

ISSC 2016 : International Soft Science Conference

Assessing Communication Competence of Flood Relief Workers in Malaysia

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Abstract

<http://dx.doi.org/10.15405/epsbs.2016.08.48>

The purpose of this paper is to explore communication competence among as perceived by disaster victim underlying the recent interest on communication studies and disaster management, discusses the current issues and offers a future research perspective. It offers to understand communication competence of relief workers in the areas of communication studies in Malaysian organizations. The cross-sectional data for this study were collected via a survey of 270 flood victims. The study highlights the important of flood relief workers' communication competence from different aspect as perceived by the flood victim. These characteristics will improve the level of understanding and create a better relationship among them. In sum, this study provides theoretical contributions to communication competence research and the literature on communication studies. The paper draws attention to the current issues of the disaster management on communication studies and highlights it for future directions..

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Keywords: Communication competence; Disaster management; Flood management; Communication studies; Flood victim.

1. Introduction

Emergency management scholars have long acknowledged the roles of communication in disasters. Disaster viewed by emergency management scholars as a rich context in communication studies. Despite this common interest, the two disciplines have had little do with each other in an integrated fashion. Emergency and crisis incidents are characterized by numerous factors that may delay effective reaction for managing worrying problems faced in such a situation. First, during crisis emergency managers face situations that create uncertainty in roles and responsibilities. Second, emergency

situation are require emergency managers to respond and react immediately due to the severity of the emergency situation. The devastating consequences of disasters and crises such as casualties, damage to people and property, and so forth make it imperative to prepare for, respond to, and recover from disasters in the most effective and timely manner. Finally, emergency situations require fast and frugal decision making by emergency managers (Abdullah 1996) which means that critical decisions are made under time pressure and uncertainty. Thus the purpose of this study is trying to combine both areas of communication competence and disaster management in Malaysian contexts.

2. Problem statement

Many reports, discuss management challenges, performance of response operations, and intergovernmental relations in the contexts of disaster management. Two frequently stated problems are interoperability and performance management. Problems in interoperability concern the need to create common languages, define expected outcomes, and lead by example. Performance measurement is an approach to defining outcomes and measuring progress toward achieving outcomes. Several reports argue the need to establish national standards. Performance is an essential management tool to guarantee objectives are being met whether these standards exist or whether local entities formulate their own. Thus, national-level plans show and emphasize some important performance standards, abilities, skills, and competencies that are required for managing emergencies in a collaborative setting.

Thus, the primary goal of this article is to address the concern related to communication competence among flood reliefs workers in Malaysia. This issue is particularly important and critical when considering such a elusive and sensitive field as emergency management. In a state where aid is necessary to show their skills in dealing with various issues related to disaster victims. Competence' implies having the capacity to function effectively as an individual and an organization within the context of the cultural beliefs, behaviors, and needs presented by consumers and their communities (Applegate and Leichty 1984). In the Malaysian context, culture plays a big role in communication. As a country which is comprised of three ethnic groups; the Malays (52 %), Chinese (30%) and Indians (8%), perceptions of communication competence can be varied. However, Asma (1996) asserts that, "while we differ in many symbolic expressions, our common denominator lies in our deep-seated Asian values" (p. xiii) (Clemens, Hietla, Rytter and Reese 1999). Looking at the communication style of one of these ethnic groups, the Malays, Lailawati (2006) contends that for the Malaysian Malays, their communication is partly shaped by the religion they embrace (Cody and McLaughlin 1985).

3. Review of the Relevant Literature

Communication scholars have long grappled with the concept of communicative competence. In a seminal publication, Chomsky (1965) articulated two concepts on competence: linguistic competence and performance. Linguistic competence refers to the native speaker's innate ability to produce grammatical sentences of a language, while linguistic performance refers to the actual use of language. His work is solely preoccupied with an ideal speaker-listener in a completely homogeneous speech community that knows its language perfectly and is unaffected by such grammatically irrelevant

conditions as memory limitations, distractions, shifts of attention and interest, and errors (Gigerenzer & Todd 1999).

Throughout the literature, the uses and definition of the term “competency” are numerous, varied, and inconsistent. While competence refers to the capability to function in a given setting, competency refers to one’s actual performance in a specific role in a given situation (Schroeder 2008). According to Eraut, (1994) “Competence.... is given a generic or holistic meaning and refers to a person’s overall capacity. At first, Spitzberg (1988) determined communication competence as “the ability to interact well with others” (p.68). He explains, “the term ‘well’ refers to expertise, clarity, comprehensibility, coherence, accuracy, effectiveness and appropriateness” (p. 68). Whereas Friedrich (1994) come out with a much more complete definition when he defined that communication competence as “a situational ability to set realistic and appropriate goals and to maximize their achievement by using knowledge of self, context, other, and communication theory to generate adaptive communication performances.”

This paper looks at communicative competence as a product of social experience, as it is highly dependent on the context in which the interaction takes place, and can have consequences on health risk behaviors among risky individuals, specifically children and adolescents. Communication, is a transaction that occurs between the conversant and interactant. We adopt the definition that communicative competence is the ability of an individual to demonstrate knowledge of the appropriate communicative behavior in a given situation such as disaster.

4. Theoretical Framework

Spitzberg & Cupach (1984) was designed a useful framework for understanding communication competence that known as the component model of competence because it is contain of three specific dimensions which is motivation (an individual’s approach or avoidance orientation in various social situations), knowledge (plans of action; knowledge of how to act; procedural knowledge), and skill (behaviors actually performed).

The component model asserts that communication competence is mutually defined by the interdependency of the cognitive component that concerned with knowledge and understanding, the behavioural component (concerned with behavioural skills), and the affective component (concerned with attitudes and feelings about the knowledge and behaviors) by interactants in an interpersonal encounter within a specific context. Rubin (1985) defined communication competence is “an impression formed about the appropriateness of another's communicative behaviour” and that “one goal of the communication scholar is to understand how impressions about communication competence are formed, and to determine how knowledge, skill and motivation lead to perceptions of competence within various contexts” (p. 173).

Communicative competence is dependent on the context in which the interaction takes place (Salleh 2006; Cross, Bazron, Dennis and Isaac 1089). Communication that is successful with one group in one situation, may not be consider as competent with a different group in another situation. McCroskey (1982) attempts to explained the importance of competence as “The domain of communicative competence includes learning what are the available means (available strategies), how they have been

employed in various situations in the past, and being able to determine which ones have the highest probability of success in a given situation (p. 5).

5. Method

The method employed was this study was quantitative design. The population for this research was flood victim at negeri Terengganu during the flood 2014. The sampling technique that has been used in this research was purposive sampling. This method required the researcher to select the sample that are known to possess a particular characteristics under investigation. Self-administered questionnaire was used as the research method. From the 300 set of questionnaires that are distributed by the researcher, only 270 set were returned. The questionnaire was classified into different parts. The first part of the questionnaire was about the socio-demographic characteristics of the respondents. The second part comprised the information about communication competence. Likert scale was used in the questionnaire for analysis.

Communication skills were measured using scales by Moreale, Spitzberg and Barge (2001) which measured communication competence based on three components which were motivation, knowledge and skills. Two items were dropped since it was not appropriate with the Malaysian community culture. The items were *Discussing Safe Sex with Someone You are Considering Sexual Relation With* (interpersonal communication) and *Making an Elaborate Toast to a Large, Formal Wedding Party* (public speaking). Likert type scoring (1 to 5) was employed for this instrument. High scores indicate high communications skills while low scores indicate low communications skills. The data were analyzed statistically and computed using the SPSS for Windows 20.0 statistical program.

6. Results and Discussion

This section of study presents the results and findings of the quantitative analysis. The first section of the study comprised the demographic information where data collected on the gender, age, income and education levels. The above information was analyzed using the descriptive statistics where mean, standard deviation, frequencies and percentage were calculated.

Table 1. Demographic data

Demography	Category	Frequency	Percent
Gender	Male	210	77.8
	Female	60	22.2
Age	<20 years	19	7.0
	21-30 years	71	26.3
	31-40 years	85	31.5
	41-50 years	68	25.2
	>50 years	27	10.0
Income	<RM1000	156	57.8
	RM1001-RM2000	75	27.8
	RM2001-RM3000	34	12.6
	>RM3001	5	1.9

Occupation	Not working	99	36.7
	Government	53	19.6
	Non-government	56	20.7
	Self-employed	57	21.1
	Others	5	1.9

Majorities of the participants were male at 77.8% and female accounted for only 22.2% of therespondents. All the participants were aged below 40 years. Most of the respondents (57.8%) income were less than RM1000 and self-employed as shown by table 1.

6.1. Perception toward communication competence: Motivation

The discussion in this section is performed based on three dimensions to measure the communication competencies, motivation, knowledge and skills. The mean value and standard deviation is used to determine the item with the highest and lowest perception. Table 2 indicated that in term of motivation, the highest mean is for the items *Flood relief workers motivated to deliver easy and informative to the flood victims* ($M = 4.54, SD = .56$). Next item in the rank is *Flood relief workers are motivated when giving a persuasive speech to the victims* ($M = 4.15, SD = .98$). *Flood relief workers are motivated when introducing the group leader to the flood victims* ($M = 4.04, SD = 1.01$), whereas the lowest value is for the item *Flood relief workers are motivated to tell the flood victims not to interrupt and must wait for their turn to speak* ($M = 2.53, SD = 1.58$), *Flood relief workers are motivated when debating what is right even he/she knows all the people in the group have different views* ($M = 2.58, SD = 1.42$) and *Flood relief workers motivated to give a speech without preparation* ($M = 2.6, SD = 1.39$).

The results of this study show that the employee is perceived as able and motivated to help the victims and have communication skills that are relatively high. Scores of low perceived to employee motivation in doing an impromptu speech, try to avoid open debate with the victims and also has low motivation in telling the victim not to interrupt when they were speaking. This finding is consistent with the culture of the Malay community who do not like to talk too direct and always emphasize on the value of courtesy eventhough in the disaster situation

Table 2. Mean and SD for items for Communication Competence : Motivation

Item	Mean	Std. Deviation
Flood relief workers are motivated to deliver easy and informative information to the flood victims.	4.54	.56
Flood relief workers are motivated when giving a persuasive speech to the victims.	4.15	.98
Flood relief workers are motivated when introducing the group leader to the flood victims.	4.04	1.01
Flood relief workers are motivated while giving technical report to the victims.	3.99	1.22
Flood relief workers are motivated to refused the invitation for an activity with someone of different gender.	3.97	1.17
Flood relief workers are motivated when asking someone of different gender to perform activities at the relief centers.	3.88	1.17

Flood relief workers are motivated to tell the victims that they can not cross the line/boundary.	3.79	1.28
Flood relief workers are motivated to tell the victims that he has made a mistake.	3.71	1.03
Flood relief workers are motivated when he was a leader of the group.	3.34	1.01
Flood relief workers were motivated when interviewed for a live television broadcast.	3.21	1.39
Flood relief workers were motivated to raise up the topics that he feels are important.	3.19	1.38
Flood relief workers are motivated to make spontaneously jokes during serious discussions.	3.03	1.51
Flood relief workers are motivated to correct minor errors during discussion with flood victim.	2.88	1.39
Flood relief are workers motivated to tell the victims that he is not ready for flood situation.	2.81	1.43
Flood relief workers are motivated to give a speech without preparation.	2.66	1.394
Flood relief workers are motivated when debating what is right even he/she knows all the people in the group have different views.	2.58	1.424
Flood relief workers are motivated to tell the flood victims not to interrupt and must wait for their turn to speak.	2.53	1.379

For knowledge dimension, the item that yielded high values is Flood relief workers are knowledgeable when delivering the easy and informative information to the flood victims ($M = 4.54$, $SD = .58$), followed by Flood relief workers are knowledgeable when giving a persuasive speech to the flood victims ($M = 4.16$, $SD = .99$), and Flood relief workers are knowledgeable to tell the victims that they can not cross the line ($M = 4.04$, $SD = 1.18$) (see Table 3). In turn, interpersonal communication skills in Flood relief workers are knowledgeable to give a speech without preparation ($M = 2.70$, $SD = 1.26$); Flood relief workers are knowledgeable to tell the victims that he was not enough ready for flood situation ($M = 2.83$, $SD = 1.19$) and Flood relief workers are knowledgeable to make jokes spontaneously during serious discussions ($M = 3.16$, $SD = 1.05$).

The results for this dimension indicate the same phenomenon. Employees are perceived by the flood victims as more knowledgeable in conveying information, ability to persuade and inform about the regulations to the victims is high as well as persuasive. However, their knowledge is low in terms of humor, delivering an impromptu speech and did not admit that they are not prepared to face disaster situations.

Table 3. Mean and SD for items for Communication Competence : Knowledge

Item	Mean	Std. Deviation
Flood relief workers are knowledgeable when delivering the easy and informative information to the flood victims.	4.54	.58
Flood relief workers are knowledgeable when giving a persuasive speech to the flood victims.	4.16	.99
Flood relief workers are knowledgeable to tell the victims that they cannot cross the line.	4.04	1.18
Flood relief workers are knowledgeable to tell the victims that he had made a mistake.	3.96	1.39
Flood relief workers are knowledgeable when he was a leader of the group.	3.96	1.26
Flood relief workers are knowledgeable when giving technical report to the victims.	3.93	1.21
Flood relief workers are knowledgeable when introducing the leader to the	3.90	1.19

flood victims.		
Flood relief workers are knowledgeable to ask someone of different gender to perform activities at the relief centers.	3.81	1.02
Flood relief workers are knowledgeable when interviewed for a live television broadcast.	3.50	.89
Flood relief workers are knowledgeable to correct minor errors during group discussions.	3.32	1.21
Flood relief workers are knowledgeable to raise up the topics that he feels are important.	3.21	1.22
Flood relief workers are knowledgeable to make jokes spontaneously during serious discussions.	3.06	1.55
Flood relief workers are knowledgeable to tell the victims that he was not enough ready for flood situation.	2.83	1.19
Flood relief workers are knowledgeable to give a speech without preparation.	2.70	1.26

As for skilled dimension, the item that yielded high values almost equal to other items in the other two dimensions, *Flood relief workers are skillfull when delivering the easy and informative information to the flood victims* ($M = 4.14$ $SD = .58$). *Flood relief workers are skillfull when giving a persuasive speech to the victims* ($M = 4.16$ $SD = .99$), and *Flood relief workers are skillfull to tell the flood victims that they cannot cross the line* ($M = 4.04$ $SD = 1.18$). The lowest item was for *Flood relief workers are skillfull to refused an invitation for an activity with someone of different gender* ($M = 2.54$ $SD = 1.11$). *Flood relief workers are skillfull to tell the victims not to interrupt while his talking and must wait for their turn to speak* ($M = 2.59$ $SD = 1.24$), and *Flood relief workers are skillfull in debating what is right even he/she knows all members in the group have different views* ($M = 2.65$, $SD = 1.24$).

The results of this study showed that workers have the skills that are perceived as high in terms of speech, persuade and inform about the rules to disaster victims but have low skills in terms of the debate, refused an invitation and also impromptu speech.

Table 4. Mean and SD for items for Communication Competence Skills

Item	Mean	Std. Deviation
Flood relief workers are skillfull when delivering the easy and informative information to the flood victims.	4.54	.58
Flood relief workers are skillfull when giving a persuasive speech to the victims	4.16	.99
Flood relief workers are skillfull to tell the flood victims that they cannot cross the line.	4.04	1.18
Flood relief workers are skillfull to tell the victims that he had made a mistake.	3.96	1.39
Flood relief workers are skillfull when he was a leader of the group.	3.96	1.26
Flood relief workers are skillfull while giving technical report to the flood victims.	3.93	1.21
Flood relief workers are skillfull when introducing the leader to the flood victims.	3.90	1.19
Flood relief workers are skillfull when asking someone of different gender to perform activities at the relief centers.	3.81	1.022
Flood relief workers are skillfull when interviewed for a live television broadcast.	3.50	.895
Flood relief workers are skillfull to correct minor errors during group discussions.	3.32	1.218
Flood relief workers are skillfull to raise up the topics that he feels are important.	3.21	1.221

Flood relief workers are skillfull to make spontaneously jokes during serious discussions being run.	3.06	1.557
Flood relief workers are skillfull to tell the victims that he was not enough ready for flood situation.	2.83	1.196
Flood relief workers are skillfull to give a speech without preparation.	2.70	1.263
Flood relief workers are skillfull in debating what is right even he/she knows all members in the group have different views.	2.65	1.246
Flood relief workers are skillfull to tell the victims not to interrupt while his talking and must wait for their turn to speak	2.59	1.246
Flood relief workers are skillfull to refused an invitation for an activity with someone of different gender.	2.54	1.113

7. Suggestion for future research

This study identified communication can be facilitated between the organizations are forced to cope with disaster issues when they realized the important to understand the challenges of their communication with each other. Researchers have to study communication for its role in generating or being a source of disaster. Next, communication should be examined not just for its role in preventing, responding to, but also for recovering from disaster.

Finally, disasters will effect individuals and communities in unique ways and it is critical for research subjects to express their experience from their point of view. So, we would suggest that more disaster-related studies privilege multiple voices, beyond those of researchers and disaster managers. Qualitative techniques, such as long term observation, or ethnography, focus groups, interviewing, document and artifact analysis provide valuable means of data collection and capture subjects' own words, experiences, and perceptions. Communication studies has benefited greatly in recent years by including qualitative research in its repertoire of methodological approaches and would recommend that communication scholars consider doing likewise.

Acknowledgements

The authors wish to thank the Ministry of Education, Malaysia for funding this study under the Long-term Research Grant Scheme (LRGS/b-u/2012/UUM/Teknologi Komunikasi dan Infomasi).

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