addressed in this study, where the current study investigates the contextual factors which contribute to the proficiency of students' communication skills (specifically verbal and written communication skills) at two higher learning institutions. Through nuanced depiction of lived experiences with qualitative inquiry, and systematic thematic analysis using NVivo 12, the

study yields grounded, evidence-based suggestions for enhancing communicative competence in higher education in Tanzania.

1.1. Statement of the Problem

Despite the widespread recognition of the value of communication skills in academic and professional domains, many students in Tanzanian higher learning institutions continue to face challenges in developing adequate proficiency. While there is increasing awareness of the importance of communication skills, and Tanzanian institutions have taken steps to address these needs through curricular reforms, policy changes, and the recruitment of communication instructors, many students still graduate lacking adequate competencies in verbal and written communication. Communication skills proficiency is frequently cited by employers as a key soft skill missing among graduates, acting as a major barrier to youth employment (World Bank, 2014). Although some studies (Dauba & Jullanda, 2024; Munishi, 2016; Munishi, 2022; Suhairom et al., 2024) have examined this issue, existing literature often fails to distinguish between the specific characteristics of verbal and written communication challenges or appreciate how these differ across various types of institutions. Additionally, the majority of past studies have relied heavily on broad, descriptive instruments that lack the qualitative depth needed to understand students' and instructors' lived experiences.

By focusing specifically on the two higher learning institutions, this study seeks to generate contextualized and actionable insights that will support communication skills enhancement through evidence-based recommendations tailored to the Tanzanian higher education setting.

1.2. Significance of the Study

Understanding the barriers to communication skills development is essential for designing effective interventions in higher education. This study offers several contributions toward that goal. Firstly, it provides an in-depth analysis of the factors hindering communication skills proficiency in Tanzanian universities, drawing a clear distinction between verbal and written communication challenges. Secondly, the study informs curriculum designers, education policymakers, and instructors by identifying key areas for pedagogical improvement and resource allocation. Thirdly, the findings help shape institutional strategies for improving students' communication capacities in support of both academic success and employability.

Finally, the study contributes to existing literature by applying NVivo 12 software for qualitative analysis. This approach offers a more detailed and systematic understanding of stakeholder perspectives, thereby addressing a critical gap in research concerning communicative competence in multilingual and resource-constrained educational contexts.

2. Literature Review

Communication, with both oral and written forms, is one of the essential competences needed to succeed in higher education and professional practice (Khan, 2017). Despite this, several studies also indicate that Tanzanian higher learning institution students still face difficulties in these skills (Montaner-Villalba, 2021). Barriers to effective communication skills appear to fall within five main thematic areas: linguistic background, pedagogic quality, systemic deficiencies, assessment, and student behaviours. Although these areas have been explored independently, little research has critically compared their impact on verbal and written

communication across Tanzanian colleges with varied programs. Therefore, this study addresses this gap of existing literature and contextualised it with technical & business education of Tanzanian environment. This framework also guided the initial coding categories and node development during the data analysis process in NVivo 12 to ensure continuity between the framework identified from the literature and that developed analytically.

2.1. English Language Proficiency and Foundational Barriers

One of the main arguments raised for the poor performance in communication skills amongst Tanzanian learners is a poor grounding in English as the medium of instruction in both secondary and tertiary education (Killick, 2019; Shishiwa, 2016; Wingate, 2012). Many students are poorly prepared for higher education and are educated by teachers who themselves lack proficiency in English (Munishi, 2016; Munishi, 2022). This has implications both for delivery and for student comprehension, especially when it comes to communication skills classes taught in English. Due to language limitations, instructors frequently mispronounce, give incorrect tone and make grammatical mistakes, which inherently obstructs students' understanding (Tang, 2016; Wei, 2022).

(Gilakjani & Ahmadi, 2011) and Luton (2015) note that poor pronunciation and tone or intonation changes alter meaning, create confusion, and hinder student involvement. This encourages students to shy away from communication-based activities and prevents learning basic principles. While existing literature recognizes these barriers, it often fails to distinguish between how they affect oral and written communication. This study addresses that gap using disaggregated thematic coding in NVivo 12, because mapping how language-related difficulties manifest across communication modalities provides a fuller picture of the challenge individuals face and offers potential avenues for intervention.

2.2. Instructional Quality and Pedagogical Gaps

Instructional quality is another critical determinant of communication skills development. Ellis (2019) and Mwila (2025) note that communication instructors often lack mastery of subject content and pedagogical strategies, particularly in areas like active listening, non-verbal communication, and public speaking. Poor lesson planning and delivery compounded by students' language limitations undermine comprehension and participation (Munishi, 2022). Tang (2016) emphasize that inadequate pedagogical practices hinder instructors from promoting interaction, creativity, and independent thinking, which are key elements in developing communicative competence.

Roorda, et al. (2020) and Malykhin et al. (2024) underscore the necessity of communicative teaching approaches to inspire student engagement. Yet, the literature rarely examines how these shortcomings affect oral versus written performance or how they influence students' confidence in either mode. This study bridges that gap by analyzing instructor-related factors through NVivo 12, with coding categories such as "delivery method," "feedback," and "teaching interest," helping isolate how pedagogical choices shape communication skill development.

2.3. Infrastructure, Class Size and Feedback Constraints

Physical learning environments are also important in communication (Guffey, 2016). Overcrowded classrooms and insufficient teaching aids as well as lack of digital or physical infrastructure limit feedback and active engagement opportunities (Komba, 2016; Munishi, 2016; Munishi, 2022). Tang (2016) and Gulua (2020) contend that such constraints inhibit instructors from customizing learning or providing constructive feedback, especially when it comes to writing tasks. Indeed, detailed feedback is crucial for learners to improve their written communication but is rarely viable in large classes (Kotamjani et al., 2018).

These are all well-known challenges, but few studies have examined their particular impact on verbal versus written proficiency in different fields of study. NVivo 12 is then used to help capture these nuances, structuring nodes around variables of interest, including 'class size', 'feedback delays', and 'resource availability'. Further, frameworks such as CEFR (Wang & Li, 2020) are also conceptually tested in this context, in terms of progressive skill development in resource-constrained contexts.

2.4. Curriculum Interpretation and Assessment Systems

Poor dissemination of curricula (Holley, 2023) is another contributor to communication skills not being optimal. Tang (2016) and Needleman et al. (2018) argue that when instructors move from curricular goals to teaching practice, intended and practiced learning often diverge, resulting in coverage of prefigured content without attention paid to their transformational quality. Pandey et al. (2020) and Makayev et al. (2017) move beyond grammar-heavy approaches and lecture-mode delivery and encourage positive expression from students. No one even try to monitor or improve their writing skills without frequent formative feedback (Lipnevich & Smith, 2009; Sopina & McNeill, 2014).

Koretz (2008) goes further by warning that high-stakes testing actually encourages memorization at the expense of meaningful communication. Yet, previous studies do not sufficiently investigate how oral and written assessment practices affect learning outcomes differently. Using matrix queries and text search functions in NVivo, this study investigates these gaps across identified coded themes in the interviews such as 'assessment pressure', 'feedback cycles', and 'task engagement', and assists in pinpointing which practices either impede or facilitate varying communication outcomes.

2.5. Student Attitudes, Motivation, and Anxiety

Student behaviour is also an important factor. Students tend to avoid class activities due to fear of being judged, low self-esteem and lack of motivation (Seng & Abdullah, 2018). Some researchers (Roorda, 2025) directly link passive classroom behaviour to poor student-teacher relationships; others (Dauba & Jullanda, 2024; Munishi, 2016, 2022) note that students place little value in communication courses, using them as a way to pass without seeing much use outside the classroom. Weak foundations in the English language compound this disengagement and underperforming academically in all subjects (Ahmed et al., 2017; Babapoor et al., 2018; Tayyab et al., 2023). Yet little research has examined how these behaviours rippled effect into the acquisition of spoken and written communication (Özdemir & Seçkin, 2025). The assumption that their psychological barriers were contributing to poorer academic performance than expected was based on the analysis through coded NVivo themes

of ‘fear of speaking’, ‘low motivation’, and ‘feedback rejection’. This supports the findings of Reed (2020), who emphasize the need to nurture both cognitive and affective domains in the growth of 21st-century skills.

Even though there is plenty of literature concerning the abovementioned topics, we have insufficient information on the dynamic influences that affect verbal and written communication skills in higher education. The vast majority of studies either generalize their findings around the challenges of communication or focus exclusively on written communication without considering the differential impact of these challenges in different communication modes and institutional contexts. Additionally, few studies have utilized qualitative software such as NVivo to systematically code stakeholder perspectives and thematic interrelatedness.

To fill this gap, the present study explores the problems that affect students' verbal and written communication skills at both institutions. The five thematic categories identified through the literature review: language background, instructional quality, infrastructure, assessment systems, and student behaviour informed the coding framework and the basis for data analysis in NVivo 12. This alignment allows for conceptual coherence and an evidence-based, contextualized understanding of the forces shaping communication skills development in Tanzanian higher education.

3. Research Design and Methodology

3.1. Research Design

A descriptive qualitative research design was employed in this study to explore and describe the constraints of communication skills proficiency amongst higher learning students in Tanzania. This design was chosen, as it facilitates a comprehensive understanding of human experiences, perceptions, and behaviours, without being limited by a prescriptive case framework (Sandelowski, 2000). It is particularly well-suited to answering ‘what’, ‘how’ and ‘why’ questions such as why students struggle with verbal and written communication skills and how those challenges manifest in different academic contexts. This study stands from the fact that it was conducted in Dar es Salaam to two major technical institutions. The aforementioned institutions were selected purposefully based on their reputable standing in Tanzania’s higher learning institutions and the fact that CBE is largely prominent for Business and ICT programs, with DIT well-known for Engineering and Natural Sciences. This juxtaposition paved the way for learning valuable comparative lessons regarding how communication skills are taught, used, and contested across diverse academic disciplines and enhanced the capacity of the study to capture different experiences and opinions.

3.1.1. Research Questions

1. What factors hinder students’ proficiency in verbal and written communication skills in Tanzanian higher learning institutions?
2. How do these challenges differ across academic disciplines and between instructors and students?

To ensure the trustworthiness of the analysis, strategies such as peer debriefing, iterative coding cycles, and inter-coder agreement were applied. A second researcher reviewed 20% of the

coded data for consistency and alignment with identified themes. Any discrepancies were discussed and resolved through collaborative validation, enhancing the study's credibility and dependability. Additionally, audit trails were maintained to document coding decisions and analytical reflections throughout the process.

Advanced NVivo tools, such as matrix coding queries, were used to explore patterns and differences across institutions and participant types. Visualizations, including word clouds, tree maps, and coding stripes, illustrated the prevalence and intensity of particular themes. NVivo's text search and word frequency features also helped identify dominant terms and concepts across the entire dataset. The structured use of NVivo 12 significantly enhanced the efficiency, transparency, and validity of the data analysis process. It enabled triangulation of responses across data sources and participant groups, leading to contextually grounded and evidence-based interpretations. As a result, the analysis provided a robust understanding of the root causes behind the communication skills gap among students in Tanzanian higher learning institutions.

3.2. Sampling and Participants

A purposive sampling approach was employed to recruit participants with knowledge and experience relevant to teaching and learning communication skills. The sample included 100 participants: 80 students (i.e., ranging from first-year to final-year students), and 20 instructors teaching communication skills. The selection reflects diversity of voice across disciplines, levels of study and teaching experience that enabled meaningful thematic exploration.

3.3. Data Collection Methods

In-depth qualitative data collection methods included:

1. Document Review: Reviewing institutional reports, national policy documents (e.g., Tanzania Education and Training Policy 2014), global frameworks (e.g., UNESCO Education 2030) as well as education sector reviews by organisations such as the World Bank and African Union. These documents added context and helped triangulate findings.
2. Semi-Structured Interviews: The study conducted in-depth interviews with 40 participants (i.e., 25 students and 15 instructors). These enabled locked down exploration of experiences, perceptions and challenges related to communication skill development.
3. Focus Group Discussions (FGDs): Six FGDs (i.e., four FGDs in each institution) were conducted, five (5) participants per group. FGDs promoted meaningful dialogue and allowed discussion for responses of common challenges and solutions.
4. Non-participant observation: Non-participant classroom observations were conducted to evaluate real-time communication practices, teaching styles, and student engagement in communication-related lessons.

3.4. Data Analysis Using NVivo 12

Qualitative data collected from semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions (FGDs), classroom observations, and document reviews were analyzed with NVivo 12 (i.e., a qualitative data analysis software that allows for systematic, in-depth thematic analysis (QSR International, 2028). Data analysis started with the transcription of all interviews and FGDs, as

well as the development of field notes and documentation of data. These data sources were subsequently imported into NVivo 12 and aligned to enable source classification based on participant traits (i.e., participant attribute), including institution, role (i.e., student or instructor), gender, and year of study. This classification made it possible to effectively cross-compare between participant groups.

The first step in the analysis was open coding, after which transcripts were read line-by-line and meaningful statements or phrases were highlighted and coded. Based on recalibrating ideas from recurring thoughts, codes were created such as 'poor English foundation', 'lack of feedback', 'large class sizes', 'lecturer disinterest', and 'student anxiety'. The researcher subsequently coded the data and grouped them into nodes, representing a category of related themes. Codes specific to instructor behaviour were summarised under the theme 'Instructor Competence', whereas learning environment-related issues were grouped under the theme 'Teaching and Learning Challenges'. These nodes were distilled into broader themes corresponding to the research objectives of the study.

The study used NVivo's advanced tools like matrix coding queries to compare patterns and differences across institutions and participant categories. Word clouds, tree maps, coding stripes, and other visualization were produced to help illustrate how prevalent and widespread particular themes and concepts were. This allowed for text search and word frequency queries to extract leading phrases and concepts across the data set. This allowed identification of shared barriers to effective communication skills development greater, such as lack of effective teaching strategies, limited feedback, and low levels of student engagement.

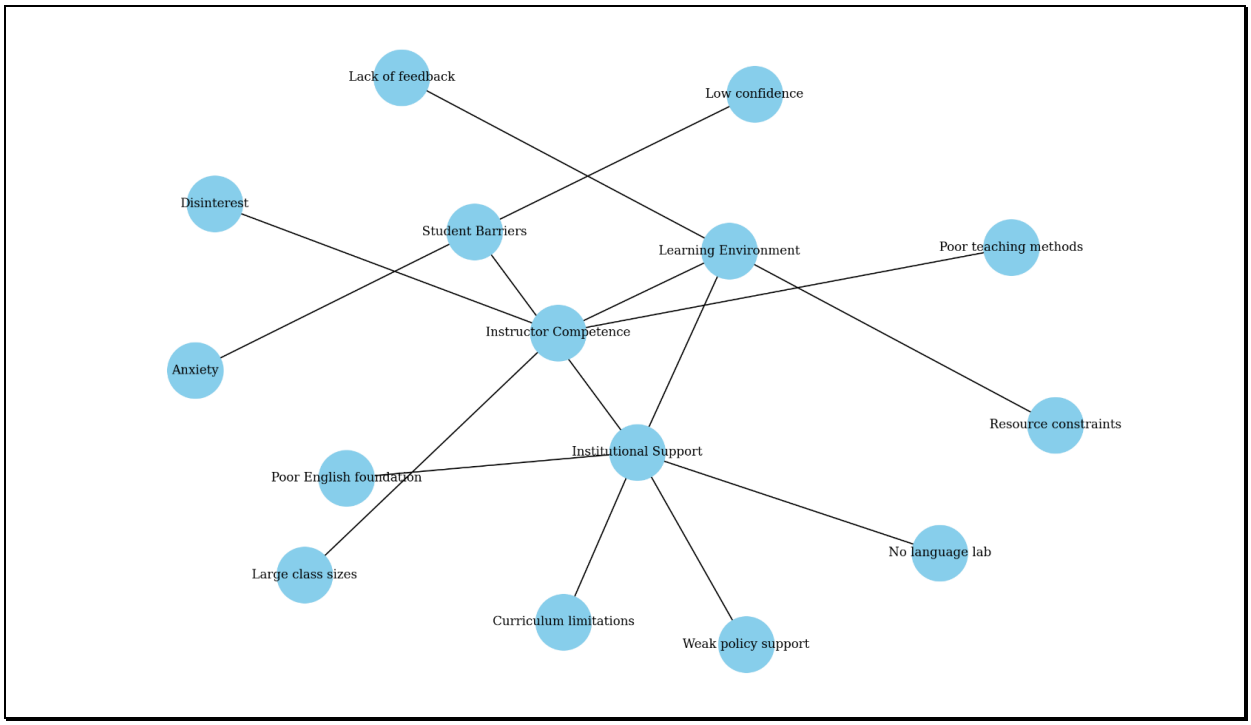
NVivo 12 increased efficiency, validity, and transparency in the data analysis process. This enabled triangulation of data across different sources and types of participants providing a contextually grounded and evidence-based interpretation of findings. The benefit of NVivo 12 was its ability to systematically organize and manage the large volume of qualitative data, which enabled the researcher to identify trends, categorize challenges, and draw meaningful insights into the reasons behind the communication skills competency gap among higher learning students.

FIGURE 1. WORD CLOUD DISPLAYING FREQUENT NVIVO CODES

Source: own compilation

Description: This word cloud visualizes the most commonly referenced terms in participant responses. Larger words such as "feedback", "anxiety", "foundation", and "teaching" highlight recurring themes that reflect the core communication barriers faced by students across both institutions.

FIGURE 2. HIERARCHICAL MODEL OF MAJOR THEMES IDENTIFIED IN NVIVO ANALYSIS



Source: own compilation

Description: *This diagram illustrates key thematic categories and their sub-nodes as coded in NVivo. Major themes include: (1) Instructor Competence, (2) Learning Environment Challenges, (3) Student-Related Barriers, and (4) Institutional Support Systems. Each theme is supported by linked codes representing specific recurring issues mentioned by participants.*

3.5. Ethical Considerations

The study adheres to ethical and data protection guidelines to protect participants and ensure research integrity. All participants gave written and verbal consent to participate in the study after the purpose and scope of the study explained. The names and identities of participants were anonymized; all data were secured. Participation was completely voluntary, with the option to withdraw at any time during the study. All research activities were carried out in accordance with local cultural norms and institutional policies.

4. Discussion of the Findings

Using NVivo 12 data processing, multidimensional barriers that hinder students in higher learning institutions in Tanzania from fully achieving communication skills proficiency emerged from the study findings. Systematic thematic analysis featuring NVivo node coding, matrix queries and visualization was utilized to identify key barriers, grouped into four main themes of impediment: (1) Teaching and Learning Processes, (2) Instructor-related Factors, (3) Student Behaviours, and (4) English Language Proficiency.

4.1. Teaching and Learning Processes

Using NVivo 12 for data analysis, the "limitation in teaching and learning process" has recognised as a main theme which influencing the students in acquiring communication skills. More than 65 percent of coded segments featured apparent student dissatisfaction with outdated

pedagogical approaches that characterized by one-way lectures, minimal interactions and delayed or insufficient feedback. Students regularly characterized their classroom experience as passive and uninspiring; one said, *"The lectures are so boring; we just sit and listen to the lecturer read from slides, no discussion, no practice"*. Another said, *"We only receive feedback during exams, and by then it's often too late to make changes before the next exam"*. This was supported through NVivo's word cloud, which shows common words such as 'boring lectures', 'no feedback', and 'no practice'.

The analysis also reveals a convergence of apprehension among instructors, in particular the need for interactive strategies in the context of large classrooms. *"As a teacher, I attempt to get my students to participate, but at times the class sizes get too large to be able to manage meaningful interaction"*, one instructor says. This adds to the dilemma of keeping students engaged in overpopulated classrooms in addition to the ineffectiveness of standard lecture and test methods. The matrix query in NVivo also illustrates the homogenous perspective among pupils and tutors on the lack of dynamic modalities like simulations, role-playing and peer teaching methods that are well-documented to enhance active learning and real-life communication practice.

Indeed, Lipnevich and Smith (2009) argue for regular, low-stakes formative feedback as necessary to develop students' communication and writing skills, and these results support their position. Moreover, the work of Wang & Li (2020) supports the trend towards curriculum designs that are structured, student-centered and aligned with the CEFR and that stage the development and use of communication skills across time. Such recommendations are supported by the NVivo analysis, highlighting the imperative of revamping communication modules to adopt interactive pedagogies and the use of frequent formative assessment together with timely feedback streams to augment student preparedness and performance.

4.2. Instructor-Related Factors

The most unifying barrier that impacted findings on skills acquisition is the competence of instructors within communication skills; 87% of student responses pointed to issues related to the delivery practices of communication skills instructors including their use of language and their overall engagement. NVivo 12 analysis reveals that poor grammar, monotone deliveries, absence of constructive feedback and inattentiveness from some instructors. All these factors led to lower student motivation and understanding during lessons. A student said, *"The lecturer is speaking in a monotone voice, and sometimes I can't even understand the points with the grammar being poor"*. Another commented, *"The instructor doesn't seem to care about our progress. They don't follow up with us after class to explain"*. Such sentiments affirm Luton's (2015) observation that it is the tone and delivery with which we speak that informs how students interpret us and engage in the classroom.

The most common mentions within the NVivo (i.e., text search query) files are words like tone, confidence, and grammar errors, which seem to indicate less instructional communication styles, indicating that this is certainly a recurring sub theme in the data. The matrix query in NVivo further provides evidence of a shared perspective of both students and instructors on the impact of rapport on classroom interaction, where it concludes that the absence of rapport plays a significant role. *"I know I could improve my delivery, but sometimes it's hard to keep things fun when the class size is overwhelming and students easily get distracted"*, one instructor

explained. This reinforces a shared understanding of the pedagogical challenges facing institutions of higher learning.

This study confirms Roorda (2025) that relational trust ultimately builds effective communication between instructors to successfully communicate with students. If students feel that there is no-one supporting them, no-one trying to listen to them, they will not engage in any learning process, because if you don´t communicate with them actively, they basically shut down. The NVivo findings reveal a critical need for ongoing professional development for instructors that will dedicate to improving pedagogical practice, using clear and engaging delivery and ensuring language accuracy within the context of the development of the e-learning materials. Even though implementation of influential capacity-building programs based on frameworks, e.g., CEFR (i.e., Common European Framework of Reference for Languages) assists instructors in developing privileged language awareness and improving instructional delivery, integration of meaningful, interactive, and student-centered pedagogical maps is critical.

4.3. Student Behaviour

Student-related behavioural factors are a significant barrier influencing the communicative skills proficiency level as evidenced in over 80% of the student response reporting issues including fear of speaking, lack of motivation, procrastination and poor time management. NVivo 12 cluster analysis indicates a high co-occurrence between '*fear of making mistakes*' and avoiding or refraining from verbal participation, thus revealing that a significant portion of students engaged in a passive response in classroom dialogue. This is consistent with Martínez-Saéz (2019), who identified the syndrome in activity where hesitation to be judged and failure disables students who will not make oral communication exercises.

The depth of this issue is reflected in students' narratives. For example, one student said, *"I'm afraid of making mistakes when I speak in class. It feels like easier to shut up, keep on your side and don't answer"*. Another spoke to similar concerns, saying, *"I don't feel motivated to contribute in group discussions because I don't feel that I'm good enough at English". These accounts show how self-doubt and a sense of low self-efficacy thwart students' efforts to participate in communicative practices, in particular oral communication"*. Instructors see this behaviour too. One wrote, *"I notice that students are afraid to answer questions even when I ask them to speak when in front of the class"*. Those tendencies inhibit verbal fluency and stifle feedback and iterations. Moreover, a word frequency query using NVivo exposes common words, including fear, feedback, and writing late, and how assignments completed at the last minute and without proper engagement in learning contribute to poorly developed writing abilities.

In this way, these findings support the argument by Sopina & McNeill (2014 that students who do not get specific, iterative feedback have difficulty identifying and addressing their own communication strengths and weaknesses. In addition, they are consistent with Wingate (2012) focus on formative assessment and the role of personalized support in promoting student engagement and motivation. This qualitative process leads to NVivo's thematic analysis, which suggests that learner-centered interventions are required to address these behavioural imperatives. Possible solutions like peer collaboration, personalized feedback and low-stakes speaking opportunities help students develop confidence in their communication skills. Incorporating these practices into instructional practices leads to increased confidence, engagement, and an overall sense of agency in students.

4.4. English Language Proficiency

The level of mastery in the English language becomes a significant predictor of students' ability to learn to communicate effectively. Upon analysis using NVivo 12, 84% of the students' reason that their issues with expressing themselves in writing and speech are due to poor grammar, limited vocabulary, and lack of input of English beyond school settings. Using the NVivo word tree output, it is found that these issues are repeatedly associated with words/phrases including '*confusion*', '*poor understanding*', and '*writing errors'*.

This concern is echoed in students' responses. One student said, *"I make many mistakes on grammar when I write or speak, and it makes embarrassed to communicate"*. Another wrote, *"I don't feel confident speaking in English because my vocabulary is limited, and I do not read much outside of class"*. These experiences highlight how language hinder students' confidence and their capability to express ideas with clarity, a pattern confirmed by instructors as well. As one said, *"The students often have problems with expression because they don't have enough words, and don't practice English enough"*. These results are in line with an earlier study (Komba, 2016; Munishi, 2016, 2022) which indicating that weak foundations in English, particularly in grammar and vocabulary are fundamental impediments for Tanzanian students' effective communication. As NVivo's thematic clustering also shows students do little listening, reading, and writing in informal settings outside of what they are formally assessed on, that only serves to exacerbate the problem.

4.5. Intersections and Interdependencies Across Themes

NVivo findings indicate that addressing this involves implementing more extensive language support strategies. This covers all steps from creating support programs in English, increasing access to language labs and media, integration of the English language through immersive and learner-based experiences. These interventions are seen as reflective of Wang & Li's (2020) argument for progressive exposure in multilingual learning contexts, and UNESCO's (2023) recommendation for education systems to implement inclusive and applied approaches for positive outcomes in functional language development.

The four thematic barriers are the teaching methods employed, the limitations of the instructors, the behaviours of the students, and the English proficiency of the students, none of which operate in isolation and rather compound each other in complex ways. For instance, established pedagogical techniques for second language learning are one thing; desirable outcomes in terms of the neurobiological or psychological facets of second-language acquisition under proper teaching interventions are quite another, and they suffer subrogated undermining when teachers do not have a great language command or do not craft an engaging course environment. In the same vein, students' anxiety, and lack of motivation, are often the direct result of poor teaching, and instructors' ability to provide timely and actionable feedback throughout the learning journey. In addition, without strong, foundational skills, students tend to disengage from both rendition (speaking and/or listening to others speaking) and written tasks, both of which add to the passivity in the class and the breakdown of communication.

Through comparative matrix coding of NVivo, the study finds overlapping nodes across all four themes, confirming these interconnected influences. These findings highlight the need for a more comprehensive intervention that enhancing instructional quality, teacher-student relationships, student confidence, and language skills in an integrated manner. An integrated approach like this

is better to prepare students with the appropriate communication competencies for success in Tanzania's higher learning institutions both in academia and executive positions.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

5.1. Conclusion

The results indicate that ineffective pedagogical strategies such as lecture-based presentation, large class size, and limited feedback reduce meaningful language practice and language skill consolidation opportunities. Against this background, instructors' own language proficiency, pedagogical competence, and attitudes have a powerful influence on how communication is taught and subsequently perceived by students. In addition, students' own behaviours such as speaking anxiety, procrastination, and rejection of feedback create internal barriers to skill development. Last but not the least, having a weak foundation in English, with limited exposure, irregular practice and outdated teaching methods, have found to be a key contributor that holds back further improvement in both written and spoken proficiency.

In response to the first research question, the study identifies four interrelated factors hindering students' verbal and written communication skills: outdated teaching practices, instructor-related challenges, student behaviours, and limited English language proficiency. Regarding the second research question, the study finds that the impact of these barriers varied across academic disciplines and participant categories. For instance, engineering students report higher levels of anxiety in oral tasks, while business students exhibit more difficulties with written structure and vocabulary. Instructors, on the other hand, express frustration over large class sizes and students' disengagement, which further compounded these challenges.

The key findings suggest that the in-depth teaching and learning of communication skills among students in higher education is hindered by limited approaches to teaching, inadequacies in facilitative teaching, factors related to the students themselves and gaps at an elemental level. The results highlight the importance of moving away from traditional, lecture-focused pedagogical models toward that of interactive, student-centered and feedback-rich instruction. Instructors are not just deliverers of content but facilitators of engagement, practice and mentorship. Moreover, students should be equipped with skills in time management, public speaking and constructive feedback application. Pre-university and higher education English language instructions must be redefined as communi-technology based, multi-modal and contextually driven.

Noteworthy is that the NVivo 12 software is incorporated into the analysis process which assisted in a structured thematic interpretation, which reflected the importance of data-driven decision making for identifying the unique complexities of educational challenges. In addition, it finds that the use of structured assessment frameworks, innovative programs such as the Virtual Exchanges (Horváth-Csikós, 2021) and the use of interactive writing practices positively impact on these key competences. Lastly, embracing international competency frameworks such as CEFR and utilizing digital tools vastly improve the teaching and learning of communication skills in higher education.

Importantly, this study reflects on the researchers' own positionality and the reflexive process undertaken during the research journey. Being academic members within one of the studied institutions provided unique access to participants and contextual insight; however, it also required continual self-awareness to minimize bias during data collection and interpretation. Peer debriefing

and audit trails were employed to enhance objectivity. This reflexivity strengthens the credibility of the study and underscores the importance of transparency in qualitative inquiry.

5.2. Recommendations

Based on the study's findings and conclusions, the following recommendations are proposed and grouped into three major categories for clarity and stakeholder actionability:

5.2.1. Institutional-Level Recommendations

1. Enhanced Student Support Services: Establish dedicated writing centers and speaking labs within institutions to offer personalized coaching, peer mentoring, and communication workshops. These can support students with confidence-building in public speaking, academic writing, and time management.
2. Smaller Class Sizes or Teaching Assistants: Institutions should reduce class sizes in communication skills modules or introduce teaching assistants to facilitate interaction, feedback, and individualized support during lessons.
3. Utilization of Digital Platforms: Encourage continuous language engagement through e-learning tools, mobile apps, podcasts, student-led blogs, and moderated discussion forums that support verbal and written communication outside traditional classroom settings.

5.2.2. Pedagogical Recommendations

1. Curriculum Reform and Instructional Innovation: Communication skills modules should be redesigned to incorporate interactive teaching strategies such as simulations, role-playing, debates, peer teaching, and collaborative writing projects. This should also include task-based and problem-solving activities that mirror real-life communication contexts.
2. Formative Assessment and Feedback Mechanisms: Introduce low-stakes, continuous assessment techniques that emphasize frequent, constructive, and individualized feedback to help students reflect, improve, and build confidence in both verbal and written communication.
3. Instructor Capacity Building: Provide regular professional development for communication instructors focusing on student-centered pedagogy, multimodal communication, differentiated instruction, and the integration of CEFR-based frameworks (i.e., Common European Framework of Reference for Languages) for teaching and assessing language proficiency.

5.2.3. Policy-Level Recommendations

1. Improved English Language Instruction in Secondary and Higher Education: The Ministry of Education should promote Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) approaches in English language instruction from secondary school through tertiary levels. Emphasis should be placed on multimedia exposure and balanced development of all four language skills listening, speaking, reading, and writing.
2. Benchmarking and Monitoring Language Proficiency: Regulatory bodies such as Tanzania Commission for Universities (TCU) and National Council for Technical and Vocational Education and Training (NACTVET) should set and enforce minimum English language proficiency standards for both students and instructors. Institutions should also be supported in implementing language proficiency monitoring tools at entry and exit levels.

3. Support for Research and Innovation: Policymakers should fund research into innovative models of communication pedagogy and support institutional experimentation with blended and virtual exchange programs that improve communicative competence in multilingual and resource-limited contexts.

5.3. Limitations of the Study

Although this study is rich in insights regarding the challenges influencing communication skills competency among Tanzania's higher education students, some limitations need to be noted. To begin with, the study was conducted in only two institutions which, though ensuring disciplinary contrast, restrict generalizability of findings across other settings and across universities with alternative 5student profiles and institutional environments. Second, the dynamic nature of language learning technologies and AI tools is likely to influence subsequent communication skills teaching and learning dynamics that may not be adequately appreciated from this study. Third, whereas NVivo 12 enabled systematic theme analysis, the employment of self-reported data from FGDs and interviews may be vulnerable to biases such as social desirability or recall bias. Future research may expand in scope by including longitudinal data, broader institutional coverage, and student performance measures to further enhance understanding and verify the current findings.

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Ethics Statement

For studies involving human participants, the authors confirm that the research complied with relevant institutional and national ethical standards. Ethical approval was obtained where required, and informed consent was secured from all participants prior to data collection. If ethical approval was not required, the authors confirm that the study adhered to applicable ethical guidelines.

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