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From Researching to Teaching Organisational Communication: The Application of Communication Audits

Abstract

This paper presents how organisational communication, being an important component of organisational behaviour, can be researched from a linguistic perspective with the help of communication audits. Putting the linguistic viewpoint at the forefront means that apart from using established methods such as interviews and questionnaires, the communication auditor collects and analyses real-life oral and written texts produced by auditees. The paper showcases the results of linguistic research into the communication audit, such as the communication audit model and procedures additional to the linguistic form sheet. Following this the paper presents how these research findings may be utilised in teaching practice in order to familiarise students of linguistics with both organisational communication and organisational behaviour.

Keywords: communication audit model, communication audit procedures, communication audit scope, linguistic form sheet, communication behaviour.

1. Introduction

It is widely agreed that the field of organisational behaviour (OB) requires the interplay of theory, research, and practice so that a better understanding and thus management of people at work, can be achieved. As Sinding and Waldstrøm (2014: 27) aptly note with regard to the field of OB "[e]ach area – theory, research and practice – supports and, in turn, is supported by the other two." This can be visualised with the help of three overlapping circles depicted in Figure 1.
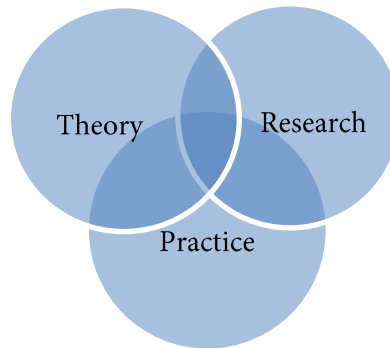
Figure 1. Learning about OB through a combination of theory, research, and practice (Sinding & Waldstrøm 2014: 27)

It should be borne in mind that OB as an academic designation was predominantly set up to name a specific area of teaching and research, rather than as a job category (Sinding & Waldstrøm 2014: 30). Nevertheless, the professional aspect must be included in order to maximise learning about OB. Being an academic invention, OB is interestingly an interdisciplinary field, as it draws on a great array of disciplines, amongst them management, psychology, sociology, information technology, anthropology, to name just a few. It is widely agreed that within the area of OB, we can distinguish three levels of analysis, *i.e.* the individual, the group, and the organisation, and it is maintained that organisational behaviour, as opposed to organisational theory, focuses on the micro perspective. In other words, OB deals with the behaviour of individuals and groups within the organisation, instead of higher levels of the organisation. Having considered this, this paper offers a closer look, through a linguistic lens, at a specific "component" of OB, *i.e.* organisational communication (Turkalj & Fosić 2009: 34). The focus is on the micro level of organisational communication, *i.e.* communication between individuals within specific groups called project teams (research perspective) and communication between individuals (students and teachers) at a university (teaching perspective). In particular, this paper deals with how research results stemming from a close collaboration between a linguist and business practitioners in the form of a communication audit, might be translated into teaching practice at a tertiary level. Thus providing students of linguistics with theories related to OB and communication behaviour based on lived experiences. It also discusses the issues and challenges of researching and teaching organisational communication in the form of a communication audit.

2. Background

Students of linguistics, who commonly have little opportunity to encounter real life organisational communication and behaviour during their studies, will often find their first full-time appointment within a business context. Broadly speaking, during their studies they usually deal with foreign languages. In the main, they learn how to translate and interpret texts formulated in one language into texts in a different language, and they are confronted with the characteristics of languages for special purposes, such as law, economics, IT, medicine. In addition, they gain insights into the teaching of selected foreign languages. In short, their studies prepare them to become professional translators, interpreters,

proofreaders, and teachers of foreign languages. And yet whilst a great number of linguistic students choose to study linguistics out of an interest in foreign languages, they do not necessarily intend to become translators or foreign language teachers. In reality, many of them would like "to do something with languages in the future." As a result, after graduating, they become employed as specialists in banks, assistants in law offices or embassies, managers in international corporations, members of project teams or project managers, *etc.*, where skills in foreign languages are indispensable. Gradually they also gain specialist knowledge related to banking, law, or management, and they develop the communication competencies essential for every employee within an organisation, in particular to transfer specialist knowledge, solve issues, *etc.* However, aspects of communication and development of communication skills/competencies, particularly organisational communication in international settings, are rarely included in the curriculum of linguistic studies, not to mention other fields of study (see Hargie [1996] 2006: 2), even though the importance of organisational communication is widely recognised. Therefore, it is necessary to close this gap and include subjects related to professional communication in linguistic curricula and potentially in curricula of other fields of study. In the first place, however, teaching and learning methodologies concerning professional communication in the area of linguistics must be developed on the basis of research findings gained by scholars dealing with *actual* organisational communication in *concrete* organisations.

Up to now, researching and teaching organisational communication (OC) has related to management studies. In the 1960s, OC was investigated mainly with regard to its applied aspects, amongst them being persuasive writing and speaking (Redding [1985] 2006: 5; Barker & Angelopulo 2006: 14). Nowadays within the constraints of management studies, OC is understood in a broader sense, *i.e.* its role in organisations is studied (Barker & Angelopulo 2006: 14). In other words, scholars of management and economics attempt to investigate OC by taking on research projects related to day to day OC in specific organisations and then to transfer their research findings not only to these organisations but also to students via lectures and seminars.

OC's "unique blend of theory, research and practice" (Hargie & Tourish 2009b: xviii) can be discovered through various handbooks or texts concerned with OC assessment known as "communication auditing." Hargie and Tourish (2004, 2009a), as well as Downs and Adrian (2004) probably offer the most extensive overview of communication audits in organisations and their application in research and teaching. With regard to the two publications edited by Hargie and Tourish in 2004 and 2009, it is worth adding that in fact both publications are one and the same book. In other words, the *Handbook of Communication Audits for Organisations* that came out in 2004, is the second reprint of the book that was first published in 2000 under the same title (the first reprint came in 2002). It was subsequently updated and published again in 2009 under a different title, *i.e. Auditing Organizational Communication. A Handbook of Research, Theory and Practice.* Both in Hargie and Tourish (2004, 2009a) and in Downs and Adrian (2004), the communication audit is extensively discussed, *i.e.* its process, characteristics, and methods. Additionally, in Hargie and Tourish (2004, 2009a) a variety of case studies are presented and pedagogical implications discussed.

Furthermore, a number of articles and papers have been devoted to communication audits from a managerial perspective. The Issue of *Management Communication Quarterly* 15 (3) (2002) brings together an interesting collection of papers on communication audits, offering a reflection on communication assessment in organisations at the beginning of the millennium that brought about new information and communication technology solutions. Indeed, theoretical considerations on

the communication audit were predominantly developed in the 1970s and 1980s, when the concept of the communication audit was first applied within various organisations (see *e.g.* Hamilton 1987; Wiio *et al.* 1980), and thus was sometimes called an "organisational communication audit" (Wiio *et al.* 1980: 84). It is worth noting that the idea of the communication audit started to be utilised as a pedagogical tool relatively early on. In 1989, Zorn provided a handful of practical tips for instructors of communication audit (assessment) classes (Zorn 1989: 17) and elaborated mainly on the organisational design of such classes. In 1994, Conaway provided a thorough programme of classes on the communication audit and gave tips how students can link theory and practice during a 15-week semester term. Likewise, Shelby and Reinsch (1996) described in great detail the method of the communication audit and the organisation of a graduate-level management communication course. In fact, they provided interesting recommendations for both students and professors of similar academic courses. Scott, Shaw, Timmerman, Frank & Quinn (1999) also presented a valuable insight into the education value of the communication audit for students and organisational members, and indirectly also for scholars. They made detailed comments with regard to the communication audit procedure, especially to setting up and going through the entire process of collaboration with organisations that can be of great help to anybody interested in collaborating with companies in general and conducting communication audits in particular. Tourish and Hargie (2004: 310–313) provided a summary of steps to be taken in the classroom, devoted to the communication audit. Recently, an interesting article was published concerning the use of the communication audit as part of tertiary courses for pedagogical purposes. Its authors, Hart, Vroman, and Stulz (2015), report on the steps that students should take in order to conduct communication audits in non-profit organisations and at universities.

Overall, it should be noted that the concept of the communication audit has been developed on the basis of a blend between research, practice, and teaching in order to generate a better understanding of organisational behaviour. What is more, it has been applied within a variety of organisations (see the overview of communication audit case studies in Alnajjar 2016a: 67–78). Nevertheless, certain issues should be borne in mind. Firstly, as Alnajjar (2016a: 17) aptly pointed out "up to now publications on the communication audit have been delivered mainly by specialists across a range of fields *excepting* (applied) linguistics, even though it is (applied) linguists who focus on researching language and communication." As a result, in reality communication audits have little to do with language and actual communication, as they predominantly equate to distributing questionnaires and assessing subjective answers with regard to respondents' (job) satisfaction, in addition to interviewing selected auditees on the same matter. Indeed, few authors/studies have yet offered a thorough look at *actual* communication process and behaviour has so far hardly been offered (the exception being Patti *et al.* 2004). Secondly, scholars have not yet touched upon auditing virtual project teams, which have become part and parcel of modern organisations, in particular in business contexts. These teams offer flexibility, lower costs, and creativity, but face-to-face communication is limited (Sinding & Waldstrøm 2014: 319–320). There are various reasons why linguists have undertaken few research projects on communication audits, even fewer on them within business contexts. One of the main obstacles relates to issues of research and difficulties in gaining access to data (see more in Alnajjar 2016a: 323–324; Alnajjar 2016b). Professionals are not particularly eager to devote their precious time to collaborating with a linguist, as such a collaboration does not offer immediate financial incentive. The author of this paper undertook the challenge of researching communication audits, mainly from a linguistic perspective, by taking a close look at the actual communication behaviour of members of virtual project teams within selected companies.

After an intensive period of close collaboration with business professionals, she closed the research project and published the findings (Alnajjar 2016a). Additionally, on the basis of her research experience within a professional setting and with the purpose of testing new didactic ideas stemming from this experience, in tandem with her students she is currently conducting an experimental communication audit at a university. This paper reports on the results and challenges of both research into the communication audit in an organisation and the experimental communication audit carried out with students.

3. Communication audit: From researching to teaching

Conducting research into organisational communication serves, in the first instance, the development of theoretical models and practical solutions that should help professionals to improve organisational communication and optimise communication processes. However, it is worth translating new theoretical and practical insights into pedagogical tools and teaching programmes, which could help students prepare themselves for real-life encounters in organisational contexts. However, let us start by presenting general remarks on communication in organisations and the concept of organisational communication audits derived and specified in the course of linguistic research, before we discuss pedagogical implications of this research.

3.1. Communication in organisations

The word "organisation" may refer to the process of organising or to the results of this process. It may also refer to both the process and its results (see *e.g.* Flak & Alnajjar 2015: 2). This implies that organisations are formed so that certain purposeful activities can be performed. This, in turn, means that in order to form organisations and conduct these activities, "the human factor" is indispensable. In other words, it is human beings and their interactions through which the process of organising takes place, and the results of this process are achieved. It should be understood that human beings interact by way of communicating. On the one hand, communication enables them to transfer knowledge and learn. In this way, it is possible to undertake the process of organising and achieve its results. On the other hand, communication inevitably leads to the building and maintaining of relationships, which are crucial to the efficient performance of organisational activities (Watzlawick *et al.* [1969] 2011). The aspect of knowledge transfer and relational aspect of communication are both of great importance in organisational contexts. This is especially visible in the case of virtual project teams, whose members are deliberately relatively loosely connected in horizontal relationships so that they can build friendly relationships and thus be more creative and open when dealing with their tasks. In such a manner knowledge can be better generated and transferred, and thus work can be accomplished in a more effective and efficient way. At the same time, members of virtual project teams cannot rely on face-to-face interactions, as they communicate mainly via email and chat. More often than not this poses a serious obstacle for building relationships and negatively influences already established interpersonal relations, and thus knowledge sharing and the process of learning on the job. Therefore, discovering more about the state of communication in such commercial (as opposed to *e.g.* academic) virtual project teams, of which students of linguistics and other fields of study are prospective members, is essential. To this end, a linguist might employ a communication audit.

3.2. Communication audit definition and scope

As noted above, communication audits have been utilised by researchers for the purposes of investigating communication in a range of different organisations. However, there is little evidence of a linguistic approach to communication audits. The author of this paper has attempted to close this gap by taking on a research project on communication audits from a linguistic perspective, the findings of which she published in Alnajjar (2016a). Inevitably, research into the communication audit, similarly to communication and organisational behaviour, required that insights delivered by other fields of study were considered during the research process. Project management, intercultural communication, psychology, sociology, and ethnography turned out to be of particular value. Nevertheless, the linguistic perspective remained at the forefront during the entire research project.

From the researcher's point of view, before the research process could start the basic issues needed to be established, namely the definition and scope of the communication audit, both as explained and understood in the research literature (see examples and detailed explanations in this respect in Alnajjar 2016a: 81–91). As regards the definition of the communication audit, it was decided that a communication audit is a metacommunicative activity, which in the first line aims at investigating the quality, *i.e.* appropriateness and effectiveness, of communication conducted by certain individuals within a particular context at a given time. Appropriateness relates to the extent to which individual behaviour meets standards of acceptability and legitimacy, whereas effectiveness concerns the degree to which the desired goals are accomplished. Thus, appropriateness is connected to the relational aspect of communication, while effectiveness is at the forefront as far as knowledge generation and transfer are concerned. In short, an individual should not significantly violate the valued rules, norms, and expectancies of the relationship in the process of reaching the goals (Spitzberg 1997: 380; Spitzberg 1988: 68). The ultimate goal of a communication audit is to provide a description of the quality of communication under study (diagnostic communication audit) and if need be to formulate recommendations for future discourse practices and their possible optimisation with respect to communication competencies (prognostic communication audit). Following this understanding of a communication audit, the investigation of the quality of communication always relates to a specific case or cases and it consists of four steps: (1) defining the group of individuals conducting the communication under investigation, (2) identifying the level of quality of given communicative events and acts produced in the form of texts within the given context, (3) investigating reasons for the low quality level of given communicative events and acts, (4) suggesting solutions to improve the quality level of communicative events and acts (Alnajjar 2016a: 106). Such an understanding of the communication audit ensures that it is actual communication behaviour that is observed and analysed, with the help of linguistic tools (*e.g.* discourse analysis, conversation analysis) in the first instance, as opposed to other understandings focusing on eliciting employees' satisfaction with a job or with communication at work through questionnaires. It can also be recognised that within linguistic understanding, the aim of a communication audit is to deal with concrete situations and thus to enable practitioners to communicate better.

A communication audit is performed by a communication auditor who, in the case of research, is an academic and does not usually have full access to the business entity in question. Therefore, the communication auditor attempts to extend the field of study by investigating not only the actual communication behaviour of the auditees but also their perceptions and facts concerning communication practices within the given context. Perceptions and facts help the communication auditor to obtain

a holistic picture of the communication behaviour under investigation. Perceptions are best reconstructed through interviews and they allow understanding of the auditees' internal context as they subsume opinions, attitudes that are subjective in nature. Facts, as the name suggests, should be objective, as they refer to the external context, *i.e.* to artefacts related to or influencing communication, such as cultural norms and values, organisational structure, policy statements, training programmes, guidelines, *etc.* Thus, actual communication behaviour, facts and perceptions constitute the scope of any communication audit (see the inner triangle in Figure 2), but it should be stressed that the main focus lies on investigating actual communication behaviour rather than facts or perceptions, which play a supportive role in the study of OC. Because all three aspects are captured in the form of texts and discourses, and hence cannot be directly observed, their reconstruction and investigation, and at the same time the description of the context, individuals, and their communication competencies, is performed based on data consisting of texts and discourses (Alnajjar 2016a: 106). In order to collect, analyse, and evaluate such data, it is crucial to choose appropriate methods. These are presented within the constraints of the communication audit model (see Figure 2), which can be seen as a result of research into communication audits conducted by the author of this paper.
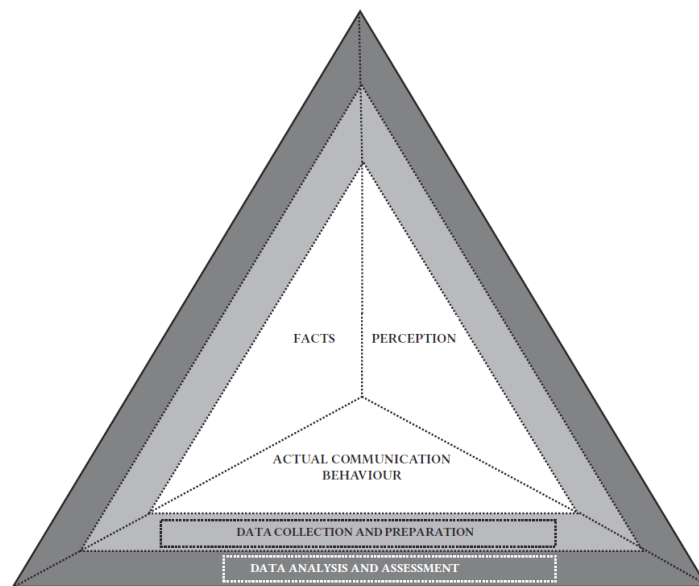

Figure 2. Communication audit model (Alnajjar 2016a: 339)

3.3. Research findings: Communication audit model, procedures and linguistic form sheet

The research project researching communication audits from a linguistic perspective resulted in three different research outcomes: the communication audit model, the communication audit procedures and the linguistic form sheet. Whilst the communication audit model was devised for scientific purposes, the communication audit procedures were developed with the primary aim of helping practitioners conduct communication audits in a systematic way. Finally, the linguistic form sheet was prepared as an integral part of the communication audit procedures, in order that communication auditors can assess the effectiveness and appropriateness, *i.e.* quality, of the communication under investigation.

First, let us take a closer look at the communication audit model depicted in Figure 2. In this model a communication audit is understood in terms of three concentric triangles referring to various aspects of the communication auditor's work: the inner triangle (white colour), the outer triangle (light grey colour), and the expanding triangle (dark grey colour).

The white inner triangle (△), referred to as the "scope triangle," represents the area of work of the auditees selected for the communication audit, with which the communication auditor is obliged to become acquainted in the course of the communication audit. In the case of the research project in question, auditees were project team members. Therefore, it was necessary to collect information on the project methodology that they applied to their work and to gain insights into their daily work, in particular team structure, roles within the team, modes and channels of communication, *etc.* Additionally, it was key to collect information about the socio-cultural contexts which the team members originated from. Apart from the factual data, it was also important to discover more about the auditees' perceptions of communication, their opinions concerning obstacles and challenges related to it, as well as aspects that facilitate communication and make it easier in the eyes of the auditees. Above all, however, it was crucial to take a thorough look at their actual communication behaviour, *i.e.* at those communication acts and events in which they participated in order to reach their goals.

The light grey outer triangle (△) can be called the "data-collection and data-preparation triangle," as within the constraints of this triangle the communication auditor gathers data and prepares it for analysis. It was discovered that in addition to planned and *ad hoc* interviewing, facts can best be collected through the observation of documents and walk arounds. Perceptions can also be collected through interviews, viewed as self-reports, although group discussions are also possible. Such data can be transcribed and form a corpus for analysis. If interviewing is impossible, an auditor may choose to distribute questionnaires. Actual communication behaviour should be divided into two forms: oral and written. While oral data (*e.g.* meetings) can be transcribed and formed into a corpus for analysis, written texts (*e.g.* emails, reports, chats) may be directly collected as a corpus and prepared for analysis (see more in Alnajjar 2015). In the case of this research project, both spoken (project meetings) and written texts (emails) were collected.

Data evaluation, in turn, relates to the dark grey expanding triangle (▲), referred to as the "data-analysis and data-assessment triangle." An auditor may choose to employ content analysis in order to gain a better understanding of facts and perceptions, while actual communication behaviour may best be evaluated using pure linguistic tools. Specifically elements of linguistic discourse analysis, conversation analysis, and genre analysis can be utilised. In the course of research into communication audits, based on linguistic methods, a linguistic form sheet has been developed that provides a list of linguistic aspects for consideration when evaluating the quality of actual communication behaviour. It should be noted that this sheet has been developed specifically for the purposes of assessing communication within virtual project teams, and as such it should be modified for the purposes of evaluating communication in other contexts. In general, the linguistic form sheet consists of two parts. Part 1 assesses the effectiveness of communication with the help of two simple questions about whether discourse participants achieved their goals, while Part 2 focuses on the appropriateness of communication investigated through the observation and analysis of concrete interactions, *i.e.* by investigating various aspects of texts/discourses related to: (A) text superstructure, (B) text macrostructure, (C) text microstructure, (D) intertextual characteristics, (E) acoustic features (see more in Alnajjar 2016a: 350–359).

With regard to the communication audit model, it may be concluded that the inner triangle sits at the heart of the communication audit. However, in order to obtain a full picture of the area of auditees' work within the inner triangle, it is imperative to conduct data collection and analysis within the outer and the expanding triangles, *i.e.* to decide on the research methods to be applied in a specific context. As such, the three triangles are to be viewed as closely interrelated. In order to highlight the strong connection between the triangles and also between the elements of the communication audit scope (facts, perceptions, actual communication behaviour), the author used dotted lines (instead of solid lines) in Figure 2. The interconnections between the triangles and between the elements of the communication audit scope play an important role for the communication auditor. They reflect the fact that the communication auditor constantly moves between various elements and aspects of a communication audit. At the same time, this captures the non-linear and dynamic character of the communication audit process. In other words, collecting and sorting texts, observing, and interviewing as well as performing analysis, often all take place in parallel during a communication audit. Additionally, there is no specific order in which data should be collected and analysed. For instance, it may be the case that the communication auditor has not finished interviewing all the team members, yet he/she has already started analysing the corpus of collected emails. This implies that the work of the communication auditor may be carried out simultaneously in all three triangles, and with regard to the three elements of the communication audit scope, until the communication audit is completed. The highly non-linear character of communication audits was one of an insightful finding of the research process, of which the author had not been fully aware beforehand, and it was, therefore, important to capture it in the form of the communication audit model.

The communication audit procedures were developed in order to help practitioners conduct communication audits. These provide practitioners with concrete guidelines as to what needs to be done and verified during a communication audit. The communication audit procedures, thus, are to be understood as tasks or activities to be undertaken during a communication audit. They are divided into five stages of a communication audit, as mentioned previously, *i.e.* (1) information about the organisation, (2) contact with and information about the auditees in question, (3) interviews and observations, (4) data compiling and processing, (5) linguistic report, final audit report, presentation, and discussion. Each stage encorporates specific tasks that need to be performed. Depending on the context, the communication auditor decides precisely what should be done at each stage (see examples in Alnajjar 2016a: 340–350). This division of tasks and activities into stages provides a systematic overview of the communication audit procedures, but does not mean that the procedures must be performed following the order of the stages into which they are divided. Similarly to the communication audit model, no straightforward linear sequence is required. What is more, certain procedures may take place simultaneously. A communication auditor is free to modify the procedures depending on context and need. Nevertheless, dividing the communication audit into stages, to a certain extent forces the communication auditor to consider and develop a list of tasks within each stage, and thus makes the entire process transparent and easier to follow. Again, this was an important insight realised during the research into communication audits.

Apart from providing the definition and scope of the communication audit, and developing the communication audit model, procedures, and linguistic form sheet, the research process resulted in certain ideas of how research findings may further be utilised in practice, research, and pedagogy. In addition, a list of points, issues, limitations, and aspects to be considered in future research and practice

concerning communication audits was presented (see Alnajjar 2016a: 320–328, 363–374). Let us now dwell on these aspects specifically with respect to pedagogy.

3.4. Organisational communication audit in teaching practice

Without any doubt, the application of communication audits within pedagogy, encouraging graduate students to engage in discovering organisational behaviour and gaining understanding of organisational practice, is beneficial. Hart, Vroman, and Stulz (2015: 294–305) have noted a variety of benefits of communication audits for students. In particular, the authors pay attention to various skills that students can develop when conducting communication audits, such as teamwork skills, writing skills, presentation skills, research skills, interviewing skills, statistical and software skills, and analytical skills, as well as further job-related benefits:

> We believe that the communication audit project is an excellent way to provide students with these valuable skills instead of just reading about them in a textbook. When engaged in a communication audit, students live every aspect of communication and observe the strengths, weaknesses and results of communication as they happen within an actual organization. Students experience having to tolerate ambiguity and accept that there may be questions for which there are no single right answers – just like in the business world. They must assume direction and responsibility for their audits and must expect accountability from their teammates. They also must engage in appropriate professional conduct at all times. (Hart *et al.* 2015: 304)

Tourish and Hargie (2004: 313) also highlight the skills and benefits that communication audits can bring to students:

> [a]udits as a pedagogical tool offer an invaluable means of exploring many wider issues in organisational communication – e.g. the role of hierarchy, democracy, power and organisational citizenship. Additionally, they equip students with 'hard' real-world skills which they can use to sell themselves at interviews. Overall, with some encouragement and assistance, most students respond well to the challenge of utilising communication audits, and derive significant benefits from the process.

In literature on the subject previously mentioned in the section entitled "Background," researchers and students can find certain tips concerning the practical aspects of organising communication audits and the communication audit process. It may be observed that in research literature communication audits are mainly regarded and, to a certain extent, conducted, as projects within the understanding of traditional project management (see Alnajjar 2016a: 331–332). In other words, communication audits are viewed as a temporary endeavour undertaken to create a unique product, service, or result (see *e.g. PMBOK Guide* 2013: 2). They are temporary, as they have a beginning and a foreseeable end. They are unique, as they have not been done in a specific way before and their process is adjusted to the specific circumstances, such as the organisation in which the audit is to be conducted, its expectations, wishes and needs, and budget. What is more, communication audits produce new results. Similarly to projects, communication audits are carried out in phases or stages that are fixed for every communication audit, but may differ depending on the type and needs of the organisation in which the communication audit is to be conducted. In general, following research literature, the communication audit process consists of the following phases: planning, execution, and closure. It is worth adding that the execution phase usually comprises three subphases: data collection, data analysis, and data evaluation/interpretation. Moreover,

according to research literature communication audit phases usually have a sequential relationship, *i.e.* the communication auditor may begin a phase once the previous one has been completed (see *PMBOK Guide* 2013: 42). These theoretical assumptions, however, have not been confirmed during the linguistic research process mentioned in this paper, which evidently pointed to the highly non-linear feature of the communication audit process. While it cannot be denied that the communication audit process should be adapted to the specific characteristics of the organisation under investigation, nevertheless, the guidelines provided in literature on the subject may be useful for students who are novice in the field of communication audits to obtain an overview of what steps are necessary to be taken and how to prepare them. Tutors may also use such guidelines to help students dealing with communication audits to organise them in a more systematic way.

However, in the opinion of the author of this paper, it is critical to not only explain the communication audit process to students, but to also equip them with concrete tools (*cf.* Hart *et al.* 2015: 290–293), in order that they can conduct communication audits, or parts thereof, within organisations in a systematic and confident way. This is where the communication audit model and procedures, in tandem with the linguistic form sheet, are invaluable. They can be seen as tangible tools that can be given to students, in particular students of linguistics, to enable them to undertake systematic investigation of *actual* communication behaviour. The communication audit model and the communication audit procedures can help students to plan their communication audit projects, choose suitable methods of data collection and analysis, and submit their results. The linguistic form sheet, on the other hand, provides students with ideas about which linguistic aspects are worth paying attention to when conducting linguistic analysis of the elicited data. They also offer the suggestion that creating a systematic list of linguistic aspects to be investigated is possible and useful. In short, the communication audit model, the communication audit procedures, and the linguistic form sheet may be helpful to students in planning, executing, and concluding a communication audit project, providing them with clear methodological ideas. When conducting communication audits, it is of great importance to focus sharply not only on methodological details but also ethical aspects related to conducting communication audits. Both methodological and ethical aspects have turned out to be issues during the experimental communication audit that is currently being conducted by students on the basis of the research results mentioned previously.

Let us briefly describe the aims and give an overview of the experimental communication audit referred to. The communication audit is being conducted by four students of applied linguistics (three students of the second semester in a BA programme and one student of the final, fourth semester in a MA programme) in an institute of the faculty of applied linguistics at Warsaw University, in which these students pursue their studies. More precisely, the students formed a communication audit working group. It is worth adding that these students are also active members of the student science group at the faculty of applied linguistics. Thus, it can be stated that highly motivated students have taken on the task of conducting the communication audit in an organisation that they are part of. Furthermore, the students limited the scope of the communication audit to communication between the selected groups of students and their lecturers, irrespective of the language in which this communication was performed. They mainly chose the groups of students to which they think they have good access. Their aim is to take a closer look at the state of the communication in question (diagnostic communication audit). As highly motivated as the students are, their knowledge about communication processes in organisations and about the communication audit process itself is limited, and they lack real-life

experience within the organisational landscape. Therefore, they need intensive assistance in the entire process of preparing and conducting a communication audit. This is one of the reasons why we chose to carry out a communication audit in an institution that the students broadly understand and to which they have relatively easy access. Below, we discuss some of the challenging points that have arisen so far. It is worth adding that currently the students deal with data collection and analysis, *i.e.* they went through the initial process of audit planning and preparation. At the end of the communication audit, they are supposed to interpret the data, write up the final report and most probably present the results to the head of the institute. That is why, in this paper, we focus on the issues related to planning, preparation, and collection of data. Aspects related to data analysis, interpretation, and preparation of the final report, are omitted.

In the first instance, the author of this paper, who is also the "supervisor" (or rather "helper") of the students, attempted to provide the students with a better understanding of the general organisational process of carrying out a communication audit. In other words, the four students were coached on working as a team, where between meetings team members are supposed to complete certain tasks, as it is often the case in modern organisations. For this purpose, at the very beginning, after the students declared their willingness to conduct a communication audit and exchanged initial ideas, an expert from the management department was invited to one of the sessions in order to teach the students how to organise meetings efficiently. With the assistance of a professional who possesses not only theoretical knowledge but also practical experience in organising meetings and providing coaching with regard to the organisation of meetings, the students could develop a way of working efficiently through meetings. They learnt about communication maps of various departments within an organisation (or various individuals preparing a specific event) with regard to meetings. In other words, they noted that in an organisation (here a communication audit working group) individuals are responsible for various tasks that are part of a bigger project, and they discuss the progress of each task during meetings so that solutions to issues can be found to aid the successful completion of the entire project. They also learnt that issues raised in the meeting that are important for one person might be of no value for other meeting participants responsible for other tasks. Gaining this awareness was crucial, as the students noted that they should consider the time and interest of other meeting participants, and thus be careful which information they share in meetings. As a result, the communication audit group chose a leader whose task is to supervise and coordinate the work of the team, in particular the division of work, prepare for the meetings, manage the meetings, deal with the open issues that come up in meetings, and report the work to the supervisor. With the help of the instruction of the management expert and the Excel sheet, that he provided the students with, the meetings of the students became systematic and goal oriented. In addition, the students take responsibility for their tasks outside of the meetings, which is not always the case in normal classroom settings. Interestingly, the students have expressed a will to use the proposed technique of organising meetings in future work. They mentioned that the coaching was very useful, as they have become aware of how important it is to have well-structured and goal-oriented meetings, in addition to preparing beforehand and selecting information to be presented/shared in a meeting. Furthermore, from the students' perspective the coaching by the professional from the management field was also insightful in regard to the work of employees in organisations and the manner in which various projects, tasks *etc.* are completed. In short, the coaching not only enabled the students to carry out their own communication audit project in a systematic way but also allowed them to understand how people

in organisations act and why. This was an important point, providing the students with their first, both theoretical and practical insights into OB and OC.

Secondly, it was mandatory to acquaint the students with the scope of a communication audit. As prospective linguists, they are used to working with texts, and analysing these from different perspectives with the help of various tools. However, at the very beginning they did not realise that apart from texts referring to actual instances of communication (such as emails) they should also collect other data on the basis of which they could more objectively reconstruct perceptions/opinions and facts. Being part of the community in which they are conducting the communication audit, the students take a number of things for granted. For instance, they are acquainted with the structure of the institute, they unconsciously understand the power relations between students and teachers, and they can subjectively judge with which teacher it is difficult or easy to communicate (relational aspect of communication). However, in order to act objectively to the highest possible extent, it was necessary to employ ethnographic concepts, discuss with the students their positionality, and carry out introspection so that the students could realise how important it is to not fall into the trap of jumping to conclusions and taking certain attitudes/ information for granted. For this reason, the communication audit model was introduced to the students in order that they might better understand the scope of the communication audit in hand. For example, they discovered that apart from texts, they should also focus on perceptions and facts when conducting the communication audit. The methodological aspects of the communication audit were also discussed with the students in great detail using the communication audit model. In a brainstorming session, methods of data collection and analysis for the purposes of the communication audit in question were identified. The students also learnt how to prepare and work with interviews and questionnaires, which was a novelty to linguistic students who normally deal only with texts.

Next, the students had to learn more about the communication audit process. This was another challenge, with which they were confronted. Above all, they became acquainted with the, previously mentioned, five stages of a communication audit, *i.e.* (1) information about the organisation, (2) contact with and information about the auditees in question, (3) interviews and observations, (4) data compiling and processing, (5) linguistic report, final audit report, presentation, and discussion. Having learnt this, the students undertook a brainstorming session in order to relate these five stages to the communication audit in hand, in particular to apply them to the context of a tertiary organisation, and to develop a list of tasks necessary to perform at each of the stages. They were also encouraged to think about the difficulties and challenges they might encounter during the communication audit process. For example, they reflected on their contact with some tutors and lecturers and realised that it might be difficult. Thus, they thought about various alternative ways to establish such contact. In general, discussing the communication audit process was another element of the communication audit teaching process, helping the students to reflect in more detail on OB and OC, and to gain increased awareness of them in regard to the university context.

Last, but not, of course, least, it was necessary to support the students of the communication audit working group with ethical aspects of conducting research. At the start they were unaware of the fact that it is mandatory to obtain the consent of auditees participating in the communication audit, and to inform them in advance about this undertaking. Let us discuss these two issues in more detail. Firstly, it was necessary to inform the prospective auditees that they would be participating in a communication audit and, in particular, that their emails would be analysed. Together with the instructor, the students established that the best manner to do this would be to ask the head of the institute to announce to the entire community that a communication audit was to be conducted. This, we thought, would not

only help inform all institute members about the undertaking and "introduce" the communication audit working group to the potential auditees (not all institute members became audit participants), but also would explain the nature and the role of the communication audit. Furthermore, by sending such an email, the head of the institute showcased their personal engagement with, and support for, the communication audit. This, in turn, encouraged the auditees to take the communication audit seriously and participate in it. Interestingly, we received emails from some members of the institute staff expressing their full support for the communication audit. Moreover, the students also personally contacted prospective audit participants and provided them with more details about the communication audit. Secondly, the students did research on the Internet into what should be included in a participant consent form and prepared a draft version of a consent form for the purposes of the communication audit. We then discussed the draft version with respect to the university's requirements and prepared a final version later distributed to the auditees.

At present, the members of the communication audit team have collected and partly analysed the data. The author presumes that the next challenges and issues for discussion will concern data analysis and interpretation, and preparation and modifications of the linguistic form sheet for the purposes of the communication audit in hand. In addition, the final report and presentation will most probably need detailed discussion before being delivered to the head of the institute and auditees.

4. Conclusion

This paper shows that organisational communication can be investigated through the use of communication audits. However, it is the linguistic approach to communication audits that allows for a holistic picture of communication in an organisation, as with the help of this approach actual communication behaviour is at the forefront of analysis, as opposed to other approaches that hardly consider aspects of actual communication behaviour. It has been stressed that it is important to teach students of various fields of study, in particular applied linguistics, how communication in organisations works. For this purpose, however, providing them with theories and models of organisational communication, does not suffice. There is a growing need to let students test these theories and models in reality. The communication audit model and procedures, in addition to the linguistic form sheet that were devised in the course of research into the communication audit in virtual project teams from a linguistic perspective, offer this possibility. They can be considered to be concrete tools, with the help of which students can carry out communication audits in other organisational contexts in a systematic way, as they are to some extent forced to take into account and consider various methodological, ethical, and logistic aspects of studying organisational communication. When applying this model, procedures, and linguistic form sheet in practice, regardless of the context, students may learn how to adjust theoretical solutions to concrete investigations into the quality of communication. Additionally, when conducting communication audits using these tools, students can gain a better understanding of how organisational communication works in reality and how it shapes organisational behaviour.

It may be concluded that with regard to OC, similarly to OB, it is research based on close collaboration with practice that enables scholars to develop models and theories, which can then be tested and explored in the classroom training.

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