

## THE PROCESS OF COMMUNICATION IN THE CLASSROOM

Anca PATRICHI<sup>1</sup>

1. English teacher, "Virgil Madgearu" Economic Technological High School, Iasi, Romania  
Corresponding author: anca.patrichi@gmail.com

### Abstract

Starting from the definition of communication, its components, objectives and taxonomy, we will try to point out some of the most important characteristics of this process of delivering information and feelings that should be taken into account in a classroom environment. We will also discuss some of the problems that might appear in transmitting the message to students and their possible solutions. Thus, in our endeavour we will focus on the teachers and how they can use those communication principles in day-to-day activities, as well as in the related tasks that concern class management.

**Keywords:** *written and oral communication, metacommunication, problems and solutions*

### 1. DEFINING COMMUNICATION AND ITS COMPONENTS

Living in a society means interacting with its members, thus communicating. Everywhere we look we find people trying to send messages or understand them. And teachers, most of all, depend on communication daily, because their job would be pointless without it. Many have tried to define it and there are many opinions on this matter. One definition, which refers to the process of communication, is the following:

**"Communication is a conscious or unconscious, intentional or unintentional process in which feelings and ideas are expressed as verbal or nonverbal messages."**<sup>1</sup>



Human communication occurs on three levels:

- Intrapersonal;
- Interpersonal;
- Public communication.

**Intrapersonal communication** means to communicate with oneself. It refers to such activities as personal decision making, thought procession, listening and determining self-concept.

**Interpersonal communication** refers to communication that takes place between two or more persons who establish a relationship. Face to face or mediated conversations, interviews, small-group discussions are forms of interpersonal communication.

**Public communication** occurs when a speaker sends a message to an audience. It may be direct, such as a face to face message delivered by a speaker to an audience, or indirect, such as a message on the radio or television.

The most important characteristics of communication are: it is **dynamic** (is constantly in a state of change), **continuous** (it never stops, not even when we sleep; our brain is always active and we are always processing ideas and information through our dreams, thoughts and expressions), **irreversible** (once it is sent cannot be undone), **interactive** (it occurs between people) and **contextual** (is a part of our entire human experience)<sup>2</sup>.

Communication may also be defined as the vehicle by which people initiate and maintain relations with others. Communication has two main parts: **the sender**, who *encodes* (takes ideas and puts them into message form) and **the receiver**, who *decodes* (receives the message).

The sender sends the ideas through a **channel** composed of a primary signal system, the senses: seeing, hearing, tasting, smelling and touching.

This process is presented below:

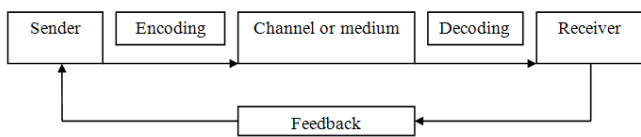


Fig.1 The process of communication

The code used is formed of *words*, which must be understood by both parties.

## 2. THE OBJECTIVES OF COMMUNICATION

When we communicate, we really have four main objectives and four main types of questions, which correspond to these objectives. Asking the questions before starting to communicate gives a better chance of success in the classroom and outside of it. Following these objectives makes the task easier:

### ❖ To be received;

In this case, the question is '**Who?**', so our interest falls on the receiver. The questions related to this one which clear out the context are: 'Who exactly is my audience?', 'What sort of students are they?' (Knowing the personality, status, age and education of the receiver may be crucial sometimes.), 'What do they need to know?', 'What do they know already about the subject of the message? A lot? Not much? Nothing?' Correct answers to these questions make the communication process a lot more efficient.

### ❖ To be understood;

The focus, in this case, is on the subject of the communication and the main questions are '**What?**' and '**How?**'. The teacher must ask himself/herself firstly: 'What exactly do I want to say?', 'What do I need to say?', 'What information can I omit?', 'What information must I include in order to be clear, concise, constructive, correct, complete and courteous?', 'How am I going to communicate my message? With words? Pictures? Or both?', 'How will I organize the points I want to make?', 'How am I going to achieve the right effect?'

### ❖ To be accepted in a given situation;

In order to be well received and accepted there are two important questions that have to be answered before transmitting a message: '**Where and When?**' These refer to the place and the context in which the communication happens. There are also other related questions to this objective: 'What state of mind and mood will they be in when they receive my message?', 'How are they likely to react to the content of the message?', 'At what point in the total matter does my message come? My message will represent the first they heard about the topic/problem/issue?', 'Is the atmosphere strained or cordial?'

❖ **To get action** (change of behaviour or attitude)

Probably the most important part of the communication is setting the purpose and the correspondent question here is '**Why?**'. 'Why am I communicating?', 'What is my real reason for speaking or writing?', 'What am I hoping to achieve? Change of opinion? Change of attitude?', 'What is my clear purpose? To inform? To persuade? To influence? To educate? To entertain? To advice? To explain? To provoke? To stimulate thought?'

In some cases the answers may seem obvious, but the problem must be seen from the listeners/readers point of view also. It is worthwhile going through these questions before communicating anything difficult or of some length. They help to stop someone 'to open his/her mouth without thinking'. One of the funniest and best pieces of advice that someone can give is: "*Please engage brain before opening mouth!*"

## 3. ADVANTAGES AND DISADVANTAGES OF WRITTEN AND ORAL COMMUNICATION

People have used oral communication since the beginning of mankind. But, at some point, they felt the need to write down figures, words, dates, in order not to lose them. Thus, writing appeared in different forms. Both oral communication and written communication occur through language, but there are some important differences between spoken and

written language, things that become even more visible in the classroom.

**Writing** is an objective planned and highly structured monologue, it is durable, scannable, syntactically complex, argument oriented, abstract, decontextualized, concerned with the past and the future. It takes time and effort to create a great piece of writing and this is why, most of the times, impressive essays are written at home, not in the class.

**Speech**, on the other hand, is spontaneous, loosely structured, ephemeral, syntactically simple, concrete, event oriented, contextualized, concerned with the present. Consequently, students prefer it to writing and they often get really involved in debates during the English lessons.

There are **advantages and disadvantages** for both written and spoken language. The speaker has available a full range of 'voice quality' effects, facial expressions and an entire fascinating gestural system. These paralinguistic advantages are denied to the writer. Although the speaker can monitor the audience's reactions, to see whether his message is understood, he has no permanent record of what he has said earlier. So, asking a student to repeat the message is risky, to say the least. The writer, on the contrary, may look over what he has already written, pause between each word with no fear of interruption, take his time choosing the right word, reorder what he has written and even change his mind about what he wants to say. Whereas the speaker knows that any words which pass his lips will be heard by his interlocutor, and if they are not what he intends, he will have to undertake active, public 'repair', the writer can rewrite his words in privacy. There are, though other advantages for the speaker. He can observe his interlocutor and can modify what he is saying to make it more accessible to his hearer. The writer has no access to immediate feedback.

Spoken and written language serve quite **different functions**. On one hand, written language has the storage function, which permits communication over time and space and it is used for transfer of information, so for transactional purposes. On the other hand, speech establishes and maintains human

relationships, so it is used mainly for interactional purposes.<sup>4</sup>

### **3.1. Types of oral communication**

There are two main types of oral communication: **verbal and non-verbal**.

a) Verbal communication and speaking skills

**The verbal** is expressed through language and it is called speech. **Speaking** means producing an infinite combination of utterances from a finite number of words.

The speaker, in order to achieve his/her purpose, has to have some important *personal qualities*:

❖ Clarity

To express ideas clearly, ideas that can be easily followed, the language should be simple and the material organized. Long and complicated words should be avoided.

❖ Accuracy

The words used must say exactly what the speaker means, so a reasonably wide vocabulary is needed. The facts used should be correct, so a great deal of attention must be given to the authorities quoted. Thus they must be reliable. Statements which begin 'Everybody thinks' or 'Nobody would accept' are always dangerous and open to challenge.

❖ Empathy

It is best for the speaker to be courteous and friendly and not only control one's emotions, but mainly putting one in the other person's place. The speaker should try to feel what the other person is feeling, which helps to establish *empathy* for that person. This doesn't mean always agreeing with them, but it helps the speaker to be understanding and patient.

❖ Sincerity

This means being natural and not becoming stiff and awkward when talking to strangers or people of higher status.

❖ Relaxation

When the muscles are tense, we have difficulty expressing ourselves naturally. So, the solution for getting rid of these unnatural speech characteristics is to relax. Taking a deep breath helps. Freezing with tension starts by holding



ones breath. Breathing naturally helps the muscles to be more relaxed.

❖ Eye contact

The direction of gaze and length of gaze are important factors in synchronizing speech. A speaker who never looks at his/her listeners may be sending messages like: 'I don't like you', 'I'm not sure of myself', 'Don't believe what I am saying'. Eyes on the desk, in the lap, out of the window don't help. The audience should be treated like individuals, so the speaker should move his/her eyes round the room.

❖ Appearance

The way the speaker looks can affect how the others understand him/her. Appearance reflects the 'self-image'. In most speaking situations people see the speaker and form judgements about them even before they speak. Attractive dress and good grooming are important in formal situations: the public meeting, the job interview and so on.

❖ Posture

Good posture is also important. Someone who props up the wall may convey the message that he/she is tired, bored or careless or all three of them. Another important reason for examining the posture is related to voice quality. If the speaker slouches or bends the head down, the throat muscles, jaw and vocal chords will not operate as freely as they should.<sup>5</sup>

When speaking, the *vocal qualities* also matter. To ensure that the sounds produced are clear, the throat muscles must be relaxed, the jaw must not be rigid and the lips must be flexible and capable of assuming a variety of positions.

The **pitch** is also important. A person whose voice has a high pitch may sound thin or squeaky. A person with low pitch will sound deep or throaty. It is essential to be relaxed when speaking, because when people are frightened or tense, their vocal chords stretch tight and their voices tend to squeak.

**Volume** is more easily controlled than pitch. Proper breathing is essential to volume control and good speaking. The speaker must learn to project his/her voice, so he/she is heard at great distances without yelling or sounding strained.

**Diction** is the way in which words are said or pronounced. It depends on 'articulation' (which refers to the way people pronounce consonants)

and 'enunciation' (refers to the way people pronounce vowels). If the speaker articulates and enunciates well, he/she will have a good diction and the message will be clearly understood.

**The speed** also affects the message sent. Speaking very quickly conveys a sense of urgency to the listener. This may be useful at times, but speaking rapidly all the time may cause the listeners to switch off and may also make it difficult for the speaker to be understood. Most people who speak in public actually speak at a slower rate than they do in normal conversation. And of course teachers must adapt the rhythm to the students' level. The speaker also varies the pace according to the relative importance of what it is said. Thus, unimportant words and phrases are spoken quickly, while the important ones will be spoken more slowly.

### The use of pause

If the speaker uses long pauses between each word or series of words, he/she would very quickly lose his/her audience. However, the pause, carefully used, can be a very effective device for getting the message across in the classroom. A good teacher will pause briefly at the appropriate places to give the students 'the opportunity to take in what they have said, or will pause before a word to emphasize it.'<sup>6</sup>

b) Non-verbal communication, listening skills and kinesics

Words are the ones that help us express our feelings and ideas, but when we communicate we don't only use words. Consciously or unconsciously, when we speak we also communicate by other means, which is known as **non-verbal** communication. For example:

- ❖ Facial expression- a smile, a frown;
- ❖ Gestures- movement of hands or body to help explain or emphasize our verbal message;
- ❖ Body posture- how we stand or sit;
- ❖ Orientation- whether we face the other person or turn away;
- ❖ Eye contact- whether we look at the other person or not, and the length of time that we look at the other person;
- ❖ Body contact- a pat on the back, an arm round the shoulder;

- ❖ Proximity- the distance we stand or sit from the person;
- ❖ Head-nods- to indicate agreement or disagreement or to encourage the other to go on speaking;
- ❖ Appearance- physical grooming and choice of clothes;
- ❖ Non-verbal aspects of speech- variations of pitch, stress and timing, voice quality and tone of voice (=‘paralanguage’).<sup>7</sup>

All these non-verbal elements are called ‘**metacommunication**’, from the Greek word ‘meta’, which means ‘beyond’ or ‘in addition to’. The message transmitted by metacommunication is also very powerful. The receiver will use these clues to help them interpret what one means, but more importantly, they often take the meaning from the metacommunication, rather than from the words themselves, especially if they are in contradiction. For example, if one is angry, but trying to hide the anger, he/she should be aware that body posture, the use of the eyes, gestures and facial expressions or the tone of voice may well give him/her away. So, ‘it’s not what he says, but the way he says it’.<sup>8</sup>

Since non-verbal communication is such an important part of the process of communication, we must become more aware of non-verbal messages. Teachers can learn a great deal from the non-verbal messages transmitted by the students. Sometimes they do not have the courage to admit they do not fully understand a task, so the teacher must guess or read this, following the signs of metacommunication.

#### **4. PROBLEMS AND SOLUTIONS CONCERNING COMMUNICATION IN THE CLASSROOM**

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In the light of the above, teachers have a difficult task in transmitting their message to their students, because teacher-student communication is of great complexity. There are numerous instances in which the following statements are heard: ‘I didn’t really mean that’ or ‘You still can’t see what I mean.’ or ‘What’s your point?’ or ‘I didn’t grasp the point.’ Whatever we want to communicate, something often seems to get in the way and we are not

understood in the way we intended. Even when we are understood, students don’t behave the way we wish.

Consequently, teachers have to react and act positively and actively, in order to avoid the possible problems occurring in decoding their message.

Sometimes, amusing situations might occur. A happy teacher, proud of the ‘almost perfect’ lesson he/she has just had, might discover that the students did not actually comprehend some parts of the discourse or of the given task. Many times teachers think they have sent the right message, but the students (the receivers) do not react as promptly as they are expected to and just parts of what has been said actually ‘arrives’ at the destination.

Thus, although the sender might be happy with the actual utterances, the feedback he/she gets could be far from what had been initially intended. Why does this happen?

We know that **words** are symbols that represent things and ideas and the meaning given to them results from the way each person interprets the world around. Far too many times, our students’ way of seeing the world and their understanding of certain situations lead to a different interpretation of the code or a misreading of some parts of the message (while in the mind of the teacher everything seems clear). Furthermore, their personal problems or their lack of motivation makes them less attentive, which is a hazard to the whole process of communicating ideas.

In conclusion, how do we solve this? The answer combines three main ideas:

- ❖ **additional explanation** – If students seem only partially convinced they have understood the message, the teacher must give some extra information

- ❖ **rephrasing the task or the message** – Using a multitude of ways in which one can express something, we bring a very valuable idea in the class, one that some students run from: richness of vocabulary is an advantage, not something that is to be viewed as an obstacle. (We are familiar with the question: ‘Why must this word have so many meanings?’)

- ❖ last, but never the least, **feedback**. Feedback indicates whether the receiver

understands, encourages the sender to continue or disagrees. When giving feedback on a task, the teacher has to do more than give the right or wrong answers. First, they need to think about whether the students need language-focused feedback or content-focused feedback. In language-focused feedback things are more to the point, as teachers respond to the language that students produce. In content-focused feedback, the response must be a more detailed one, because teachers are responding to certain ideas and information.

Whatever type of feedback is needed, teachers have to remember to contextualize everything and be positive about the whole correcting process, in order not to lose the students' motivation.

Thus, by following these steps we can change 'I didn't grasp the point' into 'That's a very good point, teacher!'

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