Perception of Physical Education college students about their communicative competence

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Abstract: This is an investigation whose core goal was to assess communication skills of future Physical Education teachers. An ad hoc questionnaire was applied to first- and third-year students of Teacher Education, in order to assess their progress in key dimensions of teacher communication skills. After obtaining data by a transversal research design, we performed descriptive quantitative analyzes. The results show a general advance in overall communicative competence of third-year students over first-year students, but that seems no to be enough to meet communication demands of the teaching work.
Key words: Communication. Professional competence. Physical education.

1 INTRODUCTION

Since the 1998 Sorbonne Declaration and the 1999 Bologna Declaration – which triggered the creation of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) – European education systems have been immersed in a convergence process. It introduces new axes around which member states' educational systems will revolve: competencies and skills to be achieved when students complete their education Therefore, one of the main challenges to be faced by future educational systems will be improving professionals' initial training.

In this context, managing the classroom as a space for communication and interpersonal relations is posited as one of the main functions of effective teachers, knowing that the

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communicative exchange is seen as the cornerstone of knowledge (MÉRIDA, 2013). However, while knowledge and practice of verbal and nonverbal communication resources are essential for professional performance (SANZ, 2005), many teachers have trouble communicating something or communicating with others (CAMACHO; SÁENZ, 2000), although their professional work is highly dependent on their communication skills.

Indeed, in the different competence designs that emerge as a core aim for higher education, the figure of the teacher is emphasized, among other key professionals, as facilitator and promoter of learning situations in which interrelation, interdependence, collaboration and tutoring are crucial. It is certainly a profession based on collaborative work, with a strong social and interactive component, in which communication skills are emphasized as knowledge that allows us to use language as a communication tool in a given social context. This consideration has been observed in Scotland (INITIAL..., 2000), Québec (GOUVERNEMENT.., 2001; MARTINET; RAYMOND; GAUTHIER, 2004; GAUTHIER, 2006) or Chile (DANIELSON, 2011), among others.

According to Imbernón (2007), the value of communicative competence for teachers' initial training is indisputable. However, the study of communication as a teaching competence is a relatively new field. In education, most reflections and research experiences focused on communication are traditional or functionalist in nature (BARRÓN, 1989). Therefore, those experiences focused on measurable aspects of the communicative act (gestures, discourse structure and grammaticality, communicative turns, etc.). The latter are undoubtedly important but they neglect knowing the communicative act from an integrative, holistic viewpoint that inquires about future teachers' concepts or beliefs about their degree of competence regarding the fundamental dimensions for their didactic interaction in the classroom and at school. Consequently, taking a communicative approach opens the way for deeper stances designed to achieve functionality and a satisfactory performance by students.

More specifically, communicative competence – including linguistic, sociolinguistic and textual processes (LOMAS; OSORO; TUSÓN, 2003) – is understood as "a unique synthesis of skills and styles that are rightly used by the subject in line with the characteristics and requirements of participants and the contexts where communication takes place" (DE LA UZ *et al.*, 2010, p. 319-320). It is interesting as a motivating factor, as a basis for decision-making and as a tool for maintaining a positive climate in the educational community (TEJADA, 2005). Such competence includes mastering different processes (of coding and decoding) and their application to different speakers and contexts (GARCÍA RUIZ, 2006). In short, it is a basic initial competence that every teacher should possess (PERRENOUD, 2004), and higher education is responsible for ensuring effective preparation of future teachers to meet the demands and needs of the European teaching environment (SCOTTISH OFFICE, 2005).

However, despite being rated at the top positions in lists of transversal competences that are documented in White Papers for the new EHEA degrees, communication competences have been highly neglected for a long time. Nevertheless, the importance of educational communication and the need for it to be appropriate to the school context has been highlighted since a few decades ago, because of its obvious impact on the quality of education. Its importance is such that studies proliferate on teaching competences in order to understand initial teacher training (BARRÓN, 1989; CAMACHO; MARTÍNEZ; MENDÍAS, 1999; LASNIER, 2000; CAMACHO; SÁENZ, 2000; AGENCIA…, 2005; PERRENOUD, 2004; DÍAZ BARRIGA, 2006; CASTELLÁ *et al.*, 2007; IMBERNÓN, 2007; RICOY; FELIZ; SEVILLANO, 2010). These studies unanimously underscore the value of the communicative competence for teachers' performance, relating it to the mastery of different skills. The aim is to avoid the use of one's intuition and rely solely on professional experience to try to promote and develop students' communication competences.

Given the above, and in order to achieve professionals apt for quality teaching, an extremely interesting question arises: do students of Physical Education (hereafter PE) have the

communicative competence needed to respond to communication needs typical of their future professional performance?

For this purpose, a preliminary study was conducted on communicative competence of PE students – future PE Teachers – during their initial training, with the following goals: 1) To know the perception of PE college students about their communication skills; 2) To establish possible differences between new students and those who are close to graduating; 3) To propose strategies to optimize the development of communicative competence in future PE teachers' initial training.

2 Methodology

In accordance with the research's aims and focus, the strategy selected was "social survey research" (CEA D'ANCONA, 2001; COHEN; MANION, 2002; MCMILLAN; SCHUMACHER, 2005). The strategy consist in asking questions directly to a representative sample of subjects in a particular population in order to obtain data from their oral statements (SCHUTT, 2001). Through a cross-sectional design, an extensive analysis was performed on the perception of PE college students about their communicative competence in different dimensions (cf. Table 2), according to the literature consulted.

Quantitative analysis was considered an appropriate strategy to meet the goals.

2.1 Population and sample

The population consists of 1st and 3rd-year students of the PE course of the School of Educational Sciences at the University of Granada (Spain), attending the Teacher Education course lasting three school years (the new Plan of Studies started in 2010-2011 extends that course by one school year).

To obtain a representative sample, stratified sampling was conducted with single or disproportionate allocation and random

selection of subjects to be surveyed within each stratum (COHEN; MANION, 2002). The criterion for grouping or stratification was the Teacher Education course taken (in our case, in-training PE Teachers). The sample size obtained allowed to estimate proportions with a 95% confidence interval and a maximum permissible error of 5% according to Tagliacarne's (1968) tables.

Table 1 contains the size of the subpopulation and subsample as well as significant and actual totals, taking into account:

• *Subpopulation*: Total number of students actually attending class regularly;

• *Statistical subsample*: data offered by Tagliacarne' formula as statistically significant for each subpopulation (by year and course);

• *Actual subsample*: actual population of students responding in each of the strata.

Table 1: Subpopulation and subsample sizes

COURSE	Subpopulation		Statistical subsample		Actual subsample	
	1st	3rd	1st	3rd	1st	3rd
Physical Education	138	249	38	53	116	38

Source: Authors

2.2 Data collection and analysis

The questionnaire was used for data collection because it is a basic tool to collect information in survey-based research (SCHUTT, 2001; COHEN; MANION, 2002). An ad hoc questionnaire was designed for this research, aimed at collecting data in a systematic and orderly way (McMILLAN; SCHUMACHER, 2005). Initially, this questionnaire was validated by the process of "expert judgment"

and "triangulation" (FOX, 1981, HODDER, 2000). That is, three researchers who are experts in oral communication determined the validity of its content according to representativeness and relevance of the items.

Subsequently, the questionnaire was statistically validated, proving its reliability and internal consistency. Indeed, the questionnaire obtained an alpha reliability coefficient of 0.936 and the coefficient of reliability of the items analyzed ranged between 0.935 and 0.936. In addition, other tests were applied in order to further ensure the instrument's reliability: the split half test (value of α for the first part: 0.900; value of α for the second part: 0.881; Spearman-Brown coefficient: 0.866), KMO test (significant value of 0.91, close to unity) and Bartlett's test (Chi-Square of 19313.955 and very high significance (p = 0.000), giving a high level of reliability.

This questionnaire includes 5 thematic blocks (Cf. Table 2) and 60 items with multiple choice (Likert-type) questions, with five possible options or estimation questions to request responses for which levels of intensity were established to evaluate a fact or situation: 1. No mastery; 2. Insufficient mastery; 3. Sufficient mastery; 4. High mastery; 5 Very high mastery. These alternatives are offered to students to determine the extent to which they consider themselves prepared in aspects related to educational communication – the ultimate goal of this study.

Table 2: Student's Questionnaire

Blocks	Competences	Items
1st	As a good sender	12
2nd	As a good receiver	10
3rd	Communication skills in class	20
4th	Acting in meetings with parents and colleagues	12
5th	Exercising the tutorial function	6

The study of quantitative data was performed with SPSS 15.0 software.

3 RESULTS

For a better understanding of data, the prevalence of females over males in the School of Education should be noted (80.7% of women; 19.0% of men; and 0.2% which have not been defined). Of those, 17.3% take the PE education.

Of students enrolled in the 1st year, 79.4% are women and 20.4% are men, and 0.2% of the sample was not identified; 22.3% study PE. Also, of students enrolled in the 3rd year, 16.9% are men, 82.3% are women and 0.5% were not defined. Of these, 10.2% study PE.

Data are summarized below and percentages are indicated both as course (PE) and by year (1st and 3rd), keeping in mind that the values 1.00 and 5.00 represent the lowest/highest perception of mastery of communication skills. However, for the correct interpretation of data, values 1 and 2 have been considered together as they represent lack of mastery of that skill, as well as values 3 and 4, which indicate mastery of that skill.

3.1 CONTINGENCY ANALYSIS ABOUT GENERAL PERCEPTION

In the items listed in Table 3, PE students admit, though in different percentages, a clear preference for value 3, which represents a sufficient mastery of the communication skills described.

Table 3: Item's value: 3

V2	I express myself properly and correctly in writing
V3	I think about what I will say before saying it
V6	I feel safe when I have to hold a conversation
V7	I contrast opinions before imposing my own ideas directly

V8	I avoid allowing my opinion about the receiver to reduce my objectivity as sender
V10	I use understandable language in my relations with others
V11	I allow listeners to say to which degree they understand me
V12	on general issues about good sender skills
V13	I respect opinions and ideas of those who speak to me
V14	I concentrate on listening before passing a judgment or opinion
V15	I put myself in the place of others to understand their reactions
V16	I make sure that I have understood it before speaking
V18	I easily find the guiding thread of what I am told
V19	I pay attention to context to understand the meaning of words
V20	I keep calm even when the person speaking to me is excited
V21	I ask questions to make sure I understood
V22	in general, I consider my mastery of good receiver skills as
V23	articulating clearly and correctly and at moderate speed
V28	capturing and holding students' attention
V29	creating a positive climate for relations in the classroom
V30	using different types of questions
V32	using sense of humor productively.
V33	applying techniques for working in small groups
V34	knowing the content I will teach
V35	facing difficult situations in class
V38	feeling confident to conduct the class
V39	using gestures and other bodily expressions to improve communication
V40	using understandable language in class presentations
V42	I usually consider my mastery of the communication aspects of the teaching work as
V43	paying attention to what others say
V46	focusing on the subject under discussion
V47	respecting opinions of other group members and their speaking turns
V49	expressing myself concisely, clearly and precisely
V50	making an effort for my speeches to be perceived by others as an important contribution to achieve the group' goals
V52	together with criticism, making suggestions to help solve problems
V53	respecting the decisions agreed upon by most members, even though they are different from our own opinions
V54	in general, I consider my mastery of skills typical of participant in meetings as good
V57	testing and recording the results of the interview
V59	interpreting the meaning of verbal and nonverbal signs during interview.

Source: Authors

By contrast, items in which PE college students choose – to a greater extent and in different percentages – value 2, characterized by mentioning a perception of insufficient mastery of communication skills, are the following (Cf. Table 4).

Table 4: Item with value 2

V1	I express myself orally in a proper and correct way
V4	I persuade others with my arguments
V9	I avoid issuing categorical opinions on issues that I don't know
V12	on general issues about good sender skills
V17	I disregard the prejudice that I have towards those who are talking to me
V24	properly organizing my presentations
V26	applying motivational strategies to engage students in the subject or subjects
V27	using examples appropriate to the content and students' level
V36	getting students to focus on the task
V37	productively using criticism and praise
V41	allowing students to express their doubts about what was explained or done
V44	self-regulating the frequency and length of my own speeches
V45	preparing the strengths of my arguments in advance
V48	speaking naturally and without inhibition
V51	keeping a measured, polite and constructive tone in my speeches
V55	systematically planning the tutoring interview
V56	applying techniques required by the supportive relationship
V58	creating an environment proper for interpersonal relations
V60	in general, I consider my mastery of communication skills typical of teachers as

Source: Authors

However, in item 25 ("using proper vocabulary level"), students were doubtful, i.e., they had difficulties to choose between a sufficient (v3) and an insufficient (v2) level of mastery, which

indicates problems estimating the actual degree of control they admit to possess of that communicative skill. Only item 5 ("I feel confident when I have to start communication") concentrates the lowest number of students' preferred responses on value 1, which shows a null level of perception for that communicative skill. Moreover, the sum of values 1 and 2 in both years is higher than 60% of the answers.

Table 5 includes preferred values selected by PE students and their specific percentages.

Table 5: Preferred values and percentages of the //specialty

Item	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
values	V2	V3	V1	V2	V3	V3	V3	V3	V2	V3	V3	V3
%	40.3	58.4	51.9	45.5	32.5	45.5	40.3	39.0	48.7	56.5	38.3	44.2
Item	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24
values	V3	V3	V3	V3	V2	V3	V3	V3	V3	V3	V3	V2
%	33.8	46.8	48.1	46.8	42.2	61.0	44.8	44.2	42.2	62.3	44.2	57.8
Item	25	26	27	28	29	30	31	32	33	34	35	36
values	V2/3	V2	V3	V3	V2	V3	V3	V2	V3	V3	V2	V3
%	46.4	43.5	38.3	44.2	41.6	39.0	41.6	47.4	46.1	50.0	47.4	48.7
Item	37	38	39	40	41	42	43	44	45	46	47	48
values	V2	V3	V3	V3	V2	V3	V3	V2	V2	V2	V3	V3
%	44.2	42.9	38.3	39.0	42.9	43.5	39.0	49.4	37.0	47.4	53.9	38.3
Item	49	50	51	52	53	54	55	56	57	58	59	60
values	V3	V3	V2	V3	V3	V2	V3	V3	V2	V2	V2	V3
%	49.4	45.5	42.9	48.1	43.5	43.5	43.5	42.2	44.2	40.3	51.3	46.8

Source: Authors

3.2 Contingency analysis by year

In a first group of contingency variables by year, we put together all items whose score has a majority trend (v1, v12, v17, v20, v21, v23, v24, v25, v26, v27, v28, v30, v31, v33, v37, v38,

v39, v40, v41, v42, v44, v46, v48, v49, v50, v51, v52, v53, v54, v55, v56, v58, V59, v60). Therefore, we see that 1st-year students overwhelmingly choose value 2, which represents an insufficient level of mastery for those communication skills in the questionnaire. However, most 3rd-year students favor value 3 in the items marked – sufficient mastery of the communication skill. From these results, we can infer an increase in communication skills during the course as perceived by the students themselves.

In a second group of variables (v2, v3, v10, v11, v15, v16, v18, v19, v22, v29, v32, v43, v45, v47), all students (both from 1st and 3rd years) chose preferably value 3, though with different percentages. That indicated sufficient mastery of those skills, even though there are percentage differences between the two groups, always favoring 3rd-year students. It is a block of competences in which progress has been made, but very slightly.

In a third group of variables (v4, v5, v8, v35, v36, v57), one can see common trends among students of 1st and 3rd years, since students' responses concentrate on value 2 (insufficient mastery).

In fourth place, which includes a single item (v6: "I feel confident when I have to hold conversation"), 1st-year students appear to have ascribe higher evaluation (sufficient mastery) than their 3rd-year colleagues, about their competence in that skill (insufficient mastery). This could be due to an increase in their awareness of what it means to be competent in that conversational skill.

Finally, in the fifth group of variables (v13-v14), we found that students in both courses have a high perception of those communication skills. Indeed, 1st-year students preferably choose value 3 (Sufficient mastery) and 3rd-year students, in turn, value those skills even more, predominantly marking value 4 (High mastery). Preferred values and percentages for courses (1st and 3rd) are included in Table 6.

Table 6: Preferred values and percentages by course (1st and 3rd)

Item	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
values	v2/3	v2	v3	v3	v3	v2/2	v2	v2	v2/3	v3	v3	v2/3
%	55.1	44.5	41.8	50.9	33.3	40.8	40.5	46.6	36.2	52.2	43.9	49.7
1st/3rd)	40.4	39.9	38	37.5	41.0	36.7	35.8	40.4	35.8	43.7	45.3	40.4
Item	**13**	**14**	**15**	**16**	**17**	**18**	**19**	**20**	**21**	**22**	**23**	**24**
values	v3/4	v3/4	v3	v3	v2/3	v3	v3	v2/3	v2/3	v3	v2/3	v2/3
%	33.9	43	42.2	44.1	55.5	49.1	45.1	40.1	43.7	48.7	54.5	53.6
1st/3rd)	47.4	41.8	44.2	43.7	42.9	39.1	43.4	36.1	39.1	41.2	48	45
Item	**25**	**26**	**27**	**28**	**29**	**30**	**31**	**32**	**33**	**34**	**35**	**36**
values	v2/3	v2/3	v2/3	v2/3	v3	v2/3	v2/3	v3	v2/3	v2	v2	v3
%	54.3	39.3	42.8	41.6	40.5	48.7	42.6	41.6	40.5	40.1	40.8	47.8
1st/3rd)	43.7	37.5	37.7	39.4	36.4	40.4	38.8	34.5	44.7	41	34.5	36.1
Item	**37**	**38**	**39**	**40**	**41**	**42**	**43**	**44**	**45**	**46**	**47**	**48**
values	v2/3	v2/3	v2/3	v2/3	v2/3	v2/3	v3	v2/3	v3	v2/3	v3	v2/3
%	49.5	36.8	42.6	43.9	34.1	50.3	41.2	58.2	37.6	46.4	38	46.4
1st/3rd)	40.2	35.8	32.6	39.9	36.7	41.8	38.3	36.1	42.6	45.3	36.1	35
Item	**49**	**50**	**51**	**52**	**53**	**54**	**55**	**56**	**57**	**58**	**59**	**60**
values	v2/3	v2/3	v2/3	v2/3	v2/3	v2/3	v2/3	v2/3	v2	v2/3	v2/3	v2/3
%	40.8	50.5	48.2	43	44.1	49.7	45.1	49.9	45.1	50.7	43.2	54.5
1st/3rd)	41.8	39.1	43.9	44.2	40.7	46.4	36.4	38.8	35.8	38.3	37.2	40.4

4 Discussion and conclusions

Previously, we presented a summary of results and percentages obtained in this study. That is the reason why, in presenting our final conclusions, we will only highlight general observations that emerge from it, avoiding repetition of specific data that can be checked in the preceding pages. However, remember that in order for the data shown in Tables 5 and 6 not to be misleading, its ultimate assessment is derived from the joint consideration (sum of percentages) of values 1 and 2 (representing null/insufficient mastery of the capacity) compared to values 3 and 4 (indicating sufficient/high mastery).

From this perspective, at first it should be noted that although

communicative competence is regarded as a basic skill for teaching (CAMACHO; SÁENZ, 2000; PERRENOUD, 2004; SANZ, 2005; CASTELLÁ et al., 2007), this study enabled us to prove that (a) the level of communicative competence of PE teachers in training shows numerous limitations; (b) 3rd-year students of that course admit a higher level of communicative competence than 1st-year students; (c) future plans for training should incorporate techniques and strategies for effective communication that foster development of communicative competence of future PE teachers.

However, the investigation revealed detailed perceptions held by PE teachers in training in terms of their communicative competence. In this sense, those students generally considered that they have sufficient mastery of their skills as senders-teachers, especially when they have to express themselves in writing in a proper and correct way – which differs from the data obtained in previous studies (AGENCIA…, 2003; GALLEGO; GARCÍA; RODRÍGUEZ, 2013) – holding conversation, exchanging opinions, using understandable language, listening to others and thinking before speaking. However, as seen in other studies addressing problems for effective oral educational communication (CAMACHO; SÁENZ, 2000; AGENCIA…, 2003; NÚÑEZ; DEL MORAL, 2010), they see themselves as insufficiently trained to express themselves orally in a proper and correct way or to persuade their interlocutors.

Furthermore, though they did not feel safe to start communication or to disregard prejudices about their interlocutors, they see their receptor skills as sufficient, because they feel able to respect others' opinions or ideas, to make informed judgments, to try to understand messages and reactions, not to make unfounded speeches, to consider the context before expressing an opinion or to remain calm in adverse environments. Therefore, according to the data obtained, that is the skill in which students are best prepared.

Moreover, in general terms, their skills for classroom communication are deemed sufficient, knowing that efficacious

communication will enable the construction of new meanings and knowledge by students, from the effective transfer of the different teaching proposals (VILLALOBOS, 2011). In this sense, they consider themselves able to speak an understandable language in classroom, to involve students, to ask different questions, to make productive use their sense of humor, to apply work techniques, to know educational contents, to face difficult situations, to lead the group-class and to make appropriate use of nonverbal communication in order to supplement verbal communication. Nevertheless, they are not sure of their readiness to use the appropriate vocabulary for each communicate situation and they admit having serious doubts as to their ability to disregard prior prejudices, to properly organize presentations, to motivate students, to manage appropriate examples and to make productive use of criticism and praise.

Likewise, these students admit having major difficulties in meetings related to their future teaching work, given their limitations in terms of regulating their own activities or the previous preparation of their arguments, as well as in the difficulty to speak naturally and without inhibitions or keeping a measured, polite and constructive tone. On the other hand, they think they have sufficient mastery of other communication skills related to communication management: expressing themselves clearly, paying attention to others and respecting their opinions and speaking turns, focusing on the subject under discussion, striving to contribute to attain group goals, accompanying their criticism with suggestions to help solving the problem or carrying out agreed decisions. Studies in the classroom show that it is possible to learn in interaction (EMANUELSSON; SAHLSTRON, 2008).

In addition, these students perceive that their competence as tutors is insufficient. Although they consider themselves competent to assess and record the results of an interview or interpret their interlocutors' gestures and messages, they do not feel able to create stimulating environments, to resort to customized helping techniques or to plan a tutoring interview, when the value of that teaching competence in interviews and communication with families

and other colleagues is crucial to achieve a shared understanding of what constitutes good teaching and for professional dialogue and education (DANIELSON, 2011). Communication is therefore key to the contact among teachers, students and families, and tutoring as a teaching function is very useful not only to prevent learning difficulties but also to move from teaching-centered models to learning-centered models.

We also note that the subjects in our sample show a positive trend in the development of communication skills from beginning to end of their studies. Third-year students, perhaps for different reasons such as maturity, show increased awareness of the communicative competence than 1st-year students. Indeed, although the improvement can be considered shy, according to the data, 3rd-year students show higher mastery than 1st-yeat students in all blocks of the questionnaire, except for item 6 of Block 1, which refers to confidence of future teachers to hold a conversation.

Finally, the study has shown that these students feel particularly vulnerable when they have to start communication given their null or scarce initiative capability, and when they have to organize their presentations properly. However, they are much more confident when they have to express themselves in writing, when using understandable language with their interlocutors or when discovering relations between messages.

Based on the results obtained in this study, some teaching guidelines or strategies can be outlined to improve future teachers' communication skills: 1) to incorporate in an organized way the development of communication skills in future Teacher Training Guides; 2) to adapt speech to each communicative situation, based on the analysis of its contexts; 3) to learn and experiment with different linguistic and non-linguistic resources in order to keep the group's attention; 4) to understand how oral messages are structured; 5) to understand and manage group dynamics techniques.

The exploratory nature of this research suggests a cautious interpretation of its results, especially when generalizing them,

since they are open to future testing or challenge. However, the initial nature of the study opens new questions of special interest for research in this field.

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