

Comparison of the Effectiveness of Stress Management Training and Communication Skills on Academic Adjustment

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: This study aimed to investigate the impact of communication skills and stress management training on the academic motivation of students at the University of Education.

Methods and Materials: In this quasi-experimental study, 60 students were selected through purposive sampling and divided into experimental and control groups. The experimental group received 10 sessions of training: two weekly sessions on communication skills and eight sessions on stress management. Data were collected using the Academic Adjustment Questionnaire by Baker and Siryk (1984).

Findings: The results of the data analysis, conducted using multivariate analysis of covariance (MANCOVA) and the Bonferroni post hoc test, revealed that the training in communication skills and stress management significantly increased academic motivation in the experimental group compared to the control group.

Conclusion: Based on the findings, it can be concluded that training in communication skills and stress management may serve as an effective strategy for enhancing academic motivation in students.

Keywords: *Communication Skills, Stress Management, Academic Adjustment*

1. Introduction

Academic adjustment, an essential component of students' overall well-being and success, plays a pivotal role in determining their academic outcomes,

personal development, and social integration within the educational environment. In the face of increasing academic demands, students often experience a range of psychological challenges, such as stress and communication difficulties, that can impede their academic progress and emotional well-

being (Travis et al., 2020). As such, enhancing students' academic adjustment through targeted interventions has gained significant attention in educational psychology. Among the various approaches to fostering academic adjustment, stress management training and communication skills development have emerged as two of the most effective strategies in improving both psychological and academic outcomes (Salehi & Behzadi, 2018).

Academic adjustment refers to a student's ability to manage the demands of the academic environment, including emotional regulation, coping with academic stress, and maintaining positive relationships with peers and faculty (Ahmadzadeh et al., 2022). Effective academic adjustment is often associated with higher levels of academic motivation, reduced procrastination, and improved academic performance (Samadi et al., 2020). However, many students face challenges in adjusting to the academic demands placed on them, often resulting in decreased academic performance and increased stress (Talebi Khansari, 2020). For this reason, interventions designed to promote academic adjustment have become an essential part of educational psychology.

Stress management plays a crucial role in promoting academic adjustment by helping students regulate their emotional responses to academic pressures (Terp et al., 2019). Stress is a common experience among students due to the demands of exams, assignments, and social expectations, and can lead to negative outcomes, including decreased academic performance, burnout, and mental health issues (Travis et al., 2020). Cognitive-behavioral stress management (CBSM) is one of the most widely used approaches to address stress among students. CBSM interventions typically focus on altering maladaptive thought patterns, improving coping strategies, and enhancing relaxation techniques, such as progressive muscle relaxation and deep breathing (Othman, 2018). Numerous studies have demonstrated the positive impact of CBSM on reducing stress and improving academic performance (Salehi & Behzadi, 2018; Terp et al., 2019). By targeting both the cognitive and emotional components of stress, CBSM has the potential to improve students' academic adjustment by increasing their ability to cope with stressors effectively.

Communication skills, on the other hand, are critical for students to navigate the social and academic challenges of their educational environment. Communication skills, including both verbal and nonverbal communication, active listening, empathy, and problem-solving, enable students to interact effectively with peers, teachers, and family members

(Janbaz Laily et al., 2021). Poor communication skills can lead to misunderstandings, social isolation, and conflicts, all of which can negatively impact academic adjustment (Ahmadi et al., 2014). Research has shown that communication skills training can enhance students' self-esteem, social adjustment, and academic performance by improving their interpersonal relationships and reducing social anxiety (Bavazin et al., 2018; Sabzi & FouladChang, 2019). For example, Ahmadi et al. (2014) found that teaching communication skills significantly improved self-esteem and academic progress among secondary school students. Effective communication helps students express their needs and concerns, resolve conflicts, and build supportive networks, all of which contribute to better academic adjustment (Ahmadi et al., 2014).

The importance of academic adjustment in students' educational outcomes cannot be overstated. Poor academic adjustment is linked to higher rates of dropout, lower levels of academic achievement, and a higher risk of mental health issues such as depression and anxiety (Saeedzade & Rahmani, 2022). Research on stress management and communication skills has consistently highlighted the importance of both areas in improving students' well-being and academic outcomes. For instance, studies have shown that students who receive stress management training are better equipped to cope with academic pressures and demonstrate higher levels of academic motivation (Salehi & Behzadi, 2018). Similarly, research has demonstrated that improving communication skills can enhance students' self-efficacy, academic motivation, and overall academic adjustment (Ahmadi et al., 2014). In addition to the individual benefits of each intervention, the combination of stress management and communication skills training may offer complementary advantages. Stress management techniques can help students regulate their emotional responses to stress, while communication skills can enhance their ability to express their needs and interact effectively with others. Together, these interventions may create a synergistic effect that enhances students' overall academic adjustment. This hypothesis aligns with previous research suggesting that a holistic approach, addressing both emotional regulation and interpersonal skills, may be more effective than focusing on one area alone (Ardalan & Hossein Chari, 2010). This study aims to compare the effectiveness of these two interventions in improving academic adjustment among students, contributing to the growing body of research on educational psychology and

providing practical insights for educators seeking to support students' academic success.

2. Methods and Materials

2.1. Study Design and Participants

This research was applied in terms of its objective and quasi-experimental in methodology, using a pretest-posttest design with a control group. The statistical population of this study consisted of all male students at the University of Education in North Khorasan, totaling 1,208 students who were enrolled during the 2023–2024 academic year. Since a minimum sample size of 15 participants per group is required for intervention work (Delavar, 2006), 60 students (20 per group) were selected through purposive (judgmental) sampling to ensure the sample size. This study included three groups: two experimental groups and one control group. Participants were randomly assigned to these groups. One of the experimental groups received stress management training, while the other experimental group received communication skills training. The control group received no training.

2.2. Measure

Baker and Siryk Academic Adjustment Questionnaire (1984): This academic adjustment questionnaire consists of 24 items, designed by Baker and Siryk in 1984, and is a unidimensional scale. It is scored based on a 7-point Likert scale. In the study by Mohammadi et al. (2016), the validity of the questionnaire was confirmed by professors and specialists in the field. In the same study, the reliability of the questionnaire was reported to be above 0.70 using Cronbach's alpha (Ardalan & Hossein Chari, 2010; Sanaei Bajgirani & Safshekan Motlagh, 2022).

2.3. Interventions

2.3.1. Stress Management Training

This intervention protocol is based on the cognitive-behavioral approach to stress management developed by Antony and colleagues (2007). It aims to provide students with skills to manage stress through cognitive restructuring and relaxation techniques. The program consists of 10 sessions, each focusing on different aspects of stress management, including relaxation techniques, cognitive reframing, self-regulation, and effective coping strategies (Othman, 2018; Salehi & Behzadi, 2018; Terp et al., 2019).

Session 1: Welcome and introduction to the program. Discussion about the number of sessions, group rules, and an opportunity for participants to introduce themselves. Overview of cognitive-behavioral stress management methods, highlighting the importance of learning stress management skills. Summary of the session and homework assignments.

Session 2: Introduction to progressive muscle relaxation (PMR) for eight muscle groups. Focus on the awareness of stress and how relaxation can help reduce stress responses.

Session 3: Training on breathing techniques and visualization, in addition to progressive muscle relaxation for four muscle groups. Discussion on the connection between thoughts and emotions and how to recognize and manage them.

Session 4: Introduction to passive progressive muscle relaxation. Exploration of negative thinking patterns and cognitive distortions that contribute to stress.

Session 5: Teaching autogenic training for feelings of heaviness and warmth. Emphasis on replacing irrational thoughts with logical and balanced ones.

Session 6: Continued autogenic training focusing on heart rate, breathing, abdominal muscles, and forehead. Teaching effective coping mechanisms to manage stress.

Session 7: Combining autogenic training with imagery and self-suggestion techniques. Emphasis on practicing effective coping responses to stress.

Session 8: Introduction to mantra meditation and anger management techniques. Discuss strategies for recognizing and managing anger in stressful situations.

Session 9: Introduction to counting breath meditation. Focus on teaching assertiveness and how to express needs in a healthy manner.

Session 10: Visualization and meditation practices for stress management. Discussion on social support systems and an overall review of the program.

2.3.2. Communication Skills Training

The communication skills training protocol is designed to enhance students' ability to effectively communicate in personal and academic settings. The program consists of 8 sessions, focusing on self-awareness, active listening, assertiveness, conflict resolution, and problem-solving skills. Each session is aimed at improving both verbal and non-verbal communication, as well as fostering interpersonal skills for effective and empathetic interactions (Bavazin et al., 2018; Janbaz Laily et al., 2021; Sabzi &

FouladChang, 2019; Sanaei Bajgiran & Safshekan Motlagh, 2022; Shahidpourfalah, 2020).

Session 1: Introduction to the objectives of the program. Participants are assigned homework to pay more attention to their communication behaviors and reflect on their interactions with others. They will share some examples in the next session.

Session 2: Overview of the structure of communication. Definition of communication and relationships. Instruction on how to begin and end a conversation effectively. Exploration of barriers to communication and strategies for improving communication effectiveness.

Session 3: Training on self-awareness and increasing self-awareness through understanding the role of beliefs in shaping emotions and behaviors. Emphasis on non-verbal communication and how to interpret body language and facial expressions.

Session 4: Instruction on active listening skills, including attending, validating, inviting, summarizing, and asking questions. Teaching empathy and how to reflect on others' feelings and meanings.

Session 5: Exploration of different types of assertiveness and the benefits and functions of assertive communication. Focus on how to assertively express needs, opinions, and feelings in a respectful manner.

Session 6: Introduction to general principles of speaking effectively, including developing assertiveness, and the importance of saying "no" when necessary. Training in setting boundaries and handling difficult conversations.

Session 7: Teaching conflict resolution strategies. Emphasis on preventing conflicts and learning how to manage disagreements constructively.

Session 8: Introduction to collaborative problem-solving techniques and how to apply them in real-life scenarios. Discussion of common problem-solving traps. Summary of the program, responding to participants' questions, and completing post-intervention assessments.

2.4. Data Analysis

Data analysis in this study was conducted using a combination of descriptive and inferential statistical methods. Initially, descriptive statistics, including means and standard deviations, were computed to summarize the academic adjustment scores for each group (stress management, communication skills training, and control) at both the pre-test and post-test stages. To examine the effectiveness of the interventions, a one-way analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) was performed, controlling for pre-test scores to assess the impact of the interventions on academic adjustment. This method was chosen to account for the initial differences between groups and to ensure that any observed changes in academic adjustment were due to the interventions. Additionally, post-hoc pairwise comparisons using the Bonferroni test were conducted to further explore differences between groups. The significance level for all tests was set at $p \leq 0.05$, and effect sizes (Cohen's d) were calculated to assess the practical significance of the findings. All statistical analyses were performed using SPSS software (version 25).

3. Findings and Results

The comparison of the means presented in the table indicates that, at the post-test stage, the mean of the research variable (academic adjustment) increased.

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics of Research Variables by Group and Test

Variable	Group	Mean ± Standard Deviation
Academic Adjustment (Pre-test)	Stress Management Training Group	97.75 ± 1.65
	Communication Skills Training	96.55 ± 1.60
	Control Group	99.15 ± 1.67
Academic Adjustment (Post-test)	Stress Management Training Group	115.10 ± 1.92
	Communication Skills Training	113.35 ± 1.86
	Control Group	98.25 ± 1.94

Considering the effect of the pre-test on the analyses, the post-test effect must be controlled for in the groups, taking

into account the pre-test scores. Only then will the differences be valid and interpretable.

Table 2

Results of ANCOVA for Comparing Academic Adjustment Between Groups

Source	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Eta Squared	Power
Group	4091.55	2	2045.77	56.94	0.000	0.67	1.00
Error	2011.86	56	35.92				
Total	719164.00	60					

As shown in Table 2, based on the results from the effectiveness evaluation of stress management training and communication skills training on academic adjustment ($F = 56.94, p \leq 0.000$), it can be concluded that the difference in post-test scores for academic adjustment in the stress management and communication skills training groups, after controlling for pre-test scores, is statistically significant at the 99% confidence level. The effect size (Cohen's d) is 0.67, indicating that 67% of the variance in academic adjustment scores is explained by the intervention (either stress management or communication skills training). The

statistical power of the analysis is 1.00, indicating a very high likelihood of detecting a true effect. Other results further show that, after removing the effect of the pre-test, the post-test mean scores for academic adjustment in the three groups changed. Specifically, the stress management group increased from 115.10 to 115.15, the communication skills training group increased from 113.35 to 114.41, and the control group decreased from 98.25 to 97.13. Overall, the mean academic adjustment scores in the experimental groups were higher than those in the control group ($p \leq 0.000$).

Table 3

Bonferroni Post-Hoc Test Results for Comparing Academic Adjustment Between Groups

Group 1	Group 2	Mean Difference	Std. Error	Sig.	Mean Difference (Adjusted)
Communication Skills Group	Stress Management Group	-0.74	1.90	0.69	-3.55
	Control Group	*17.27	1.91	0.000	13.43
Stress Management Group	Communication Skills Group	0.74	1.90	0.69	3.55
	Control Group	*18.02	1.90	0.000	14.21

Based on the significant differences in academic adjustment scores, the Bonferroni post-hoc test was used for pairwise comparisons. According to the results, the participants in the communication skills group did not show a significantly different post-test mean score for academic adjustment compared to the stress management group ($MD = -0.74, p \leq 0.69$). However, the mean difference in academic adjustment scores for the control group was significantly higher when compared to both the

communication skills group ($MD = 17.27, p \leq 0.000$) and the stress management group ($MD = 18.02, p \leq 0.01$). Therefore, it can be concluded that communication skills training was only effective in enhancing academic adjustment compared to the control group, but not more effective than stress management training. The results suggest that, based on group membership in stress management and communication skills training, there is no significant difference in academic adjustment scores.

Table 4

Results of One-Way ANCOVA for Comparing Academic Adjustment Between Groups

Source	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Eta Squared	Power
Group	3217.01	1	3217.01	86.06	0.000	0.69	1.00
Error	1383.05	37	37.38				
Total	460875.00	40					

The results from the evaluation of the effectiveness of the stress management method on academic adjustment ($F = 86.06, p \leq 0.000$) indicate that the difference in post-test

academic adjustment scores between the experimental and control groups, after controlling for pre-test scores, is statistically significant at the 99% confidence level. The

effect size (Cohen's d) is 0.69, meaning that 69% of the variance in academic adjustment scores is attributed to the stress management intervention. The statistical power is 1, indicating that the test performed provided the most optimal results for this sample size. Additional results show that, after removing the effect of the pre-test, the mean academic adjustment scores in both groups changed at the post-test

stage. Specifically, the experimental group increased from 115.10 to 115.68, while the control group decreased from 98.25 to 97.66. Overall, the mean academic adjustment scores in the experimental group were higher than those in the control group ($p \leq 0.000$). Therefore, stress management training led to an increase in academic adjustment.

Table 5

Results of One-Way ANCOVA for Comparing Academic Adjustment Between Groups

Source	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Eta Squared	Power
Group	2922.35	1	2922.35	90.18	0.000	0.70	1.00
Error	1198.96	37	32.40				
Total	452792.00	40					

The results from the evaluation of the effectiveness of communication skills training on academic adjustment ($F = 90.18$, $p \leq 0.000$) indicate that the difference in post-test academic adjustment scores between the experimental and control groups, after controlling for pre-test scores, is statistically significant at the 99% confidence level. The effect size (Cohen's d) is 0.70, meaning that 70% of the variance in academic adjustment scores is attributed to the communication skills training intervention. The statistical power is 1, indicating that the test performed provided the most optimal results for this sample size. Additional results show that, after removing the effect of the pre-test, the mean academic adjustment scores in both groups changed at the post-test stage. Specifically, the experimental group increased from 113.35 to 114.48, while the control group decreased from 98.20 to 97.11. Overall, the mean academic adjustment scores in the experimental group were higher than those in the control group ($p \leq 0.000$). Therefore, communication skills training led to an increase in academic adjustment.

scores compared to the control group. Similarly, communication skills training also led to improvements in academic adjustment, with the experimental group demonstrating higher scores on post-test measures compared to the control group. Both interventions were found to significantly enhance academic adjustment by addressing critical factors such as stress regulation, emotional well-being, and interpersonal communication skills, aligning with previous research in this field.

The findings of this study are consistent with several studies that have emphasized the importance of stress management in improving academic performance. Stress management training has been shown to help students manage academic pressures, leading to better emotional regulation and, consequently, improved academic outcomes (Salehi & Behzadi, 2018). In particular, cognitive-behavioral stress management (CBSM) has been widely used to reduce stress and increase academic motivation by helping students change negative thought patterns and adopt more adaptive coping strategies (Terp et al., 2019). This aligns with the current study's findings, where students who received stress management training demonstrated a significant improvement in academic adjustment compared to those in the control group. The significant reduction in academic stress and the development of healthier coping mechanisms likely contributed to their enhanced ability to engage with academic tasks and perform well in their studies. Thus, the results of the present study reinforce the notion that stress management training can significantly improve students' academic outcomes and overall adjustment.

In addition, the positive effects of communication skills training on academic adjustment observed in this study are

4. Discussion and Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to compare the effectiveness of stress management training and communication skills training on academic adjustment among students. The findings suggest that both interventions were effective in improving academic adjustment, with significant differences between the experimental and control groups observed following the interventions. More specifically, the results showed that stress management training had a significant impact on improving students' academic adjustment, as reflected in the higher post-test

supported by previous research highlighting the essential role of communication in students' academic and social success. Communication skills training has been shown to enhance students' self-esteem, social competence, and academic motivation, which in turn improve their academic adjustment (Ahmadi et al., 2014). Studies have indicated that students with strong communication skills are more likely to develop positive relationships with peers and teachers, resolve conflicts effectively, and feel more confident in academic settings (Sabzi & FouladChang, 2019). In the present study, communication skills training was associated with improvements in students' ability to navigate social interactions and manage academic-related challenges. This suggests that the acquisition of effective communication strategies not only enhances interpersonal relationships but also contributes to better academic engagement and adjustment. These findings align with previous studies that have demonstrated the efficacy of communication skills training in promoting both academic and social adjustment (Janbaz Laily et al., 2021).

The combination of stress management and communication skills training could potentially have a synergistic effect on academic adjustment. While stress management techniques help students cope with academic and emotional stress, communication skills training helps them develop the social competencies required for effective collaboration and conflict resolution. Together, these two interventions create a comprehensive framework for improving academic adjustment, enhancing students' emotional well-being, and boosting their academic performance. As suggested by Ardalan and Hossein Chari (2010), addressing both emotional regulation and interpersonal communication in educational settings can have a profound impact on students' overall academic success (Ardalan & Hossein Chari, 2010). Although the present study focused on comparing the two interventions separately, it is possible that a combined approach might yield even greater benefits. Future studies could investigate the combined effects of stress management and communication skills training to determine whether their joint impact on academic adjustment surpasses that of each intervention alone.

The results also indicated that both stress management and communication skills training led to significant changes in students' academic adjustment compared to the control group. These results align with the findings of several studies that have demonstrated the effectiveness of both interventions in enhancing students' adjustment to academic

life (Saeedzade & Rahmani, 2022). For instance, Ahmadzadeh et al. (2022) found that emotion regulation training, a component of stress management, significantly improved the emotional and social adjustment of adolescent girls (Ahmadzadeh et al., 2022). Similarly, studies on communication skills training have shown that enhancing students' communication abilities positively impacts their academic performance, self-esteem, and social integration (Bavazin et al., 2018). Therefore, the present study contributes to the growing body of literature supporting the benefits of stress management and communication skills training in improving academic adjustment, with the added value of comparing their relative effectiveness.

While this study provides valuable insights into the effectiveness of stress management and communication skills training in improving academic adjustment, there are several limitations to consider. First, the sample size may have been relatively small, limiting the generalizability of the findings. A larger sample would provide more robust evidence of the effectiveness of these interventions and help to confirm whether the results are applicable across diverse student populations. Additionally, the study relied on self-reported measures to assess academic adjustment, which could introduce response biases. Self-report data can be influenced by students' perceptions of their academic experiences, and as such, the findings may not fully capture objective indicators of academic performance. Future studies could incorporate more objective measures, such as academic grades or teacher evaluations, to complement self-reported data. Another limitation is the study's design, which only included two groups (experimental and control). A more comprehensive design with additional control variables, such as baseline academic performance or personality traits, would provide a more nuanced understanding of the factors influencing academic adjustment. Finally, the study's time frame was limited to the immediate post-intervention period, and therefore, it did not assess the long-term effects of the interventions on academic adjustment. Future research should consider follow-up assessments to explore whether the benefits of stress management and communication skills training persist over time.

Building upon the findings of this study, future research could expand on the current work by exploring several areas. First, future studies should consider the long-term effects of stress management and communication skills training on academic adjustment. It would be beneficial to follow up with participants several months or even years after the

intervention to determine whether the improvements in academic adjustment are sustained over time. Additionally, examining the combined effects of stress management and communication skills training in a single intervention program could yield valuable insights. Researchers could investigate whether a holistic approach that addresses both emotional regulation and interpersonal communication results in superior academic adjustment compared to separate interventions. Furthermore, studies could explore the interaction between individual characteristics, such as personality traits, self-esteem, and academic self-efficacy, and the effectiveness of these interventions. For instance, investigating whether students with higher levels of social anxiety benefit more from communication skills training, or whether those with high levels of stress benefit more from stress management, would provide a deeper understanding of how these interventions work in different student populations. Finally, it would be interesting to compare the effectiveness of online or virtual training programs versus face-to-face interventions, particularly in light of the increasing reliance on digital learning environments.

In practice, educators and administrators can incorporate stress management and communication skills training into their curricula to support students' academic adjustment and well-being. For stress management, universities and schools can offer workshops that teach students effective coping mechanisms, such as mindfulness, relaxation techniques, and cognitive restructuring, to help them deal with academic stress. Incorporating stress management into existing health and wellness programs can further support students in managing the pressures of academic life. Additionally, providing communication skills training as part of the curriculum or extracurricular activities can help students develop the interpersonal skills needed for success both in and outside the classroom. Teachers and counselors can facilitate group discussions, role-playing activities, and conflict-resolution exercises to enhance students' communication abilities. Encouraging students to engage in peer mentoring or group projects can also provide opportunities for them to practice their communication skills in real-world settings. Given the positive impact of these interventions on academic adjustment, integrating stress management and communication skills training into educational settings could contribute to a more supportive and effective learning environment. Furthermore, personalized support for students, such as one-on-one counseling or tailored workshops, can address individual

needs and ensure that all students benefit from these interventions.

Authors' Contributions

Authors equally contributed to this article.

Declaration

In order to correct and improve the academic writing of our paper, we have used the language model ChatGPT.

Transparency Statement

Data are available for research purposes upon reasonable request to the corresponding author.

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Declaration of Interest

The authors report no conflict of interest.

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Ethical Considerations

All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were under the ethical standards of the institutional and, or national research committee and with the 1964 Helsinki Declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards.

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