

# Examining the effects of a self-improvement instruction on empathetic thinking and communication skills

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## ABSTRACT

The purpose of the current study was to examine the effects of self-improvement instruction on empathetic thinking and communication skills. It was conducted with pre-test – post-test quasi-experimental design with no control group. The participants were 44 associate's degree students studying at Gaziosmanpaşa University, Tokat. The participants were given a 30-hour self-improvement instruction after the pre-test, in order to determine the change in their empathetic thinking and communication skills level. The instruction contained the concepts behavior, communication, empathy and self-criticism, reinforced by precedents and dramas. Subsequently, post-tests were performed. The results showed that the participants' communication and empathetic thinking skills were positively significantly different after the self-improvement instruction. Basing on this finding, effects of self-improvement instruction on various skills may be researched.

**Keywords:** Self-improvement instruction, empathetic thinking, empathy, communication skills.

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## INTRODUCTION

Self-improvement, recently drawn attention and of which importance we feel day by day has become an indispensable part of our lives. From nursery school to college education, from adolescence to late adulthood, self-improvement is required in every period of life. Self-improvement is the realization of potentialities and its limitations, and acting in accordance with intrinsic values (Çakmak, 2016). In self-improvement, five factors matter for the individual's awareness and fulfillment of potentialities. These are honesty, serenity, introspection, self-knowledge, and decision-making (and its application) (Özbay and Erengil, 2004). Self-improvement also encompasses communication, education, and empathy (Şirin, 2005).

Socrates's allusion of "know thyself" refers to the cornerstones of self-improvement, namely communication and empathy. Communication is one of the chief fundamentals of life (Çakmak, 2016). Living in society means being in contact with other people, and this is the prerequisite for communication (Akgül et al., 2018). Crying is the first communication tool for the human being. As time goes on, crying gains meaning. As the baby grows up, he/she adapts to the societal

communication and has language acquisition. Communication skill means understanding, and gaining sensibility of what the partner feels. For an efficient communication, the following are required:

- Accepting people that they are precious and deserve positive regard.
- Respecting human being
- Avoiding compulsion
- Realizing individual differences
- Accepting that individuals have the right to choose their decisions (Karadağ, 2013).

There are also some elements that ease communication:

*Acceptance:* The most important principle of communication is acceptance. Accepting others without attempting to change and shape them requires unconditional positive regard. When individuals are aware of being accepted, they feel loved (Yavuzer, 1996).

*Listening:* It is listening which shows if communication is successful or not. The ones who are not able to listen are

kept away from the society and left alone. Listening requires commitment, strength and ability. Most people cannot listen efficiently because they are focused upon what they will speak in their turn, rather than focusing upon what said before (Adair, 2004).

*Honesty:* For an efficient communication, individuals should display an honest, sincere and friendly manner to each other (Çağdaş, 2008).

*Physical Listening:* Facial expressions and body language differ according to the goal of communication, to the structure of the relationship with others, and to specific relationship patterns (Erdoğan, 2005). In some cases, an active communication cannot be actualized although all factors are available. This is because either of individuals' mental state or of environmental barriers (Tutar and Yılmaz, 2012).

*Empathy:* The other cornerstone of self-improvement is empathy. As emerging wherever people are in contact, as helping people to understand each other, and as a fundamental of life, empathy means putting oneself into others' shoes and thinking and sensing just the same as they do, and thus trying to see through others' experiences (Arslan, 2016). Making empathy and being able to sense others' conceptions of life help one develop awareness after a certain while and also help gain ability to understand the partner (Yüksel, 2004). Thus, empathy has become an essential factor in human life and a constituent of human affairs and communication (Dökmen, 2005). Empathy may be said to begin in babyhood. Trevarthen (1984) states that babies somewhat develop empathy by imitating their parents' facial expressions while they try to respond to their parents. Sharing emotions through empathy renders the social bond between parents and children possible (Plutchik, 1990). The child becomes aware of the fact that others also have feelings and thoughts and may construe their feelings (Aydın, 2005). The literature shows a number of studies on self-improvement, empathy and communication skills (Balaban and Çakmak, 2016; Akgül and Yavuzer, 2019; Damırçlı, 2014; Dökmen, 2005; Dökmen, 2013). Distilling from these studies, it may be concluded that self-improvement instruction may have several contributions to empathetic thinking and communication skills. Although there are a number of studies on self-improvement, empathy and communication skills, few studies on self-improvement instruction and examination of its effects on empathetic thinking and communication skills have been available. Therefore, the current study is expected to be an authentic and contributive one since it is expected to set an example for further studies on examining the effects of self-improvement instruction on empathetic thinking and communication skills.

### **Purpose of the study**

The purpose of the current study was to test the effects of

a self-improvement instruction on empathetic thinking and communication skills. The instruction was enriched with behavior, communication, empathy, self-criticism and relevant precedents. The study is expected to be a remarkable one regarding that it may be a concrete example which may reveal the effects of a self-improvement instruction.

## **METHOD**

### **Participants**

The current study was conducted with pre-test – post-test quasi-experimental design with no control group. The independent variable was self-improvement instruction and the dependent variables were empathetic thinking and communication skills. The participants were 44 associate's degree students studying at Gaziosmanpaşa University, Tokat. Demographic information was presented in Table 1.

### **Data collection and analysis**

Right after the pre-tests, the participants were given a 30-hour self-improvement instruction, and then the post-tests were performed. Empathetic Inclination Scale (Dökmen, 1988) and Communication Skills Scale (Korkut, 1996) were employed as data collection tools. Data were all gathered via Google Forms.

**Empathetic inclination scale:** Developed by Dökmen (1988), the Empathetic Inclination Scale is a 5-Likert type scale aiming to assess affective components of empathetic thinking and participants' empathy development levels. Items 3, 6, 7, 8, 11, 12, 13, 15 are negatively-worded. A high overall scale score indicates a high empathy development level. Total score is 100. The scale was found valid and reliable.

**Communication skills scale:** Developed by Korkut (1996), this 5-Likert type scale measures communication skills and subscales (communication principles and basic skills, self-expression, active listening and non-verbal communication, willingness to communicate). A high overall score indicates a good communication skill.

**Content of self-improvement instruction:** A number of instructions were given, namely behavior patterns and empathy, interpersonal communication, communication in workplace, professional competence, professional qualifications, principles of behavior, self-criticism and relevant precedents. The participants were expected to improve skills in empathetic thinking and communication and to make progress in self-improvement. Data analyses were performed using IBM SPSS 21®.

**Table 1.** Demographic information.

	Frequency	Percent
<b>How many siblings do you have?</b>		
Only child	1	2.3
1 sibling	10	22.7
2 siblings	13	29.5
3 siblings	12	27.3
4 siblings	8	18.2
<b>Where have you mostly stayed during your education so far?</b>		
In a house	24	54.5
In a dormitory	20	45.5
<b>What have the reasons of your non-attendance been?</b>		
Health problems	39	88.6
Arbitrary reasons	1	2.3
Critical situations	4	9.1
<b>Are you happy with your department?</b>		
Yes	42	95.5
No	2	4.5
<b>Where do you feel relaxed mostly?</b>		
With family	10	22.7
With friends	13	29.5
At school	8	18.2
In nature	13	29.5
<b>What is your family's average income?</b>		
2000 TL or less	22	50.0
2001 TL - 3500 TL	17	38.6
3501 TL - 5000 TL	3	6.8
5000 TL or more	2	4.5
<b>Family Marital Status</b>		
Together	41	93.2
Divorced	2	4.5
Deceased	1	2.3
<b>How long do you spend in social media daily?</b>		
1 hour or less	7	15.9
1-3 hours	25	56.8
3 hours or more	12	27.3
<b>What is the favorite characteristic of your friend?</b>		
Honesty and trustworthiness	14	31.8
Sincerity	8	18.2
Caring about me	12	27.3
Being entertaining	10	22.7
<b>How long do you read daily?</b>		
1 hour or less	20	45.5
1-3 hours	22	50.0
3 hours and more	2	4.5
Total	44	100

Negatively-worded items were transformed into positive before the analyses. After ensuring the normality tests, paired-sample *t*-tests were performed.

At the end of the instruction, participants are expected to:

- (I) Learn behavior patterns
- (II) Develop empathy with close others
- (III) Know that communication enriches or impoverishes life
- (IV) Be more reasonable and calmer in workplace.
- (V) Enrich their professional qualifications and principles of behavior
- (VI) Make self-criticism
- (VII) Be open to criticism
- (VIII) Consider precedents in order to solve possible communication problems

## RESULTS

A paired-sample *t*-test was performed to examine the change in the participants' empathetic thinking and communication skills after they were instructed in self-

improvement. Results were displayed in Tables 2 and 3.

Table 2 displays a significant increase in the participants' empathetic thinking skills after the self-improvement instruction ( $t(43) = -3.92, p < .01$ ). Prior to instruction, while the participants' mean score for empathetic thinking was  $\bar{X} = 72.61$ , it increased to  $\bar{X} = 77.77$  after the instruction. This finding may indicate that self-improvement instruction may have a significant impact on increasing participants' empathetic thinking skills.

As seen in Table 3, a significant increase in the participants' communication skill levels after the self-improvement instruction was observed ( $t(43) = -5.29, p < .01$ ). After the instruction, the participants' mean score for communication skills increased from  $\bar{X} = 104.82$  to  $\bar{X} = 114.11$ . Also, self-improvement instruction may be said to have a significant impact on enhancing the participants' communication skills.

A paired-samples *t*-test was performed to examine the change in the scores from the subscales of communication skills scale after the self-improvement instruction. The results were displayed in Table 4.

**Table 2.** Paired-sample *t*-test pre-test – post-test mean scores for Empathetic Inclination Scale.

Measurement	N	$\bar{X}$	sd	df	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
Pre-test	44	72.61	7.83	43	-3.92	.000
Post-test	44	77.77	9.65			

$p < .01$ .

**Table 3.** Paired-sample *t*-test pre-test – post-test mean scores for Communication Skills Scale.

Measurement	N	$\bar{X}$	sd	df	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
Pre-test	44	104.82	10.01	43	-5.29	.000
Post-test	44	114.11	7.50			

$p < .01$ .

**Table 4.** Paired-sample *t*-test Pre-test – Post-test Mean Scores for the Subscales of Communication Skills Scale.

Subscale	Measurement	N	$\bar{X}$	sd	df	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
Communication principles and basic skills	Pre-test	44	42.84	4.20	43	-4.65	.000
	Post-test	44	46.23	3.27			
Self-expression	Pre-test	44	16.41	2.58	43	-4.64	.000
	Post-test	44	18.27	1.74			
Active listening and non-verbal communication	Pre-test	44	25.05	3.63	43	-4.97	.000
	Post-test	44	27.86	2.01			
Willingness to communicate	Pre-test	44	20.52	2.50	43	-2.81	.007
	Post-test	44	21.75	2.26			

$p < .01$ .

As seen in Table 4, a significant increase was observed in all the subscales, respectively, after the participants were given the self-improvement instruction. These findings again indicate that the self-improvement instruction may have a significant impact on increasing communication principles and basic skills, self-expression, active listening and non-verbal communication, and willingness to communicate.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Self-improvement is important and pleasurable. Human beings enjoy developing themselves. As self-improvement is noticeable, it becomes a source of motivation and leads the individual to new paths and to take steps. Just as self-improvement is intertwined with many fields, communication skills and empathy are so. The individual becomes aware of his/her environment if he/she establishes empathy, thus gains self-awareness, realizes his/her competence and incompetence, and this contributes to self-improvement.

Many problems, controversies and lack of solution are caused by communication deficiencies. Individuals having good communication skills produce solutions; each problem solved means an additional step toward self-improvement. Behavior patterns and empathy, interpersonal communication, communication in workplace, professional competence, professional qualifications and principles of behavior, self-criticism and precedents are directly related to empathetic thinking and communication skills and are expected to make significant contributions to self-improvement. The current study yielded authentic results for efficiency in self-improvement instruction, empathetic thinking and communication skills. Each individual is unique with behavior patterns. Although behavior patterns direct individuals, it may be possible to shape the patterns with proper instructions. In behavior patterns and empathy classes, individuals should be presented how they could shape behavior patterns through precedents and dramas, making associations to empathy. In interpersonal communication classes, concepts like efficient communication, right message and channel, politeness and patience should be presented through precedents and dramas so that two or more people could establish an efficient and a smooth communication. In communication in workplace classes, occupational ethics, code of practices, individual duties, patience, politeness, diligence and deliberation should be presented through dramas and precedents. In professional competence, professional qualifications and principles of behavior classes, skills and qualifications expected from the individual and how they could be properly and efficiently conveyed to the receiver should be presented through dramas and precedents. In self-criticism classes, individuals should be instructed in that they should be at peace with themselves, that they become aware of their

inadequacies, flaws and imperfections, and in self-improvement through dramas and precedents. As a side note, instructors should act carefully and delicately while instructing. They should be well-prepared for the class, scrutinize the dramas and precedents before classes and prefer a daily language to be clear and understandable enough.

The results of this quasi-experimental study revealed that the participants' empathy and communication skills scores showed a positively significant difference considering the pre-test – post-test score means after the instruction given. In other words, self-improvement instruction may be said to make a positive contribution to empathetic thinking and communication skills. Hergüner (2008) examined the relationship between adults' skills at problem solving and coping with stress and found that self-improvement instruction made positive contributions to the participants' problem-solving skills. Ekşi (2011) states that self-improvement books positively contribute to readers. The literature shows consistent studies (Çoruk, 2007; Okyay, 2012; Limoncu, 2015) showing the contributions of self-improvement process. There are also studies available showing the positive effects of self-improvement instructions in workplaces (Erakkuş, 2004; Tat, 2007; Cömert, 2010). The results of the current study seem to support previous similar studies. It may be concluded that self-improvement instruction may be said to contribute to self-expression, developing behavior patterns, problem-solving, empathy and communication skills.

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