

EXPLORING L2 UNIVERSITY STUDENTS' ATTITUDES TOWARD ENGLISH FOR ACADEMIC AND PROFESSIONAL PURPOSES COURSE

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ABSTRACT

Communication Skills, a course taught in Ghanaian tertiary institutions, is tailored to make students proficient users of English for academic, professional, and other specific purposes. Over the years, the research landscape of the course in Ghana has largely covered areas including but not limited to error analysis, needs analysis, knowledge assessment, and trend analysis. This study investigates the attitudes of university students toward the study of Communication Skills from the tripartite components of attitude theory perspective: cognitive, affective, and behavioural. This quantitative study adopted a descriptive survey design and conveniently sampled first-year students from the Faculty of Social Sciences, Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology, Kumasi, Ghana, using an online questionnaire. The data has been analysed using descriptive statistics. The results show that, overall, first-years held positive attitudinal perceptions, feelings, and behaviours toward the study of Communication Skills. However, female first-year students showed comparatively better positive attitudes to the study of Communication Skills to that of their male counterparts. Nearly nine in ten of the students studied (87.5%) passed the course in the First Semester Examination. This suggests that the overall positive attitudes recorded may have contributed to this positive academic performance. We recommend that lecturers for the course take cognizance of students' attitudes toward the course from time to time in order to adopt appropriate measures and instruction to achieve positive attitudes and academic performance.

Keywords: General English; English for Specific Purposes (ESP); English Medium of Instruction (EMI); Gender; Academic performance

INTRODUCTION

There are about thirty (30) to eighty (80) indigenous languages in Ghana (Hall, 1983; Dakubu, 1998; Eberhard et al., 2014). After the English language was introduced to the then Gold Coast (now Ghana) through colonization, it emerged as the country's official language (Huber & Dako, 2004). For Morris (1998, p. 16), this can be attributed to the fact that "to choose one language would infer a hierarchy among the people and their languages". Therefore, Obeng (1997) sees the English language as one that transcends the local borders of communication and unites every part of the country through communication. As an official language in multilingual Ghana, English is used for purposes such as the writing of documents in government offices, communication by government officials, and a medium of instruction (English Medium of Instruction (EMI)) in schools (Yevudey, 2017; Aboagye-Dacosta & Adade-Yeboah, 2019; Gyimah Manu et al, 2024). The dominant language in the world today, and an important language for science, technology, trade and commerce is English (Ihmeideh et al., 2010; Viet, 2017). Consequently, Feng (2002) has argued that the emergence of English as the world's language demands that it should be taught at all levels of education.

English is taught as a second language (L2) in Ghanaian schools (National Council for Curriculum & Assessment (NaCCA), 2019; Amua-Sekyi, 2005). In most Ghanaian tertiary institutions, *Communication Skills* – otherwise known as General English or English for Academic Purposes (EAP) in some foreign institutions (Gborsong et al, 2015) – is designed to equip students with the requisite skills to become proficient users of the English language in both spoken and written forms of communication. Since tertiary students are expected to demonstrate knowledge in

writing in their specific areas of study, Afful (2007, p. 145) has posited that the course is also meant "to stem the downward trend in the quality of writing of students in various discipline-specific contexts". Hence, the course is tailored to help them to be able to use English in their pursuit of academic knowledge and for academic purposes – that is, English for Academic Purposes (EAP) (Coker & Abude, 2012). With these, the course covers topics in grammar (e.g., word classes, concord, and some common errors in the use of English), writing (e.g., punctuation, paragraph development, and summary), vocabulary (e.g., spelling), business communication (e.g., letters, memorandum, and minutes) and oral presentation (e.g., vote of thanks, chairperson's remarks and proposal of toast).

In Gborsong et al's (2015, p. 413) view, "the scholarship on undergraduate student pedagogy has continually been faced with how best to improve upon learners' knowledge of communicative skills [as a course]" in Ghana. In an attempt to proffer solutions to this situation, the research landscape on the course, *Communication Skills*, in Ghana, has largely centred on issues such as analysing students errors or error analysis (e.g., Yankson, 1994; Dako & Forson, 1997; Edu-Buandoh, 1997; Appiah, 2002; Adika, 2003), needs analysis (e.g., Dzameshie, 1997, Afful, 2007; Gborsong et al, 2015), knowledge assessment (e.g., Kodom-Gyasi et al, 2011), and referral or trail trends analysis (e.g., Coker & Abude, 2012). While the findings of these studies are huge contributions to scholarship on the study of Communication Skills, it is, however, surprising that stakeholders of the course in Ghana, have paid minimal attention to the attitudes of students toward the study of Communication Skills. In other jurisdictions, students' attitudes toward the study of English, have been explored (Ahmed, 2015; Viet, 2017; Abu-Snoubar, 2017). In a research that explored the attitudes of undergraduate students of a university in Malaysia toward the

learning of English language (Ahmed, 2015), varying students' attitudes based on different variables were recorded, subsequent to which Viet's (2017) study recorded positive attitudes from undergraduate students at Nong Lam University, Vietnam, towards the learning of English at the university. Similar findings had been established by Abu-Snoubar (2017) when the attitudes of students at the Al-Balqa Applied University in Jordan, toward learning English were studied for which gender and area of specialization of the students were noted as influences of their attitudes.

Attitude is the reaction or behaviour of an individual towards an object or entity out of his or her opinions, views, and beliefs about the said entity (Latchanna & Dagneu, 2009; Abidin et al., 2012). For Hancock (1972), attitude, which can either be negative or positive, is a behaviour that is learnt by a learner through his or her activities. Similarly, Baker (1992) has noted that it is a construct that is used in explaining how human behaviour is persistent and directed. To Perloff (2017), it is a psychological or mental construct that is built through the varied experiences of an individual and consequently, characterizes his or her being as human. Eagly and Chaiken (1998) have specified that it is a cognitive tendency that is shown through the assessment or evaluation of something with some level of favour or disfavour. Based on the inclination of the human mind from experiences, an individual reacts or acts in a certain way (negatively or positively; favourably or unfavourably) towards an entity. This action, reaction or behaviour is what is known as attitude (Main, 2004).

Various scholars (Rosenberg & Hovland, 1960; Hilgard, 1980) have opined that attitude is made up of a tripartite component: cognitive (mental), affective (emotional), and behavioural (conative). The cognitive component is said to be the totality of information or fact that is available to an individual. This information includes beliefs,

opinions, and thoughts about objects (Eagly & Chaiken, 1993). The affective component culminates into the feelings or emotions of an individual towards an entity (Rajecki, 1982; Baker, 1992). Baker (1992) therefore posits that although beliefs and feelings may not correspond, they may be able to cause a positive or negative reaction towards an object. The behavioural component is the intention to act or the reaction or action towards an object (Eagly & Chaiken, 1993). Fishbein (1967, p. 259) has linked the behavioural and cognitive components by noting that "the cognitive component refers to beliefs about the nature of the object and its relations to other objects, while the action component refers to beliefs about what should be done with respect to the object" which will consequently, catapult the action on the object. Importantly, Fazio and Olson (2003) have argued that the three components are interdependent. Hence, they have reciprocal influence on each other (Wenden, 1991; Viet, 2017). From the foregoing discussion, in this study, attitude is defined as the perceptions, feelings, and actions of an individual towards an entity – i.e., Communication Skills, a course designed to make Ghanaian first-year university students proficient users of English for academic, professional, and other specific purposes.

For Getie (2020, p. 3), "an important predictor of success in [learning] a foreign language is students' attitude towards it". Hence, an investigation on the attitudes of students toward the study of a language will enable educators to gain a deeper understanding of "what goes inside the learners' heads, their fears, sources of anxiety and preferences instead of relying on how we as teachers view these points" (Abu-Snoubar, 2017, p. 19). The forgoing evidence posits the situation of the near absence of evidence on what pertains in respect of Ghanaian tertiary students' attitudes toward the study of Communications Skills. More importantly, first-year at the tertiary

education level is a formative year, coupled with the fact that students within the social sciences disciplines are largely presumed to engage much with language. A study of this group within the Ghanaian tertiary space provides a justifiable context, such that the evidence generated from first-year students in the Faculty of Social Sciences in a tertiary university such as the Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology, Kumasi (KNUST) will provide evidence adequate enough to represent the Ghanaian evidence on this phenomenon. The findings of this study will provide insights for the examiners of the course to develop various strategies to improve teaching and learning outcomes. The emerged research question worth interrogating relates to what the attitudes of university students toward the study of *Communication Skills* are. The interrogating questions are (a) What are the attitudes of university students toward the study of Communication Skills in terms of their gender? and (b) What is the implication of the students' attitudes toward Communication Skills on academic performance of the students in Communication Skills?

DATA AND METHODS

The quantitative study approach was adopted to answer the research questions through results from First-year students (Regular), 2020/2021 academic year, of the Faculty of Social Sciences, KNUST, on their attitudes toward the study of Communication Skills. A convenient sampling strategy was employed. Students from the Faculty of Social Sciences were conveniently selected due to their reasonable access to the researchers (Asiamah et al, 2017). In all, a total of 2,664 first-year students registered in the Faculty during the year under study, the 2020/2021 academic year. An online questionnaire was designed using Google Forms at <https://docs.google.com> and distributed via an online link to all the registered first-year students through

their Class Representatives. The questionnaire survey items were carefully constructed, with reference to relevant literature (e.g., Ahmed, 2015; Abu-Snoubar, 2017; Viet, 2017; Getie, 2020; Mabee et al, 2021) to solicit responses that would help achieve the overarching objective of assessing the attitudes of the target group toward the study of Communication Skills. In all, the questionnaire was made up of fourteen (14) items. Out of these, one (1) sought the gender of the respondents, eleven (11) on the three components of attitudes, and two (2) on the academic performance of the students. The attitude measuring items presented a five-point Likert Scale ranging from Strongly Agree, to Strongly Disagree for the participants to respond.

The section on results has been partitioned into three (3) subsections based on the objectives of this paper. The eleven (11) survey questions on the components of attitude (cognitive, affective, and behavioural), towards Communication Skills, were grouped into two thematic areas; a) The learning domain and b) the relevance domain for easy analysis. The learning domain, which consists of eight items (1.1, 1.4, 1.5, 1.6, 1.7, 1.8, 1.9, and 1.10), was classified so because these items centred on students' attitudes towards learning Communication Skills. The relevance domain, comprising three items (1.2, 1.3 and 1.11), was labelled so because the items evaluated students' views on whether it is necessary to study the course, whether they would opt to study it if it were to be optional, and why they study it. Particularly, item 1.3 is labelled so because participants' willingness to study the course if it were optional reflects their perception of its relevance. Attitude is presented here as: students' perceptions toward the course (cognitive); students' feelings toward the course (affective); students' actions or behaviours toward the course (behavioural). To present easy-to-read tables for the survey results, (*Strongly*) Agree is used in reference to *Strongly Agree* and *Agree*

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Likert scale responses whereas (*Strongly Disagree*) is used for *Strongly Disagree* and *Disagree*. Overall, a total of 989 students (representing 37% of the registered students in the academic year) participated in this study by responding to the survey items via the link sent to them. The data collected was anonymised so individual identifiable information were not traceable. The data collected was cleaned, and analysed using descriptive statistics. The results have been presented in frequency tables.

RESULTS

This section presents the analysis of the results from the questionnaire survey.

University students' attitudes toward the study of Communication Skills in terms of gender

This section analyses the results of the survey on the attitudes of university students toward the study of Communication Skills in terms of the gender of the respondents. From Table 1, a total of 989 students participated in the study. This was made up of 599 females and 390 males.

Table 1: Gender distribution of respondents

Gender	Number (n=989)	Percentage (%)
Female	599	60.6
Male	390	39.4

The proceeding subsections are put under the two themes of the survey items: the learning domain items and the relevance domain items. They present the results of the survey, as summarized in Table 2, and their attitudinal components.

Table 2: Students' attitude towards the study of Communication Skills in terms of gender

Item	Statement	Scales	Frequency			% (Gender)		
			Female	Male	Freq.	% of Freq.	Female	Male
1.1	Communication Skills is a <i>difficult</i> or challenging course to study or learn.	(Strongly) Agree	153	106	259	26.2	25.5	27.2
		Neutral	241	141	382	38.6	40.2	36.2
		(Strongly) Disagree	205	143	348	35.2	34.2	36.7
	Total		599	390	989	100	100	100
1.2	I do not find it necessary or important to read Communication Skills as a course in the university.	(Strongly) Agree	51	56	107	10.8	8.5	14.4
		Neutral	76	52	128	12.9	12.7	13.3
		(Strongly) Disagree	472	282	754	76.2	78.8	72.3
	Total		599	390	989	100	100	100

1.3	I would not read or take Communication Skills if it were an optional course.	(Strongly) Agree	138	96	234	23.7	23	24.6
		Neutral	135	82	217	21.9	22.5	21
		(Strongly) Disagree	326	212	538	54.4	54.42	54.35
	Total		599	390	989	100	100	100
1.4	Communication Skills is a boring and uninteresting course.	(Strongly) Agree	61	51	112	11.3	10.2	13
		Neutral	125	90	215	21.7	20.9	23.1
		(Strongly) Disagree	413	249	662	66.9	68.9	63.8
	Total		599	390	989	100	100	100
1.5	I dislike Communication Skills as a course.	(Strongly) Agree	33	40	73	7.4	5.5	10.3
		Neutral	98	56	154	15.6	16.4	14.4
		(Strongly) Disagree	468	294	762	77	78.1	75.3
	Total		599	390	989	100	100	100
1.6	I dislike the grammar aspect of Communication Skills	(Strongly) Agree	79	74	153	15.5	13.2	19
		Neutral	108	73	181	18.3	18	18.7
		(Strongly) Disagree	412	243	655	66.2	68.8	62.3
	Total		599	390	989	100	100	100
1.7	I dislike the writing aspect of Communication Skills.	(Strongly) Agree	104	83	187	18.9	17.4	21.3
		Neutral	138	86	224	22.6	23	22.1
		(Strongly) Disagree	357	221	578	58.4	59.6	56.7
	Total		599	390	989	100	100	100
1.8	I do not attend my Communication Skills class regularly.	(Strongly) Agree	38	27	65	6.6	6.3	6.9
		Neutral	50	34	84	8.5	8.3	8.7
		(Strongly) Disagree	511	329	840	84.9	85.3	84.4
	Total		599	390	989	100	100	100

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1.9	I do not read my Communication Skills lecture notes and reference materials.	(Strongly) Agree	61	47	108	10.9	10.2	12.1
		Neutral	106	62	168	17	17.7	15.9
		(Strongly) Disagree	432	281	713	72.1	72.12	72.05
	Total		599	390	989	100	100	100
1.10	I just study Communication Skills to pass the examination as a requirement.	(Strongly) Agree	127	78	205	20.7	21.2	20
		Neutral	116	66	182	18.4	19.4	16.9
		(Strongly) Disagree	356	246	602	60.9	59.4	63.1
	Total		599	390	989	100	100	100
1.11	I study Communication Skills to be able to communicate effectively in English.	(Strongly) Agree	522	295	817	82.6	87.1	75.6
		Neutral	54	58	112	11.3	9	14.9
		(Strongly) Disagree	23	37	60	6.1	3.8	9.5
	Total		599	390	989	100	100	100

Source: Authors' Construction

Students' attitudes toward the learning domain in terms of gender

The items "Communication Skills is a difficult or challenging course to study or learn" and "Communication Skills is a boring and uninteresting course" (1.1 & 1.4, respectively) present participants' perceptions on whether they consider the course as difficult, and uninteresting. The data revealed notable gender differences on these perceptions. 38.6% (382 of 989) majority, of the respondents, held neutral perception on the difficulty of the course. This comprised 40.2% and 36.2% of the female and male respondents, respectively. Here, it can be said that the female respondents were more indecisive on the subject as compared to their male participants. Further, male respondents (36.7%) displayed a stronger conviction in (strongly) disagreeing with the given perception compared to the female respondents (34.2%). Thus, the males

showed a more positive perception that the course is not challenging than their female counterparts. Contrastingly, on whether they find the course as boring and uninteresting, 68.9% (413 out of 599) of the females (strongly) disagreed whereas 63.8% (249 out of 390) of males did same. Comparatively, although the males were more assertive on their perception that the course is not challenging, the females showed a greater perception that the course is interesting.

The second sub-category under the learning domain (items 1.5, 1.6 & 1.7) centres on the students' feelings toward the course (affective component). On item 1.5, 77% (762 out of 989) affirmed that they like the course by (strongly) disagreeing with the given statement. This was constituted by 78.1% and 75.3% of the female and male respondents, respectively. Also, on item 1.6, majority of the respondents (66.2%) expressed that they like the grammar aspect

of the course by selecting (strongly) disagree. Again, the female respondents dominated by showing their likability with 68.8% of their respondents as against the 62.3% of the males. Item 1.7 also brought similar feelings to those in 1.5 and 1.6. Majority of the respondents (58.4%) asserted their likability towards the writing aspect of the course. This was made up of 59.6% of the female respondents and 56.7% of the males. From the foregoing percentages, it can be posited that the female respondents exhibited a stronger liking for the course and its components than their male counterparts. Overall, majority of the total respondents held positive feelings toward learning the course and its aspects, grammar and writing.

Items 1.8, 1.9 and 1.10 present students' actions or behaviours toward learning Communication Skills (behavioural component). 84.9% of the total respondents (840 out of 989) reacted that they attend Communication Skills classes regularly by (strongly) disagreeing to item 1.8. This was constituted by 85.3% of the female respondents and 84.4% of the males. The females showed a slightly higher positive behaviour in this regard. Item 1.9 ascertained whether or not the respondents read their Communication Skills notes and reference materials. Here, 72.1% (713 out of 989) showed their commitment by (strongly) disagreeing with the given statement. Surprisingly, this was almost distributed fairly with 72.12% of the female respondents and 72.05% of the males. 60.9% of the respondents (strongly) disagreed with the statement that they just study the course to pass the examination because it is a required as shown in 1.10 of Table 2. This consisted 59.4% of the female respondents and 63.1% of the male respondents. This suggests that the male respondents are more convinced on studying the course for other reasons other than just passing the course.

Fazio and Olson (2003) have argued that the three attitudinal components are not exclusive

from each other but are interdependent. Although majority of the respondents held a neutral perception on the difficulty level of the course, they showed positive perception on the course being interesting – the female respondents were more assertive. It can be advanced that this positive perception translated into the positive feelings exhibited towards the course in general and its consequent positive behaviours towards the course and vice versa. Again, the female respondents showed a somewhat greater level of assertiveness, in their feelings and behaviours toward attending classes, and reading notes and reference materials, than the males. However, the male respondents showed a higher level of positive behaviour in terms of not studying the course just to pass examinations.

Students' attitudes toward the relevance domain in terms of gender

The analysis revealed some variations in the perceptions and behaviours of female and male respondents in terms of the relevance of the course – as shown in 1.2, 1.3, and 1.11 of Table 2. In 1.2, majority of the respondents (76.2%) showed a positive perception on the need to read Communication Skills at the university by choosing (strongly) disagree to the given statement. Here, the female respondents showed firmer positive opinion with 78.8% of their participants as against the 72.3% of the males. This positive opinion from the female participants translates into the 8.5% of female respondents who (strongly) agreed to the given perception (1.2) compared to the 14.4% on the side of the males. These show some disparity in the attitudinal perception towards the need to the study the course. Comparatively, it can be advanced that the female participants see a greater need or importance for the course than the male participants. Although the females possess this greater need to study the course, they did not show a stronger positive behaviour, compared to the males, to study

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the course for other reasons other than just passing examination – as shown in 1.10.

Item 1.3 presents the respondents' reaction on whether they would read Communication Skills if it were an optional course. 24.6% of males were unwilling to take the course if it were optional as compared to the 23% of females. Indicatively, majority of the respondents, 54.4% (538 out of 989), opined that they would read the course if it were an optional one. This was closely distributed amongst the female and male respondents – 54.42% and 54.35%, respectively. Interestingly, it can be seen that although 78.8% of the respondents recognised the importance of the course in the university's curriculum, only 54.4% of the respondents would decide to study it if it were an optional course. This means that while the participants exhibited a stronger conviction on the need to study the course, the same cannot be said about their choice to study it when it is not mandatory – its numbers dwindled by 24.4%. This reduction in numbers may suggest a gap between perceived importance of the course (attitudinal perception) and the action to be taken when the course is not mandatory (attitudinal behaviour).

Item 1.11 explores the attitudinal behaviour of the respondents towards the relevance of Communication Skills in improving their English proficiency skills for effective communication. 82.6% (817 out of 989) of the respondents (strongly) agreed that they study the course to be able to communicate effectively in English. A closer analysis revealed that 87.1% of the female participants shared this motivation, while 75.6% of the males did so. This indicates a strong positive behaviour from the females

as compared with the males. Considering the numbers explored above, this indication of strong positive behaviour correlates with the overall attitudinal perception and feeling of the females toward the course.

Academic implication of students' attitudes toward Communication Skills

The questionnaire survey also solicited for the respondents' academic performance in in-class and take-home exercises, and their grade (A is 100-70 marks; B is 69-60 marks; C is 59-50 marks; D is 49-40 marks; F is 39-0 marks, i.e., fail) in the course as shown in Table 3 and Table 4, respectively. To ascertain the respondents' performance in class assessment, the statement, "I do not get more than half of the total marks in my Communication Skills in-class exercises, and take home exercises" was presented. The results showed that 55.2% majority of the respondents exhibited a (strong) disagreement to the given statement whereas 19.3% and 25.5% exhibited a (strong) agreement and neutrality, respectively, on same. It can be inferred that the majority of the respondents who (strongly) disagreed were convinced that they performed above average in their Communication Skills class assessment. However, those who remained neutral were unsure of their performance, possibly because they may not have seen their assessment marks, in those exercises, and those who showed a (strong) agreement admitted their below average performance in same.

Table 3: Students' performance in class assessment

Statement	Scales	Frequency	Percent (%)
I do not get more than half of the total marks in my Communication Skills in-class exercises, and take-home exercises.	(Strongly) Agree	191	19.3
	Neutral	252	25.5
	(Strongly) Disagree	546	55.2
Total		989	100

Source: Authors' construction

To gain further insights in the students' academic performance in Communication Skills, the questionnaire survey solicited for the grades obtained by the respondents in the End of First Semester Examination (2020/2021 academic year). Out of the 989 participants, a distinct distribution of grades emerged. Notably, 9.7% of participants reported achieving an "A," while 27.4% acknowledged securing a "B." Furthermore, 36.6% of participants earned a "C," and 13.8% received a "D" in their examination. Conversely, 1.6% failed by getting grade "F". It must be noted

that 10.9% of the respondents decided not to respond to this question in the survey (see Table 4). According to the KNUST's grading system, it can be posited that 87.5% of the respondents passed the said examination by obtaining grades "A"- "D" (i.e., from 100 marks to 40 marks). This represents a greater majority of the respondents. From the perspective of average marks, it can also be advanced that 73.7% of the respondents obtained 50 marks and above. This also represents a significant majority of the respondents.

Table 4: Students' grades in first semester examination

Statement	Grades	Frequency	Percent (%)
What was your grade in Communication Skills?	A	96	9.7
	B	271	27.4
	C	362	36.6
	D	136	13.8
	Fail	16	1.6
	No Data	108	10.9

Source: Authors' construction

As shown in Table 2 and explained, generally, it can be argued that the respondents exhibited positive attitudes (perceptions, feelings, and behaviours) toward learning Communication Skills and acknowledging the relevance of Communication Skills in university education. This means that majority of the respondents showed positive perceptions, feelings and

behaviours toward Communication Skills through their responses to the survey items. For example, on perception, 76.2% and 66.9% of the respondents held the view that Communication Skills is an important course at the university, and an interesting course, respectively (see items 1.2 and 1.4 on Table 2). Also on attitudinal feelings, 77% of the

respondents showed their likability towards the course whereas 66.2% and 58.8% of the respondents showed their likability towards the grammar, and writing aspects of the course, respectively (see items 1.5, 1.6, and 1.7 on Table 2).

Lastly, on the attitudinal behaviours of the respondents toward Communication Skills, 84.9% admitted that they attend Communication Skills classes regularly; 72.1% admitted that they read their Communication Skills notes and reference materials; 60.9% admitted that they study Communication Skills for other reasons other than just passing the course; 54.4% opined that they would go ahead to read Communication Skills if it were an optional course; and 82.6% agreed that they study Communication Skills to improve their English proficiency (see items 1.8, 1.9, 1.10, 1.3, and 1.11 on Table 2 above). These majority percentages of responses on the attitudinal items presented above suggest positive attitudes of the respondents toward Communication Skills, in general. Considering the overall positive attitudes exhibited by the respondents, it is therefore not surprising to have recorded 55.2% of respondents obtaining more than half marks in class assessment and 87.5% of the respondents passing the End of First Semester Examination. This may suggest that the positive attitudes exhibited by the respondents toward the course might have had a positive impact on their academic performance in the course.

DISCUSSION

Communication Skills is an essential course developed to help university students to be able to demonstrate knowledge, through the English language, in writing and speech for academic purposes (Afful, 2007; Coker & Abude, 2012). Gömleksiz (2010, p. 917) has opined that "attitudes are among the factors that affect students learning". Specifically, the study examined the attitudes of first-year

students in the Faculty of Social Sciences, KNUST, toward their study of Communication Skills. It was found that participants of the present study generally showed positive attitudes toward the course. This finding is congruent with related studies, such as Malallah (2010), Ahmad (2016), Abu-Snoubar (2017) and Viet (2017), which consistently recorded positive students' attitudes toward the study of English for academic purposes at the university level. This congruence recorded in the present study and that of previous studies in other parts of the world (e.g., Malallah, 2010; Ahmad, 2016; Abu-Snoubar, 2017; Viet, 2017) suggests that university students acknowledge the importance of acquiring knowledge and skills that would help them communicate effectively in the English language.

Although this study generally recorded positive students' attitudes, a careful consideration of the results above suggests a more positive attitude on the side of the female respondents than their male counterparts. This observation is in consonance with those reported in studies conducted by Karahan (2007), Gömleksiz (2010), Kobayashi (2012), and Abu-Snoubar (2017) in which female students showed more or higher positive attitudes than the males in their learning of English. The consistencies observed in the present study and prior studies strengthen the position that female students tend to demonstrate a higher positive attitude than males in English language related learning (Orfan, 2020). However, this position observed in this study and related studies (e.g., Karahan, 2007; Gömleksiz, 2010; Kobayashi, 2012; Abu-Snoubar, 2017) is contrary to a study conducted by Soleimaini and Hanafi (2013) where higher positive attitudes toward English language learning on the part of male medical students than females in Iranian context were recorded. This reinforces the need to ascertain gender-based factors that motivate attitudinal variations between male and female students

toward English language learning at the university.

Additionally, in the present study, majority of the respondents expressed that they performed well in their Communication Skills class assessments, and passed the Communication Skills exam in the First Semester of the afore-given year. Kara (2009) has advanced that students' attitudes toward learning a course may have obvious influence on their academic performance. This may be suggestive that the overall positive attitudes recorded in the present study may have contributed to the positive academic performance also recorded in this study. This suggestion aligns with Syukur's (2016) view that positive students' attitudes foster academic learning and propel academic performance. For Al-Tamimi and Shuib (2009), learners' attitudes in learning a language affect their motivation in learning the language – this invariably affects their performance.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The aim of this study was to ascertain the attitudes (perceptions, feelings, and behaviours) of university students toward the study of Communication Skills in terms of their gender. It also explored the students' performance in the course in relation to their attitudes toward the course. The study indicated that overall, respondents held positive attitudes toward the study of Communication Skills with female students showing more positive attitudes than their male counterparts. The findings suggest that the overall positive attitudinal perceptions, feelings and behaviours exhibited by the students toward the course may have an influence on their positive academic performance in the course.

The study has provided some valuable insights into attitudinal perceptions,

feelings and behaviours toward the study of Communication Skills at the university and its possible implication on academic performance in the course. The gender differences on the various attitudinal components that have been revealed may serve as a vital information for university teachers to adopt gender-specific approaches to reach course objectives. The study may also motivate students on the need to have positive attitudes toward the study of Communication Skills. We recommend that lecturers for the course should take cognizance of students' attitudes toward the course from time to time in order to ensure positive students' attitude and also to adopt appropriate measures and instructions to achieve positive academic performance (Midraj, 2003). It is recommended that future studies adopt larger sample of students within the university in order to reach more generalizable outcomes. Lastly, we recommend that future studies in the Ghanaian context focus on the factors that affect students' attitudes from the perspectives of the teacher and the student.

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