Students' Assessment of the Importance of Communication Skills in the Asynchronous Use of English as a Second Language: Learning Activities with ChatGPT and Copilot to Develop Such Skills

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Abstract

Communication skills are an important component of using English as a Second/Foreign Language (L2). The effective utilization of L2 does not only presuppose the four basic skills of listening, reading, speaking, and writing but also implies the enactment of interpersonal communication skills in diverse contexts. It is the latter set of skills that are investigated in our paper in the context of (1) the knowledge-motivation-skills theoretical approach and (2) asynchronous online communication in both the private and educational spheres. A survey was conducted among university students who attended two undergraduate L2 courses in which the respondents were asked to evaluate the importance of specific components that constitute the following constructs of skillful asynchronous L2 interaction: knowledge, motivation, composure, self-disclosure, verbal expressivity, and conversational skills. All the components of the aforementioned constructs were evaluated as having "much" or "very much" importance in asynchronous online L2 communication by a considerable proportion of the participants in the survey. Having in mind the survey results, exemplary learning activities are presented that can be used to improve specific online communication skills in asynchronous L2 that can be performed with OpenAI's ChatGPT and Microsoft's Copilot conversational artificial intelligence (CAI) tools.

Keywords: *English as a Second/Foreign Language, communication skills, interpersonal communication, asynchronous communication, online activities, conversational artificial intelligence tools, ChatGPT, Copilot*

1. Introduction

1.1 Importance of the English language

According to the Statista portal [1], English was the most spoken language worldwide in 2023, with approximately 1.5 billion people who spoke it natively or as a second language, with 1 billion non-native English speakers vastly outnumbering native speakers (see: [2]). As stated on the Global English Education [3] portal, in 142 countries English was included in national education policy as a mandatory teaching subject for public education (i.e. in most Latin American and African countries, as well as in most countries in the Middle East, Central Asia, and Far East), while there were also 41 countries in which English was a possible elective subject. According to Eurostat [4], in the European Union (EU), approximately 98% of the students in lower secondary and 87% in upper secondary education were studying English as a foreign language in 2022. Because of the number of people who use or study English as a foreign or second language and the importance of the English language in general, it is opportune to investigate new methods of teaching and learning English, including those that utilize computer technology and artificial intelligence.

1.2 Use of Chatbots and Introduction of Conversational AI in English Language Learning

In November 2022, the artificial conversational intelligence (CAI) tool *ChatGPT* (see: [5]) was launched by the OpenAI research company. Even before ChatGPT became publicly available, several review papers had already revealed that chatbots can, in general, have a positive impact on language learning (for instance: [6]; [7]; [8]), and indicated that there was a rapidly growing number of research papers in that field [9]. Therefore, it was not a surprise that ChatGPT quickly gained popularity in the academic language teaching and research community, with the potential usefulness of this CAI tool becoming the subject of analysis in numerous scholarly papers (for related reviews, see: [10]; [11]; [12]; [13]; [14]; [15]; [16]). It must be emphasized that the authors of this paper have previously investigated the use of the Microsoft's CAI

tool *Bing Chat* (later named *Copilot*) in designing hybrid Business English *grammar and vocabulary activities* for ESP (English for Specific Purposes) students and found this tool to be convenient and reliable at the time when the study was conducted, as well as that the online learning activities with Bing Chat were predominantly positively evaluated by the students [17].

ChatGPT and Copilot are based on the *Large Language Model* (LLM) technology. At the time this paper was submitted, according to the Chatbot Arena [18], among the best performing and worldwide publicly available LLMs (CAI tools) and their providers at the beginning of October 2024 were *GPT-4o* (OpenAI), *Gemini 1.5 Pro* (Google), and *Claude 3.5 Sonnet* (Antrophic), while the latest release of the Microsoft's *Copilot* LLM has still not been evaluated in benchmarking comparisons.

2. Communication Skills in EFL Teaching

2.1 Communication Competence and EFL

In the English language learning pedagogy, the "four skills" (i.e. listening, speaking, reading, and writing) "have habitually created the foundation of the field of English language education", while for the language learner "every educational situation is unique and will inevitably involve awareness of contextual factors and the ways they impact teaching and learning" (cited from [19]). A rather elaborate model of acquiring communicative competence through language learning, based on the analyses and critique of previous historical models, was developed by Usó-Juan and Martínez-Flor [20]. By combining this model with models of competence in interpersonal communication and, specifically, the model of competence in computer-mediated communication developed by Spitzberg [21], the authors of this paper, Bubaš and Kovačić [22], created a comprehensive model with numerous interpersonal communication skills that supplement the basic "four skills" in second language utilization. According to the latter model "not only linguistic competence, but also the knowledge of social norms and cultural specificities, previous experience, and use of various communication skills can contribute to social/intercultural competence in L2".

Interpersonal communication skills (beyond the subject area of the "four skills") are occasionally a topic of research concerning the use or teaching of English as a foreign language. For instance, the interpersonal communication skills and traits investigated in the EFL context include expressivity (e.g. [23]), self-disclosure (see: [24]; [25]; [26]), and (un)willingness to communicate (e.g. [27]; [28]).

2.2 Communication Skills in Asynchronous EFL

In higher education settings, both online and offline communication skills of students are considered an important and relevant subject of scholarly investigation [29]. Communication in online learning environments is multidimensional and its importance is especially emphasized in student-tutor and students' peer/collaborative interaction [30]. A recent study performed on graduate IT students revealed that the most commonly used applications for their virtual teamwork in educational settings were WhatsApp, Discord, Jira, Facebook Messenger, and Zoom, as well as that communication application characteristics correlated with the perceived performance of a virtual team and communication quality [31]. However, it must be noted that some students may not have adequate communication preparedness for online interactions with their instructors and peers [32].

There is only scarce research on the use of online synchronous and asynchronous communication tools for the development of interpersonal communication skills of students in the EFL context. For instance, Bakar et al. [33] found that the instructional use of an asynchronous online discussion forum can facilitate the development of speaking ability and discussion skills of low-proficiency language learners. Kovačić [34] investigated willingness to communicate in the classroom as one of the learner variables in online asynchronous communication in the context of online written activities performed with a wiki system in an undergraduate EFL course. This study found that students with greater apprehensiveness in face-to-face English instruction were more likely to favorably evaluate the asynchronous use of the wiki as a pedagogical tool in the EFL course. Because of the lack of related studies, it appears that the importance, development, and use of specific interpersonal communication skills (i.e. *composure, self-disclosure, verbal expressivity,* and *conversational skills*) in the online use of EFL is a potentially relevant research topic.

3. Methodology

The study that is presented in this paper consists of: (1) an empirical part that investigates the importance of selected communication skills in online asynchronous EFL communication, and (2) brief practical examples of how to use CAI tools like the OpenAI's *ChatGPT* and Microsoft's *Copilot* in higher education to facilitate the development of these online communication skills in EFL/ESP.

3.1 Research Goals

The main goal of the empirical part of this study is to investigate the perceived importance of the following components of interpersonal communication competence (ICC) in online communication in the EFL context: *knowledge of the communication process, motivation for interpersonal communication, composure, conversational skills, self-disclosure,* and *verbal expressivity.* The goal of the practical part of this study is to explore and provide examples of the use of ChatGPT and Copilot for the development of some of the aforementioned ICC components.

3.2 Subjects in Research

The subjects in the empirical part of our study were first-year undergraduate university students of information systems at a college in the Northern part of Croatia (convenience sample; N=130; aged 18 to 23 years; 79% of male gender, 19% of female gender, and 2% without disclosing the gender).

3.3 Instruments and Procedure

The instrument for the *empirical part of our study* was a questionnaire with self-assessment scales for the measurement of the following components of interpersonal communication competence – ICC (the number of items per scale is written in the brackets): knowledge of the communication process (4), motivation for interpersonal communication (6), composure (5), conversational skills (5), self-disclosure (4), and verbal expressivity (4). Items for each scale were selected and adapted from a more extensive self-assessment instrument for the measurement of the ICC components [35]. The response scale for the respondents' evaluation of the *usefulness of the content of each scale item for their asynchronous communication in the English language* was: "1 – Very little"; "2 – Little"; "3 – Average"; "4 – Much"; "5 – Very much". For data analysis, the percentage of each of the responses was calculated and rounded to the nearest whole number. It must be noted that before they evaluated the *usefulness of a particular ICC component in asynchronous communication* in the English language, the respondents first performed a *self-evaluation* regarding how much the content of an item was characteristic of them in their face-to-face communication (the related data is not presented in this study).

The conversational artificial intelligence tools that were used as instruments in the *practical part of our study* were the *GPT-4o* version of the ChatGPT LLMs and the October 2024 release of Microsoft's *Copilot.* Both tools were used with a basic paid subscription. The two categories of prompts that were designed for implementation with those tools were: (a) simple one-shot prompting that works with the LLMs without a subscription, and (b) one-shot prompting that requires structured multiturn responses that are better performed with full-capacity LLMs that are available with a paid subscription. Due to the limited number of pages in this report, only the tested exemplary prompts are presented in this paper without the actual responses of the LLMs.

4. Results And Discussion

4.1 Evaluation of the Importance of ICC Components in Asynchronous EFL/L2 Use

In *Table 1* the students' evaluations of the importance of the ICC components *knowledge of the communication process*, *motivation for interpersonal communication*, and *composure* in asynchronous EFL are presented. For brevity and illustration purposes, three items were chosen from each self-assessment scale. As can be concluded from the data displayed in *Table 1*, for all of the items the predominant types of responses were "4 – Much" and "5 – Very much", ranging in their sum from 53% (for the 'knowledge' item "Knowing which words are the best, in different situations, to approach persons who perform various duties or hold various social positions.") to 61% (for the 'motivation' item "I am motivated to make contacts with others because that way I can better achieve my goals.") of all responses to a specific item. These findings reveal the students' awareness that these elements of skillful interpersonal communication in face-to-face EFL settings are also important in the context of asynchronous EFL interaction.

In *Table 2* the students' evaluations of the importance of the ICC components' *conversational skills*, *self-disclosure*, and *verbal expressivity* in asynchronous EFL are shown. As was the case with the data in *Table 1*, all of the items shown in *Table 2* received the sum of the predominant responses "4 – Much" and "5 – Very much" in the span from 54% (for the 'self-disclosure' item "I can accurately assess to which individuals and in which situations I can disclose confidential facts about myself.") to 66% (for the 'conversational skills' item "I can change the roles of the speaker and the listener in the conversation unobtrusively and in harmony with the interlocutors.") by the respondents. These results confirm that most respondents considered these skills in interpersonal communication important for asynchronous EFL use.

Table 1. Evaluation of the elements of *knowledge of the communication process*, *motivation for interpersonal communication*, and *composure* as components of ICC (N=130)

		IT WOULD BE USEFUL FOR MY ASYNCHRONOUS COMMUNICATION IN THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE				
		1 Very little	2 Little	3 Averagely	4 Much	5 Very much
K N O W L E D G E	Knowing which words are the best, in different situations, to approach persons who perform various duties or hold various social positions.	3%	11%	33%	**32%**	**21%**
	Knowledge of different communication skills that contribute to more successful communication with other persons.	5%	11%	27%	**35%**	**23%**
	Familiarity with the rituals (customs/procedures) that people adhere to in their mutual contacts (e.g. during introductions, when visiting someone as a guest, at a business meeting, etc.).	7%	20%	37%	**24%**	**12%**
M O T I V A T I O N	I am motivated to make contacts with others because that way I can better achieve my goals.	5%	9%	25%	**34%**	**27%**
	I have positive expectations regarding my contacts with other people.	2%	8%	32%	**34%**	**25%**
	I perceive my interactions with other people as a source of satisfaction.	6%	7%	32%	**35%**	**20%**
C O M P O S U R E	I manage to make my communication never seem nervous or upset.	2%	11%	31%	**35%**	**22%**
	I can control my interaction with others so that it seems spontaneous and natural.	1%	9%	29%	**39%**	**22%**
	I'm not constrained or inhibited when I need to have a dialogue with a stranger.	3%	10%	30%	**34%**	**23%**

* Note: the percentage of the responses was rounded to the nearest whole number so the sum is not always 100%.

The data presented in *Table 1* and *Table 2* also document the **realization of the goal of the empirical part of this study**, which was to investigate the perceived importance of the following components of interpersonal communication competence (ICC) in online asynchronous communication in the EFL context: *knowledge of the communication process, motivation for interpersonal communication, composure, conversational skills, self-disclosure,* and *verbal expressivity.* It can be concluded that most of the respondents in our study (53% to 66% of freshmen students of information systems, depending on a specific item) perceive the investigated elements of ICC in EFL as important. In fact, such interpersonal communication skills and competencies can contribute to the effectiveness of their English language linguistic skills in specific real-world private, educational, and professional settings/contexts. However, the *limitation of this study* is that it was not performed on different types of respondents and contexts of EFL use.

4.2 Design of Prompts for the ChatGPT and Copilot CAI Tools to Facilitate Learning Communication Skills That Are Perceived Important in Asynchronous EFL Communication

The *goal of the practical part of this study* was to explore and provide examples of the use of ChatGPT and Copilot CAI tools for the development of some of the aforementioned ICC components. The broad theoretical framework for this task draws on the models proposed by Spitzberg [21] and Bubaš and Kovačić [22]. These models include the *knowledge-motivation-skills* concept which is elaborated and illustrated in detail by Morreale et al. [36] in the non-EFL contexts of interpersonal, small-group, public, computer-mediated, and mass communication. Also, some of the technical opportunities for the design of multiturn activities with advanced LLMs (like GPT-4o) in the field of interpersonal communication skills were analyzed by Bubaš [37].

Table 2. Evaluation of the elements of *conversational skills, self-disclosure, and verbal expressivity* as components of ICC in asynchronous EFL interaction (N=130)

		IT WOULD BE USEFUL FOR MY ASYNCHRONOUS COMMUNICATION IN THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE				
		1 Very little	2 Little	3 Averagely	4 Much	5 Very much
C O N V E R S A T I O N A L S K I L L S	I can change the roles of the speaker and the listener in the conversation unobtrusively and in harmony with the interlocutors.	1%	8%	25%	**30%**	**36%**
	In an informal conversation, I manage to stick to topics that are interesting to (almost) everyone.	1%	9%	26%	**42%**	**22%**
	Before important conversations, I successfully plan how I will direct the flow of the discussion with the interlocutors.	4%	11%	30%	**29%**	**26%**
S E L F - D I S C L O S U R E	I can accurately assess to which individuals and in which situations I can disclose confidential facts about myself.	3%	10%	33%	**25%**	**29%**
	I take care to communicate with others the confidential and personal information about myself that they find acceptable.	4%	15%	22%	**32%**	**28%**
	When I express something very personal and private about myself, I succeed in achieving greater closeness with other individuals and not distancing them.	3%	14%	23%	**33%**	**28%**
V E R B A L E X P R E S S I V I T Y	I can easily engage others by recounting various interesting events and anecdotes.	5%	9%	32%	**27%**	**28%**
	My expression is rich with impressive parallels, metaphors, examples, and images.	1%	11%	38%	**32%**	**19%**
	I can easily describe something in words, such as a natural landscape, a picture, or a musical composition.	1%	10%	35%	**35%**	**20%**

* Note: the percentage of the responses was rounded to the nearest whole number so the sum is not always 100%.

Prompts are instructions, questions, or replies given to the LLM in a dialogue form. Zero-shot prompts rely on the knowledge of the LLM that produces the response. One-shot prompts provide an example or background before asking the LLM to produce an output. Few-shot prompting (with two or more prompts given to the LLM) helps the model to better understand what is required in a specific task, which may lead to a more precise output (i.e., the one closer to the needs of the user) by providing relevant examples, additional suggestions/definitions, or feedback on preceding output(s) of the LLM. For brevity purposes, to *realize the goal of the practical part of this study*, only tested examples of 'model' zero-shot prompts are listed in the following final segment of this paper. It must be emphasized that the use of *GPT-4o* and *Copilot* with a paid subscription may provide better user experience and more user time/interactions with advanced versions of the LLMs. Also, besides using textual interaction, some LLMs offer the functionalities of accepting users' voice input (Copilot) and giving their response as voice output (GPT-4o, Copilot) at the time this study was completed. It must be emphasized that the *limitations of the following practical part of our study* are associated with (a) the inherent characteristics of LLMs like the potential for 'hallucinations' and imperfections in their responses and (b) the fact that, for brevity purposes, only 'model' zero-shot prompts are listed without actual examples of responses provided by the LLMs to those prompts.

4.2.1 Prompting for the Development of the Knowledge Component of ICC in EFL

The *knowledge of the communication process* component of ICC in EFL may include not only the elements of linguistic competence (vocabulary, grammar, spelling, punctuation, syntax), but also knowledge of useful communication skills, context of interaction, and information about the co-interactant(s). To gain communication skills knowledge the following types of zero-shot prompts can be used with GPT-4o and Copilot (these prompts are 'models' or 'illustrations' upon which the EFL teacher can design his/her own):

- *Explain in detail { [composure] , [conversational skills] , [self-disclosure] , [verbal expressivity] } as a component of interpersonal communication competence.*

- *Provide me with {1 , 2 , 3, … n} example(s) of interaction between two persons where { [composure] , [conversational skills] , [self-disclosure] , [verbal expressivity] } as a component of interpersonal communication competence is/are manifested, as well as with the interpretation of the interaction.*
- *Create {1 , 2 , 3, … n} example(s) of online asynchronous interaction/dialogue between two persons where { [composure] , [conversational skills] , [self-disclosure] , [verbal expressivity] } as a component of computer-mediated interpersonal communication competence is/are manifested {while using [Facebook] , [WhatsApp] , [some other tool] }.*
- *Generate {1 , 2 , 3, … n} dialogue(s) where English is used between a non-native speaker and a native speaker of English, both of whom are { [exchange students] , [tourists] , business partners] , [other] }, in which { [composure] , [conversational skills] , [self-disclosure] , [verbal expressivity] } as a component of computer-mediated interpersonal communication competence is/are manifested. Provide an explanation.*
- *Design a multiple-choice test with {1 , 2 , 3, … n} question(s) to evaluate my knowledge of { [composure] , [conversational skills] , [self-disclosure] , [verbal expressivity] } as a component of interpersonal communication competence in the context of using English as a foreign language {and asynchronous online communication}. Ask me the questions of this test one by one and wait for my response after each question. Let me know if my answer is correct after each of my responses. In the end, give me feedback on my score. <This structured multiturn response requests the use of advanced LLMs!>*

4.2.2 Prompting Related to Motivation for Communication as a Component of ICC in Asynchronous EFL use

The *motivation for communication* in asynchronous EFL interaction is positively related to the perceived benefits of online communication, internal and external pressure (performance of education or job-related tasks), self-perceived competence/skill in online interaction, and willingness to communicate (i.e. it is negatively associated to online communication apprehension). Some of the possible prompts for GPT-4o or Copilot in this domain are:

- *Convincingly explain the potential benefits of the motivation to communicate in online asynchronous settings using English as a foreign language in the { [educational] , [business] , [private] , [other] } domain.*
- *Create two {extensive} examples: (1) a negative example of a person who has a very low level and (2) a positive example of a person who has a very high level of motivation to communicate in online asynchronous settings using English as a foreign language in the { [educational] , [business] , [private] , [other] } domain.*
- *Engage in a Socratic dialogue with me using {5, 6, 7, … n} questions or turns to highlight the benefits of staying motivated for online asynchronous communication in English as a foreign language within { [educational] , [business] , [private] , [other] } settings. With each question, outline at least 2-3 benefits that fall into similar categories. <This multiturn prompt worked well with GPT-4o.>*

4.2.3 Prompting Related to the Development of Specific Communication Skills in Asynchronous EFL

It is much easier to design prompts for LLMs like GPT-4o and Copilot to *increase knowledge* about interpersonal skills in asynchronous EFL communication than it is to actually *develop communication skills*. However, with the use of the English language in interaction with LLMs while performing related asynchronous EFL assignments at least the linguistic competence of learners is likely to increase. Perhaps the best general pedagogical method for online text-based interpersonal communication skills development would be role-play, but that probably depends on the characteristics of learners and the assigned tasks. Still, here are two prompts that may be experimented with for assignments aimed at increasing interpersonal communication skills development in EFL communication:

- *Use a role play training method to develop my { [composure] , [conversational skills] , [self-disclosure] , [verbal expressivity] } as a component of interpersonal communication competence in online asynchronous settings using English as a foreign language in the { [educational] , [business] , [private] , [other] } domain. First define your role (name, background) and then my role (background). Briefly define the context of interaction and repeat the skill I have to manifest in my responses. Be the first to start the dialogue. After each of my responses continue the dialogue in a slightly different direction. Stop when I write "End the dialogue!"*
- *Define a demanding situation that requires the use of { [composure] , [conversational skills] , [self-disclosure] , [verbal expressivity] } as a component of interpersonal communication competence in online asynchronous settings using English as a foreign language in the { [educational] , [business] , [private] , [other] } domain. Ask me to reply in several sentences about how I should plan, best adapt and perform my communication regarding the situation that you have defined. After my response, evaluate it and improve it. Then provide your own best possible reaction to manifest the use of { [composure] , [conversational skills] , [self-disclosure] , [verbal expressivity] } in that situation.*

5. Conclusion

LLMs like *GPT-4o* and *Copilot* are constantly and rapidly evolving, making the environment for their educational use an ever-changing landscape. Therefore, there are no permanent recommendations that can be made to educators in EFL and ethical issues should be constantly considered by them with greatest concern. Still, LLMs are becoming omnipresent since they are 'infiltrated' into operating systems, software applications, cloud services, social networks, and various IT products/services.

The *first* part of this paper provided a *theoretical background* that was at least partly confirmed by the *empirical* study in the *second* part of the paper that revealed the potential usefulness of selected interpersonal communication skills in asynchronous communication in EFL for the students in higher education. The *third* and final *practical* part of the paper illustrated that experimenting with *model-prompts* for LLMs like *GTP-4o* and *Copilot* could aid the design of online learning activities for students that intend to develop the components of their interpersonal communication competence. It is highly recommended that EFL/ESP educators experiment with such prompts and thoroughly test them using the LLMs available to their students before creating related learning assignments. Consulting with the *Ethics Committee* of their higher education institution beforehand could also be beneficial.

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