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COMMUNICATION SKILL LEVELS IN TURKISH PROSPECTIVE TEACHERS

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The author of this study tested whether Turkish prospective teachers' levels of communication skill differed significantly according to submissive acts, self-images drawn from social comparisons, and several other personal variables. A total of 274 persons participated in this study. The Communication Skills Assessment Scale (Korkut, 1996), The Submissive Acts Scale (Gilbert & Allan, Turkish version Sahin & Sahin, 1992), The Social Comparison Scale (Gilbert & Allan, Turkish version Sahin & Sahin, 1992) and a personal information form developed by the author were used for data collection. Results showed that individuals with a positive self-image, those who perceived themselves as popular and assertive, those coming from a higher income status, and individuals with perceived democratic parental styles reported higher levels of communication skills. No significant differences were found in prospective teacher's communication skills according to submissive acts.

Keywords: communication skills, submissive acts, social comparison, prospective teachers, self-image.

Communication is one of the essential tools in human adjustment. From birth, human beings are constantly interacting with their environments. Effective communication with family, a spouse, friends, and coworkers is an indispensable ingredient to long-lasting and healthy relationships. In Yuksel-Sahin (2005), the definition of *communication skills* has been developed and presented as *the learned behaviors that enable an individual to establish satisfactory relations, eliciting positive responses from other individuals and facilitating social lifet*.

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These behaviors are related to effective listening, appropriate self-disclosure through comprehensible speech, expressing feelings and thoughts to another person via verbal and nonverbal messages, "I" messages, and discarding social masks, based on a foundation of respect and empathy.

This definition of effective communication skills highlights respect as the foundation of healthy interpersonal relationships. Regard for others refers to valuing individuals for their humanness (Egan, 1975; Ersever, 2003) and relating to them in honoring ways (Eisenberg & Delaney, 1993). In addition to respect, empathy is an equally important prerequisite to functional interpersonal relationship formation. Empathy facilitates strong and healthy relationships (Munro, Bore, & Powis, 2005; Tubbs & Moss, 1991). Empathy involves one's ability to put oneself in the shoes of another and to be able to view things from the perspective of the other, while conveying this understanding to the other without losing one's objective stance (Rogers, 1970, as cited in Dökmen, 2002). Empathy is to be aimed for more than sympathy; sympathy is about taking on thoughts and feelings of another. Empathy, on the other hand, involves understanding thoughts and feelings of the person (Devito, 1989; Dökmen, 2002; Hardee, 2003).

Effective listening is crucial to accurately understanding another's thoughts and feelings. Effective listening involves an empathetic attitude, an active effort toward understanding the speaker (Tubbs & Moss, 1991) and conveying feedback on what is being heard. Effective listening is incomplete without appropriate feedback. This may involve reflecting what is being understood as well as one's thoughts and feelings about it. Effective listening accompanied with feedback can enrich relationships. In providing feedback, communicators should use precise language and avoid vague expressions. Clear and precise language can make it easier for the listener to understand what is being said. Communicators should use appropriate self-disclosure while expressing feelings, thoughts and requests (Yuksel-Sahin, 2005). Clear, precise and appropriate self-disclosure is an essential ingredient of healthy and meaningful interpersonal relationships (Ashmore & Banks, 2002; Reece & Brandt, 1990). Kunkle and Gerrity (1997) refer to *self-disclosure* as *one's voluntary sharing of past experiences, future plans and personal issues with another*. Self-disclosure is telling the truth, not just presenting one's desirable attributes or social masks (Kang & Yang, 2006). Some view too much or too little disclosure as unhealthy (Ersever, 1995). Building meaningful and healthy relationships necessitates appropriate self-disclosure of the parties involved. Luft advises that appropriateness of self-disclosure depends on the time, circumstances, the recipient and on what and to whom the communicator chooses to reveal. Self-disclosure occurs in authentic relationships where feelings are being shared (as cited in Selçuk, 1989). Expression of feelings is a vital part of relationships because it not only allows the speaker to gain insights about his or her feelings but also

provides an opportunity for these feelings to be understood by another human being. In conveying feelings, "I" should be followed by emotional words such as "I love you" or "I feel sad for hurting you" (Fensterheim & Baer, 1994). With "I" messages one is able to express thoughts and feelings without accusing or belittling the other (Devito, 1989; Gordon, 2001).

In addition to "I" messages, an empathetic and assertive relating style is an essential component of effective interpersonal communication. Empathetic assertiveness (Bayraktutan, 2006) refers to one's sensitivity to a communication partner. It involves taking into account the thoughts, feelings and circumstances of another, giving the person feedback that expresses understanding and doing so without compromising one's own rights (e.g., "I really know how busy you are. On the other hand, I would like to feel that our relationship is important to you too. That is why I would like for you to spare some time where just the two of us can spend some time together" etc.). The ability to convey one's thoughts and feelings in a genuine and respectfully assertive manner is highly important in interpersonal relationships. Individuals should strive toward genuineness in interpersonal relationships. Ersever (2003) asserts that the key to effective communication is for individuals to be consistently themselves as much as possible. On the other hand, there are two issues to take into consideration while behaving genuinely. First, such behavior should be appropriate to the social context. Functional skills in self-expression and self-monitoring are important components of social interactions (Bacanlı, 1997). Second, acting genuinely does not mean disrespecting or hurting others. Genuineness should be exhibited respectfully. Genuine expression of feelings, thoughts and wants necessitates a consistency between verbal and nonverbal behaviors. If a person verbally expresses anger and his or her posture and facial expressions also convey anger, this exemplifies consistency between verbal and nonverbal behaviors.

In short, respect, empathy, effective listening, clarity, appropriate self-disclosure, use of "I" messages, empathic assertiveness, genuineness, and consistency between verbal and nonverbal messages are vital ingredients of effective communication. These are basic skills necessary for healthy and enduring relationships, whether these relations are formal or informal. For example, a teacher should not only be able to effectively communicate with students but also with other teachers, administrators, school counselors, other employees at school and parents. Effective communication can facilitate functional and satisfying relationships both in school and in the teacher's personal relationships and thus can contribute to his or her life satisfaction. This in turn can enhance his or her productivity and contribution to society.

The purpose of this study was to investigate whether prospective teachers' communication skills differed significantly according to submissive acts, social comparison behaviors, perceived popularity, perceived assertiveness, perceived parental attitudes, and income.

METHOD

Participants

In this study, participants were 274 persons (61.3% females, 38.7% males) who were senior year university students (47.9%) and university graduates working on master's degrees (in education) in order to be able to teach in middle/high schools (52.1%) in Turkey.

Instruments

Communication Skills Assessment Scale (CSAS) Prospective teachers' communication skills were measured by the CSAS developed by Korkut (1996). The CSAS is a 5-point Likert measure with 25 items assessing one's perceived level of communication skills. Test-retest reliability coefficient was .76, and the Cronbach alpha was .80. Factor analysis done for validity testing of the CSAS resulted in one factor.

Submissive Acts Scale (SAS) The SAS was used to measure individuals' levels of submissive acts. The scale was developed by Gilbert and Allan (1994). Its adaptation to Turkish was done by Sahin and Sahin (1992) (as cited in Savasır & Sahin, 1997). The scale is a 5-point Likert measure with 16 items. The internal consistency coefficient of the scale was .74. Validity testing was done by finding correlation coefficients between scores on the SAS and the Beck Depression Inventory, .32 ($p < .001$), the Sociotropy Scale, .36 ($p < .001$) and the Autonomy Scale, -.05 ($p < .001$).

Social Comparison Scale (SCS) The SCS was used to assess prospective teachers' self-evaluations obtained through social comparisons with others. The scale was developed by Allan and Gilbert (1995) and consists of 5 items. It was adapted to Turkish by Sahin and Sahin (1992) (as cited in Savasır & Sahin, 1997). The scale is a 6-point Likert-type scale of 18 items. The internal consistency coefficient of the scale was .79 for university students and .89 for adults. Validity testing was done by finding correlation coefficients between scores on the SCS and the Beck Depression Inventory -.19 ($p < .000$) and with subscales of the Short Symptom Inventory (scores ranged between .14 and .34.

Personal Information Form Participants were given a Personal Information form to provide information on perceived popularity, perceived assertiveness, perceived parental attitudes, and income.

Data Analysis

Independent samples *t* test, Kruskal-Wallis Variance Analysis, and Mann-Whitney *U* test were used for data analysis. A significance level of .05 was used for all analyses. These procedures were run in SPSS for Windows.

RESULTS

Table 1 illustrates basic descriptive statistics on communication skills of the participants (M = 102.39; SD = 8.79).

TABLE 1
STUDENTS' COMMUNICATION SKILLS SCORES

n	Minimum	Maximum	*M*	*SD*
274	76	125	102.39	8.79

Independent samples t tests were run to test whether or not prospective teachers' level of communication skills differed significantly according to their level of submissive acts, level of social comparison, perceived popularity and perceived assertiveness. Results of t tests are illustrated in Table 2.

TABLE 2
INDEPENDENT SAMPLES *T* TEST RESULTS: COMMUNICATION SKILLS ACCORDING TO SUBMISSIVE ACTS, SOCIAL COMPARISON, PERCEIVED POPULARITY AND PERCEIVED ASSERTIVENESS

Variable	*n*	*M*	*SD*	*t*	*p*
Submissive Acts					
Low	122	101.67	8.64	1.21	.22
High	152	102.96	8.89		
Social Comparison					
Positive Self-Image	157	104.64	8.30	5.15*	.00
Negative Self-Image	117	99.36	8.55		
Popular					
Popular	184	103.62	8.88	3.39*	.00
Not-Popular	90	99.84	8.13		
Assertiveness					
Assertive	199	103.09	8.87	2.16*	.03
Not Assertive	75	100.53	8.36		

As seen in Table 2, prospective teachers' scores on communication skills did not differ significantly according to their level of submissive acts (df = 272, t = 1.21, $p > .05$). On the other hand, their means on communication skills differed significantly according to their level of social comparison (df = 272, t = 5.15, $p < .05$). Prospective teachers who held a positive self-image through social comparison had significantly higher means on communication skills (M = 104.64, SD = 8.30) than those who held negative self-images (M = 99.36, SD = 8.55). Prospective teachers' communication skills also differed significantly according to whether they perceived themselves as popular or not (df = 272,

$t = 3.39$, $p < .05$). Those prospectives who perceived themselves as popular had a significantly higher mean score on communication skills ($M = 103.62$, $SD = 8.88$) than those who did not perceive themselves as popular ($M = 99.84$, $SD = 8.13$). Likewise, prospective teachers' communication skills also differed significantly according to whether or not they perceived themselves as assertive ($df = 272$, $t = 2.16$, $p < .05$). Prospective teachers who perceived themselves as assertive had a significantly higher mean ($M = 103.09$, $SD = 8.87$) than those who did not view themselves as assertive ($M = 100.53$, $SD = 8.36$).

Kruskal-Wallis Variance Analysis was conducted to test whether or not prospective teachers' level of communication skills differed significantly according to income and perceived parental attitudes. Results are illustrated in Table 3.

TABLE 3
RESULTS OF KRUSKAL-WALLIS VARIANCE ANALYSIS: COMMUNICATION SKILLS ACCORDING TO PERCEIVED PARENTAL ATTITUDES, AND INCOME

Variable	*n*	Mean Rank	*DF*	*H*	*p*
Income					
Very High	4	213.63			
High	85	146.46	3	11.62*	.00
Average	168	136.22			
Low	17	87.47			
Parental Attitudes					
Democratic	240	142.24			
Distant	15	104.27	2	6.94*	.03
Authoritarian	19	103.84			

As seen Table 3, prospective teachers' level of communication skills differed significantly according to income ($H = 11.62$, $p < .05$) and perceived parental attitudes ($H = 6.94$, $p < .05$). A Mann-Whitney U test was used to further explore these differences.

As illustrated in Table 4, prospectives who received a very high income had a significantly higher mean rank on communication skills ($MR = 19.38$) than those with low income ($MR = 9.03$). Prospectives who received a high income had a significantly higher mean rank on communication skills ($MR = 55.23$) than those with low income ($MR = 32.85$). Likewise, prospectives who received an average income had a significantly higher mean rank on communication skills ($MR = 95.98$) than those with low income ($MR = 63.59$). In short, as participants' level of income increased so did their level of communication skills. Students who perceived their parents as democratic had a significantly higher mean rank on communication skills ($MR = 132.65$) than those with perceived authoritarian parental attitudes ($MR = 96.58$).

TABLE 4
RESULTS OF MANN-WHITNEY *U* TEST: COMMUNICATION SKILLS ACCORDING TO PERCEIVED PARENTAL ATTITUDES, AND INCOME

Variable	Mean Rank	*U*	*Z*	*p*
Income				
Very High/High	67.25 / 43.95	81.00	1.77	.08
Very High/Average	132.00 / 85.42	154.00	1.85	.06
Very High/Low	19.38 / 9.03	0.50	3.01*	.00
High/Average	133.28 / 123.82	6606.50	.97	.33
High/Low	55.23 / 32.85	405.50	2.85*	.00
Average/Low	95.98 / 63.59	928.00	2.38*	.02
Parental Attitudes				
Democratic/Distant	130.10 / 94.47	1297.00	1.82	.07
Democratic/Authoritarian	132.65 / 96.58	1645.00	2.02*	.04
Distant/Authoritarian	17.80 / 17.26	138.00	0.16	.88

DISCUSSION

In this study we tested whether or not Turkish prospective teachers' levels of communication skills differed significantly according to submissive acts, self-images drawn from social comparisons, and other personal variables. The finding on submissive acts was contrary to those of previous researchers who have reported a significant relationship between submissive acts and individuals' communication skills. Some authors found strong relationships between submissive acts and fear of social interaction and fear of negative social evaluation (Gilbert, 2000; as cited in Yıldırım, 2004). Others have found links between submissive acts and psychological problems (Allan & Gilbert, 1997) and psychopathology (Connan, Troop, Landau, Campbell, & Treasure, 2007). Given these findings, one would expect that individuals with high levels of submissive acts would score lower on communication skills. However, as noted above, the difference between these two variables was not significant. Submissive acts are marked by difficulty in voicing feelings and thoughts and an inability to defend oneself when one's rights are being violated (Erdoğdu & Oto, 2004). Relative to the Western cultures, submissive acts are more prevalent in interpersonal relationships among individuals of Eastern cultures. As a result of the heavy Eastern influence on the Turkish culture, submissive acts and respect are often intertwined. In hierarchical relationships between parents and children, administrators and subordinates, and teachers and students, persons with lower status are expected to behave respectfully, which often involves submissive acts. However, a respectful but not submissive stance in relationships provides room for individuals' freedom, creativity and productivity. Such individuals are free to think, question, change and come up with alternative ways of handling

matters. On the other hand, individuals involved in relationships requiring submissive acts have a lower sense of self, a lower sense of self-importance, a lack of freedom, and/or limited opportunities for self-expression, and thus are not expected to be productive and creative. A person with these attributes is expected to do what is required of him or her (Yıldırım & Ergene, 2003). Submissive acts are reinforced when respect and validation are obtained through submission and chance for relational conflicts and their resolutions are eliminated in hierarchical interpersonal relationships (Kaya, Güneş, Kaya, & Pehlivan, 2004). Individual needs for close relationships and validation might encourage submissive acts (Savaşır & Şahin, 1997). However, healthy and long-lasting relationships can be attained only if individuals can voice their feelings and opinions to others and receive respect from others without compromising their rights and needs. Hence, finding no significant difference between prospective teachers' submissive acts and their communication skills might be attributed to characteristics of the Turkish culture.

Consistent with findings of previous studies, results of the current work showed that individuals holding positive self-images (attained from social comparisons) scored higher on communication skills. Individuals use social comparison to evaluate themselves on a variety of attributes. Thus, social comparison provides a basis for positive or negative self-evaluation (Savaşır & Şahin, 1997). Individuals with positive self-images have high self-esteem which has been associated with better psychological health and socially adaptive behaviors (Üstün & Akman, 2002), proactive personal style which involves taking the initiative and persistence in efforts toward attainment of goals (Guler-Sahin, 2006), self-confidence (Aslan, 2006; Reece & Brandt, 1990), assertiveness (Yıldız, 2006), effective communication (Işık, 2006) and the ability to form and maintain healthy interpersonal relationships. Positive self-image is essential in forming meaningful and intimate relationships (Devito, 1989) and has a significant contribution to individuals' behaviors in social contexts.

Findings also showed that individuals who perceived themselves as popular had higher levels of communication skills. Literature on popularity reveals similar findings. Popular individuals have been found to be physically attractive; interesting (Demir, 2006; Oral, 2007); warm and sensitive (Eddy & Dymphna, 2005; Eder, 1985); self-respecting (Crocker & Knight, 2005); self-confident; energetic and active (Adams & Roopnarine, 1994); extraverted; sympathetic; and fun. These persons often have more friends. It is likely that the positive feedback these persons receive from others might contribute to their self-images, which – in turn – might contribute to their ease with interpersonal communication.

Participants who perceived themselves as assertive reported higher levels of communication skills. This finding is in line with those of previous studies on assertiveness, which have shown positive associations with communication

skills (Kukulu, Buldukoğlu, Kulakaç, & Köksal, 2006) and interpersonal efficacy (Turner, Conkel, Reich, Trotter, & Siewart, 2006). Individuals who consider themselves timid and aggressive, or who have difficulty in self-expression report lower levels of assertiveness (Yıldız, 2006).

Individuals' levels of communication skills increased in parallel with their income. Prior work has revealed similar results that persons with higher incomes reported higher levels of communication skills (Görür, 2001), assertiveness (Onur, 2006), and self-esteem (Tatoglu, 2006), and lower levels of submissive behaviors (Yıldırım, 2004). On the other hand, individuals with lower income levels perceived themselves as having more obstacles to overcome and reported higher levels of stress, anxiety, and depressive symptoms (Selçuk, 2000).

Participants who perceived their parents' style as democratic scored higher on communication skills. This is consistent with literature on parental attitudes. Interactions with parents constitute one's first social experiences, they are intimate and long-lasting (Terasa & Holmbeck, 1995; as cited in Öksüz, 2002) thus they might provide an experiential basis for individuals' future interpersonal relationships (Büyüksahin-Cevik, 2007; Kapçı & Küçüker, 2006). Researchers examining parental styles often report the following characteristics in children of democratic parents: independent, friendly, skilled in expressing themselves, cooperative, mindful of the needs of others, emotionally stable, socially skillful, successful, self-confident (Demiriz & Öğretir, 2007; Erdoğdu, 2006), and having higher levels of self-acceptance (Kılıççı, 1992) and self-esteem (Haktanır & Baran, 1998; Tatoğlu, 2006). Individuals raised with democratic parenting are likely to form healthy interpersonal relationships because they can acquire a democratic interpersonal style through their relationships with parents which could have positive impacts on their other social interactions.

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