

WHAT KILLS AND WHAT SAVES COMMUNICATION

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Abstract

The author suggests a number of activities devised for the English class that could raise students awareness of the barriers that usually hinder them from fully expressing themselves in communication and thus from creating successful relationships with people. The tasks include short readings that provide the necessary input for further eliciting from students those mechanisms of thinking that create the context of communication and that, most often, consists in a set of preconceived statements used to place labels on people and situations. But these are only “stories” and not the truth. The latter can be accessed by focusing on Listening and by being in the Present of the communication act.

Key- words: communication, preconceived ideas, present, awareness, listening

Brief Introduction and Rationale

The author suggests a number of tasks intended for the students of English in technical universities but also in faculties with a “humanistic touch”- philosophy, psychology, as well as business or management. The students could be encouraged to become aware of some of the preconceived ideas that limit their view upon what communication means and hence their future development both as professionals and as fully developed personalities. That is why, our paper starts with a question:

What Do We Mean By Communication?

Communication is a process of transferring information from a sender to a receiver. As a sign-mediated interaction, it is commonly referred to as the interchange of thoughts, opinions or information. As one of the components of soft skills, it is increasingly recognized as a key to making businesses more profitable and better places to work.

Soft skills, a recently coined term, is related to Emotional Intelligence that includes a set of personality traits like language, communication, personal habits, team spirit etc., namely, that part of the individual that contributes to his professional success and personal fulfillment. Soft skills imply social or interpersonal skills like talking and listening effectively, empathizing accurately, building relationships of trust and respect, negotiating, solving problems, dealing with cultural differences etc. They also imply psychological or intrapersonal skills like understanding oneself, dealing with stress, setting goals, managing deadlines, organizing and planning one's activities etc.

Communication skills are increasingly considered the most important non-hard skills for today's professionals to master. Whenever one interacts with co-workers or delivers a presentation, whenever one is called for an interview, speaks with his/her counterpart from another company or with a customer, one must use clear understandable language. What actually happens is a sign that current staff and future recruits are no longer hired on their hard skills exclusively. The reason is that technical/academic skills do no longer suffice for the increasing challenges facing the present economy, like competition, and ever- changing corporate environment. Suppose a company has to choose between a graduate with brilliant technical records/hard skills and another one with less outstanding academic results. During the interviews, it is revealed that the former one fears to deliver a speech, has problems explaining his arguments to others, loses his temper when he meets rejection, whereas the latter proves to be an excellent communicator and a warm, open personality. The interviewers will be aware of the fact that, despite of the remarkable technical qualifications of the former candidate, he will be liable to generate misunderstanding, disagreement and even crisis at work. When facing the choice they will definitely prefer the second candidate whose good communication skills are a prerequisite of effective working relationships inside and outside, of closing gaps between dissimilar departments within the business, of quickly adapting to the changing needs of the organization and ultimately, of contributing to the growth and prosperity of the company. As a result, the strictly academic

knowledge is felt to be insufficient for the increasing demands of the post modern economy and increasingly ranked as just a “bottom necessity”.

The context of globalization has created the need for corporations to deal with multiculturalism. The ever widening influences of other cultures have left very few companies untouched by the awareness of soft skills as a key for managing diversity and dealing with differences. On the other hand, the shifting industry and economy have created an ever widening expansion of job roles and “hats” that professionals have to wear. Whether taking the role of salesperson, manager, presenter, negotiator or even host, they need to master the most important soft skill which is efficient communication. If they discover that others disagree with them even though they are right, or that they are not capable of putting their ideas across to people effectively, then it is a warning that their communication skills need improvement.

The rules for good communication appear to be simple: listening carefully, not interrupting others in-between, speaking clearly and at a normal rate, minding a correct pronunciation or using proper eye- contact. And yet, acquiring the soft skill of communication or measuring is no easy thing. As opposed to hard skills that are more easily described and evaluated, soft skills in general and communication skills in particular, require an in-depth knowledge of the other person’s nature, temperament, background and even work experience. The ability to communicate well with people involves the ability to deal with their feelings in any given situation, and to complement academic intelligence with a humane understanding of issues. This ability or skill, also termed Emotional Intelligence, is fundamental in strengthening individuals from within and helping them understand “ who they are”, how best to deal with the unpredictable and how to effectively contribute in all aspects of business.

Communication skills can be developed through a variety of means such as insightful reading, observation of successful communicators, good training and course participation/practice. The training is generally provided by workshops, one-to-one coaching, classroom instruction or instructor lead on-line training. Companies (to a larger extent) and universities (to a lesser extent) all over the world have started organizing such training sessions aimed at empowering employees and students to build up and improve their communication skills. The respective workshops are usually organized by highly trained experts who deliver intensive 3-5 days sessions where the attendance cannot be described as extremely large mainly due to the

prohibitive costs involved. The companies usually sponsor such events for their own employees, an advantage that does not extend to the large public.

Already a priority of the educational plans all over the world, communication skills have started to be given attention in Romania only recently. The attempts are timid though, especially in universities where the educational instruments still rely on mechanical/materialistic premises. The purpose of this paper is therefore to introduce an alternative approach to teaching communication that is mainly focused on the psychological aspects of the phenomenon. The tasks suggested include short readings that provide the necessary input for eliciting from students those mechanisms of thinking that create the context of communication and that, most often, consist in a number of preconceived ideas used to place labels on people and situations. However, these “manufactured” statements are only “stories” that actually kill communication and do not represent a reflection of True Reality. The latter can be accessed by becoming aware of the simple fact that humans are innately and basically good. Being “outcomes” of an initial design of divine essence, they were created to be lacking nothing and to be basically able to “function” perfectly. The apparent loss of perfection seems to be only the result of ignorance or blindness to perceive the Essential Truth. Until and unless individuals learn how to resonate with It and become capable of recognizing the fundamental perfection in others, they will not master the skill of effective communication completely. The conventional tips and recipes for successful communication only deal with the “crust” of the matter which, however, remains hidden from the ordinary mind. Therefore, an awareness has to be awakened in students, namely that the conditionings and artificial ideas about themselves and the others have to be blasted in order to reach that space of genuine openness, love, compassion and respect. If and only if these qualities are imbibed into oneself, becoming a good communicator appears to be the spontaneous and automatic outcome of a strictly natural process.

Presentation of Tasks.

This section presents a number of tasks that were designed and used as part of the author’s empirical research. The main objective was to find out to what extent they might be integrated in an ESP module for engineering students with good chances for increasing their communication skills. To begin with, a group/whole class task eliciting the students’ views on the positive and negative features of communication invites them to reflect on their previous communication

experiences, share views and thereby come to know each other better. The following activities are deliberately based on simple language readings with relatively simple language requirements that are meant to focus students' attention mainly on certain psychological aspects that only rarely reach consciousness. Such zones are usually the "hiding place" of misconceptions about oneself and the others, of the feelings of guilt and resentment, of fears and self imposed false sentences. Thus, the tasks involved and the classroom atmosphere aim at introducing elements of self analysis and introspection which will hopefully become regular practice in the future.

Task 1. In groups, find at least three features that, in your opinion, are characteristic of successful/unsuccessful communication.

Task 2. The text below is an introduction to this unit. Read it and fill in the blanks with words taken from the box:

Our entire life is only about 1.....and 2There is nothing beyond communication because communication is at the very 3..... of our existence, as the only way 4.....who we really are. The 5..... results of our life (like success, fulfillment etc) are 6.....of our capability to communicate, hence create successful 7.....with people. Human beings are 8.to be basically perfect and 9.....nothing.

Then, why is it that there are 10.....so many serious gaps and 11.....stopping them to express their 12.....?

And how could they distinguish these 13..... in living their fullness?

Who are they 14..... when they are in communication

a.-to express, b.-plans, c.-lacking, d.-relationships, e.-listening, f.-core, g.-barriers, h.-still, i.-being, j.-wholeness, k.- palpable, l. -said, m.-function, n. -speaking, o.-flaw

(Task 2". In pairs, think of possible answers to the questions above.)

Task 3. Recall moments when you fully communicated with someone. What feelings/emotions/thoughts were present? Note down some of your memories and share with your peer.

(Key: we were happy, being full/pure, safety, center of the world, mutual expression, etc.)

Task 4. Recall moments when your communication with people was disastrous. What emotions/thoughts were present? Share with peer.

(Key: They don't listen to me, I feel frustrated, I don't need you, I feel annoyed, I am alone in this world, Nobody loves me, I am right and they are wrong etc.)

Task 5. Think of the communication that you ordinarily have with the persons in your life and put their names on three lists with the following headings:

1. Communication should be there and isn't.
2. Communication has been given up on.
3. Openness may not be perfect but is pretty go.

Task 6. *Read the following opinion:*

“Communication is not a private but a collective phenomenon. It is not as much about Speaking as it is about Listening.”

Think of a person with whom your communication leaves much to be desired. Write down:

a. What is your communication with him/her like? What do you actually do in the communication with him/her ? Describe what happens by referring to both parties.

b. What do you want as a result of a possible improvement in the future?

Share with your peer.

[Key: a). say something to finish the communication, get angry and speak louder, resignation as a routine act, blaming the other etc.]

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