

THE INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION COMPETENCE ON SEEKING SUPPORT AMONG FIRST YEAR STUDENTS

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Abstract

The transition to university often triggers academic and psychological stress for first-year students, necessitating social support as a coping strategy. However, support services are not always accessed due to communication barriers. This study aims to explore in depth the essence of interpersonal communication competence within the seeking support process among first-year students. A qualitative research approach employing a phenomenological method was used. Data were collected through in-depth interviews with eight first-year students selected via purposive sampling, complemented by data triangulation techniques. The findings reveal three main themes: (1) Openness serves as stimulus for support seeking, (2) Empathy and supportiveness in peer interactions create a safe space that alleviates emotional burdens, and (3) Communication apprehension and the fear of negative stigma act as major obstacles, leading students to fully embrace their problems on their own. The study concludes that interpersonal communication competence is a crucial survival skill. The availability of campus support facilities cannot function optimally unless new students are equipped with the interpersonal capabilities needed to access them. These findings highlight the urgent need for interpersonal communication skills training starting from the campus orientation period to dismantle stigma and build a responsive ecosystem.

Keywords: *Coping Mechanism, Communication Competence, Interpersonal Communication, Support Seeking, University Students.*

A. INTRODUCTION

The shift from secondary education to higher education signifies a pivotal stage in the maturation process of late adolescence. First-year students face not only a demanding academic environment that requires a high degree of independence but also significant shifts in their social landscape (Hamzah, 2018). They have to go out of their comfort zones, away from the established support systems of their hometowns, and adjust to a new university culture. The complexity of these changes often triggers culture shock and psychological stress if not managed with appropriate coping strategies (Handayani & Yuca, 2018).

The pressures experienced by new students span various dimensions, ranging from heavy academic workloads and time management challenges to financial demands. Psychologically, many first-year students experience loneliness, academic anxiety, and even stress symptoms resulting from an inability to cope with these burdens on their own (Mufidah & Fadilah, 2022). Amidst this high-pressure environment, the availability and accessibility of social support, whether emotional, informational, or instrumental, serve as a decisive factor in whether a student successfully adapts or experiences a decline in mental well-being (Ambarwati & Indriastuti, 2022).

Although social support is available within the university setting, through lecturers, counseling services, senior students, and peers, the process of accessing such support is not automatic. Observations indicate a gap between students' actual need for assistance and their actual efforts to seek it (Febrianty et al., 2022). Many first-year students choose to keep their

problems on their own. This hesitance frequently arises from a failure to express the challenges encountered or to engage with individuals who can offer assistance (Salmah, 2016).

This is where interpersonal communication competence plays a vital role. Interpersonal communication competence is not merely the ability to speak (Hullman et al., 2010). It is an individual's capacity to interact effectively, empathetically, and openly, thereby enabling the establishment and maintenance of healthy social relationships. For first-year students, these skills serve as a vital social capital. Students with strong communication competence tend to be more confident in initiating interactions, adept at reading social situations, and capable of expressing their messages or needs without fear of judgment.

A lack of interpersonal communication competence often acts as a formidable barrier when seeking support. Students experiencing communication anxiety tend to withdraw from social environments (Suhanti et al., 2018). They are frequently plagued by fears of negative stigma, being perceived as weak, or facing rejection from those around them. Consequently, they fail to identify potential sources of support in their immediate environment, which in turn prolongs psychological distress and increases the risk of struggling during their first year of university (Fahlevi & Maryani, 2022).

Understanding the essence of interpersonal communication competence within the context of support seeking is a matter of urgency. This issue goes beyond the technical mechanics of speaking. It involves a profound process of meaning-making regarding how an individual in crisis attempts to set aside their ego and fear to secure assistance (Nashrori, 2000). Without a comprehensive understanding of these communication dynamics, the effort of institution to provide support centers or counseling services may prove futile. The one of causes is university fail to address the root causes of students' reluctance to speak up (Purbaya et al., 2023).

Based on that statement, this study is aimed to understand the personal experiences of how first-year students truly perceive their interpersonal communication skills at the critical juncture of seeking support. From a practical standpoint, this understanding is expected to offer conceptual recommendations for higher education institutions designing interpersonal skill-based intervention programs for new students. It is expected that universities can foster a campus ecosystem that is more inclusive and responsive, effectively supporting students' academic and mental well-being from the very beginning of their journey in college.

B. METHOD

This study employs a qualitative approach with a phenomenological method to understand the lived experiences of first-year students as they navigate their interpersonal communication competencies when seeking support (Nasir et al., 2023). This approach was selected to understand the subjective perspectives, awareness, and meanings that informants attribute to the phenomenon of seeking support behavior within the campus environment. Informants were selected using purposive sampling based on specific criteria, active first-year students who were currently experiencing or had previously experienced a transitional crisis and had actively sought social support from peers, lecturers, or university counselors (Usop, 2019).

Primary data collection was conducted through semi-structured, in-depth interviews, allowing informants to express their lived experiences about support seeking during first year students. Additionally, passive participant observation and academic documentation were utilized as data triangulation techniques to ensure the validity and credibility of the research findings. The data analysis process applied Miles and Huberman (1994) procedure, comprising the stages of data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing or verification. These stages were directed toward identifying essential themes that illustrate how their interpersonal communication competence beneficial during support-seeking process.

C. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

1. Openness as a Facilitator for Support Seeking

The process of social support seeking among first-year students begins with an internal awareness of a problem and a willingness to share the associated emotional dynamics with others. Self-disclosure serves as the most crucial yet challenging initial step for individuals navigating a new environment (Arroyo, 2022). An informant's ability to lower their ego defenses and acknowledge the need for external assistance represents a primary manifestation of openness within interpersonal communication competence.

Based on the informants' statement, students with high levels of openness tend to be more responsive and adaptive when facing academic or personal crises. They actively formulate clear, structured, and honest messages regarding the burdens faced, whether discussing issues with their academic advisors or confiding in roommates. This openness not only enables others to accurately grasp the essence of the problem but also accelerates the receipt of targeted support, ranging from moral encouragement to practical solutions.

Informants with a tendency toward reluctance exhibit significant patterns of withdrawal from the university environment. When faced with declining academic performance or intense homesickness, they choose for solitude, masking their fragility behind an illusion of false autonomy. For this group, sharing personal problems is perceived as an act that diminishes self-worth and imposes on the comfort of others. It results on the preference of embracing their emotional burdens on their own.

2. Empathy and Supportiveness in Peer Interactions

When first-year students decide to speak up, the direction and purpose of their support seeking are heavily influenced by their perception of empathy in the person approached. Fellow first-year students are often the primary choice due to shared experiences and similar transitional backgrounds. During these interpersonal interactions whether consciously or unconsciously, informants filter the verbal and nonverbal signals emitted by their conversation partners to determine if the environment is safe for sharing.

In-depth interview results reveal that informants are highly sensitive to nonverbal cues indicating supportiveness. Signals such as focused eye contact, steady nodding, a forward-leaning posture, and a soothing tone of voice serve as key indicators that the listener is truly emotionally present. This empathetic, safe space allows new students to feel that their feelings are validated and their presence valued, ensuring they do not feel alone in navigating the challenges of university life.

When informants receive a supportive response from their peers, they experience an immediate, subjective reduction in psychological burden. Validation from peers or close friends significantly alleviates academic anxiety and feelings of isolation. These empathetic interpersonal relationships transform into a robust emotional buffer, providing new students with the psychological energy needed to face the competitive campus routine.

However, if students encounter a cold, judgmental, or indifferent response from their peer group, the process of seeking support comes to an immediate halt. Negative interactions or emotional rejection during the early stages of university life have been shown to leave lasting communication trauma. These students chose to withdraw their attempts at openness and erect stronger defensive barriers, complicating future intervention or assistance efforts.

3. Communication Barriers

Although there is an urgent need for support, the process of expressing that need is hindered by significant psychological barriers, such as communication anxiety. The majority of informants reported that they encountered both physical and psychological strain, exemplified by symptoms like a rapid heartbeat or an abrupt inability to speak clearly, whether

they planned to engage with a lecturer or seek assistance from the university counseling service. This social anxiety impairs their interpersonal skills, causing their communication to become halting or even leading them to abandon their efforts to seek support altogether.

This communication distortion is exacerbated by an acute fear of negative stigma within the university environment. First-year students often internalize the misconception that seeking support or admitting to academic struggles signifies a lack of character or independence. They are burdened by the continual fear that revealing mental health challenges or financial hardships will result in being categorized as weak, entitled, or unsuitable for collegiate competition.

This fear of negative evaluation creates a deeply distressing internal dilemma for new university students. On one hand, their internal coping mechanisms are stretched to the limit, creating a critical need for external intervention. On the other hand, the fear of being judged by new peers or viewed negatively by lecturers drives them to keep their problems to themselves. This pattern resembles a vicious cycle, anxiety hinders communication, communication barriers cause problems to accumulate, and this accumulation of issues exacerbates the students' psychological anxiety.

The finding about these communication barriers suggests that campus facilities designed to support student well-being cannot function optimally unless these mental and interpersonal obstacles are addressed. First-year students' failure to communicate their crises stems not from a lack of access to information, but rather from an inability to overcome social anxiety and internal stigma. It underscores that the primary interventions needed by new students are the creation of an inclusive environment and the strengthening of interpersonal competencies to break down these barriers of anxiety.

The findings of this study confirm that interpersonal communication competence serves as the most crucial adaptive coping mechanism for first-year students navigating the transition to university life. The initial phase of university studies represents not merely a shift in academic level, but a total reconstruction of the individual's social and psychological identity (Maulida & Winanta, 2021). When new students face a mounting array of unfamiliar burdens, their internal coping capacities often reach a breaking point. Gomez-Lopez et al. (2022) states that the ability to mobilize external social support through effective interpersonal communication becomes a primary determinant of their mental well-being.

Support seeking is a complex communicative act. Students who are skilled in interpersonal communication not only have the courage to acknowledge their weaknesses but also the tactical skills to craft messages effectively. The ability to express anxiety or academic difficulties without coming across as overly complaining allows the listener to accurately understand the urgency of the situation. This ability to articulate needs bridges psychological gaps and triggers a faster and more appropriate supportive response from their college environment (Collie, 2022).

The phenomenon of withdrawal observed among informants with low communication competence indicates a dysfunction in coping strategies. When a new student opts to conceal their difficulties, an accumulation of mental and emotional pressures may arise, sometimes leading to significant academic stress (Mayya et al., 2022). This tendency to withdraw is often driven by misconceptions regarding independence, where support seeking is wrongly equated with personal failure. As a result, they become trapped in social isolation, which further exacerbates their sense of alienation within the diverse campus environment.

The presence of mutual empathy in peer interactions also demonstrates that a safe social environment acts as a highly effective psychological buffer (McLean et al., 2023). First-year students tend to engage in social scanning to identify figures who share similar experiences. When students encounter a safe space marked by supportive nonverbal cues, the process of emotional validation occurs instantly. This validation alleviates nervous system tension and

fosters a sense of belonging, something new students desperately need to withstand the pressures of intense campus competition.

However, a stark contrast emerges when examining communication barriers, specifically communication apprehension. This anxiety is not merely ordinary nervousness but a psychological obstacle (Archbell & Coplan, 2022) that paralyzes a student's interpersonal ability to take action. Even when students cognitively recognize their need for assistance from lecturers or counseling services, intense anxiety causes them to abandon that intention. This barrier creates a significant gap between the intention to seek support and actual help-seeking behavior, often resulting in delayed crisis intervention.

This dilemma is further exacerbated by the fear of negative evaluation and the social stigma attached to support seeking behavior. Academic culture sometimes unconsciously glorifies competition and individual resilience, placing pressure on new students to always appear perfect and self-reliant (Shannon et al., 2022). Fearing of being perceived as weak or coddled by peers or academic advisors, freshman often choose to suffer in silence. This behavioral pattern is particularly dangerous, as it delays necessary medical or academic interventions until the problem has escalated and become difficult to mitigate.

In this point, universities should not focus on providing infrastructure and university support facilities such as counseling centers, academic advisors, or peer-mentoring services. University should actively overlook students' psychological readiness and communication skills regarding access to these services. It is crucial to achieve maximum effectiveness by addressing the interpersonal barriers by student. As mentioned by Berman et al (2020) that interpersonal communication competence serves as the key that bridges a student's deep-seated internal needs with the social safety net provided by the institution.

The vital role of interpersonal communication competence in seeking support necessitates a new perspective in first year student orientation programs. Interpersonal skills should no longer be dismissed as merely supplementary to organizational activities. It must be integrated as essential survival skills that students are expected to master from their very first day on campus. Equipping first-year students with effective communication skills, while dismantling the stigma surrounding support-seeking, is a strategic step toward creating a campus ecosystem that excels not only academically but also in terms of mental and social well-being.

D. CONCLUSION

This study concludes that interpersonal communication competence is an essential adaptive coping mechanism that determines the success of first-year students in securing social support during the transition to university life. Strong communication skills, particularly regarding self-disclosure, prove to be a primary drive for activating social support networks within the campus environment. Freshman who are capable of effectively articulating their academic and psychological burdens tend to secure appropriate assistance more quickly, whether from peer groups or campus support systems such as academic advisors and university counselors.

The study also reveals significant psychological and interpersonal barriers including communication apprehension and an acute fear of social stigma. Many first-year students find themselves trapped in a distressing internal dilemma. They desperately need help yet choose to suppress their problems for fear of being perceived as weak, coddled, or incompetent. This occurrence illustrates that the main barrier to requesting assistance is not the availability of university support resources, but rather the students' interpersonal incapacity to articulate their challenges.

The significance of interpersonal communication competence in this context underscores that interaction skills are not merely a form of normative social capital, but a

crucial survival skill within the academic world. Even the most impressive university counseling centers and academic advising systems will prove ineffective if not matched by efforts to equip new students with the communication skills needed to access them. Therefore, an institutional paradigm shift is required, one that views interpersonal skills as fundamental to maintaining students' mental well-being and academic continuity from the very first day of their life in university.

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