ENGLISH - FRIEND OR FOE OF COMMUNICATION?

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Abstract

Could English be the expected answer to the worldwide problem of international communication? What is the price to pay for such a universally accepted 'panacea' for clear, unbiased communication? The aim of this paper is to look into the matter of communication and language acquisition both from the teacher and student viewpoint. How well can we manage language development so as to turn English into an effective communication instrument across culture and generation gaps? The present paper will attempt an analysis of the above mentioned issues based on both class observations and a set of questionnaires completed by students participating in English taught programs within the Bucharest University of Economic Studies (ASE).

Keywords: language; communication; negotiating meaning; cultural impact.

1. Introduction

Communication is one of the most puzzling processes in human society because on the one hand it defines, structures and refines it while, on the other hand, it is defined, structured and refined by it. It is like a two-way avenue whose functionality depends on its togetherness. The multiple communication theories stand proof of man's attempt to identify the key factors in this process and harness it in view of a more beneficial yield.

The fact that communication is vital to man in general and to society in particular somewhat contradicts our everyday reality which oozes failed communication no matter whether we call it misunderstanding, miscommunication, misinterpretation, or a lot of other things with the prefix "mis" – which, by the way, many students spell "miss", by justified power of association. Something seems to be 'amiss' here, but what is it, and how can we right it, assuming that this is a realistic enough enterprise?

You might expect that after so many millennia of practice, people have become experts at communicating. This has not happened – of course we do have many experts *in* communication, but so few people who are expert *at* communicating.

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How can this be possible? Probably because communication changes from one generation to another and the process is constantly on the move – in other words, the only thing constant about communication is change. Being in constant alert and adjusting all the time might be a prerequisite of successful communication.

The present paper focuses especially on linguistic communication as seen from the perspective of students in economics in an attempt to create a needs analysis basis for their future business oriented professions. Knowledge economy is based on communication and economists themselves point out that competitive advantage is primarily based on knowledge which is scattered all over the world – sensing and mobilizing it is what they call *metanational advantage* (Doz et al, 2001:5). Having the right communication skills can offer present and future businesspersons the occasion to tap into these windows of opportunity.

From a teacher's perspective the paper is concerned with connecting the theoretical aspects of language with the practical ones. Language, just like myths or philosophical systems constitute models and, as Hall says, "The purpose of the model is to enable the user to do a better job in handling the enormous complexity of life" (Hall, 1989: 13). This means that teachers have tremendous responsibility lying upon them. "Everything man is and does is modified by learning and is therefore malleable" (Hall, 1989: 42). The need to be in constant connection with the beneficiary of the tuition process is a must for anyone involved in the system. The survey presented in the paper can be a solid source of information in this respect.

2. Three models of communication

The following part is intended as literature review which, although far from being exhaustive, offers a concise paradigm of communication that can be applied in the domain of language study.

McQuail (2000) identifies several predominant models of communication which can be placed at the basis of mass communication. Mutatis mutandis, I have selected three of them to better illustrate the findings of the student survey that I have conducted as wells as my personal class observation.

2.1 The transmission model

This model finds its roots in the information theory developed by Shannon and Weaver as early as 1949 (McQuail, 2000: 46). Information theory concentrates on the technical efficiency of transmitting a *message*, implying a *source*, a *signal* and a *channel*.

According to this model, differences between the messages sent and the ones received are due to *noise* or *interference* affecting the transmission channel. The terms 'noise or interference' go beyond their initial technical meaning, so they can read anything from language barriers to cultural idiosyncrasies.

The model creates a linear approach, a *cause-effect* or *stimulus-response* model which, for decades, has influenced communication science and educational research. Its main advantage is the possibility of measuring the effects of communication, intended or not, thus creating a data corpus which can be managed interdisciplinarily. The main disadvantage lies in its ignoring the impact of communication, therefore a less represented socially-oriented aspect.

Didactically speaking, the transmission model underlies most teaching practices of foreign languages, irrespective of method and approach. The most important component in this model and which the present study will attempt to identify is the "noise" responsible for impaired communication as identified in the foreign language production of the students involved in the survey.

2.2 The expressive or ritual model

To a certain extent, this is the model that taps into the more subtle facets of communication, bringing it closer to art rather than science: communication for the sake of communicating. This model is based on associations and suggestions, ambiguity and symbols, inferred rather than explicit meaning. Within this pattern, communication happens only if there is a mutual basis of shared values and therefore it has a strong cultural bias.

The linear model is broken, communication winds around in labyrinths of meaning waiting to be discovered and tasted so much the better. "A ritual view is not directed towards the extension of messages in space, but the maintenance of society in time; not the act of imparting information but the representation of shared beliefs" (Carey, apud McQuail, 2000: 54).

From the didactic perspective, this model implies a creative usage of language, mostly practiced in written productions. Within multicultural contexts, this type of communication is, perhaps, the hardest to master and it is intrinsically related to authentic materials.

2.3 The reception model

Within this paradigm, the focal point shifts from the message sender to the message receiver, to be more exact, from the 'encoder' to the 'decoder' of the message.

Most messages, especially public ones, have a pre-encoded status, Stuart Hall calls it a "meaning structure" (McQuail, 2000: 56), but I would rather call it a "belonging or category marker", which gives the receiver a certain hint on what to expect from the respective message.

We can see this in television programs under the form of *established genres* like 'news', 'detective series', 'reality shows', 'soap operas', to name the ones we encounter on a daily basis. They generate a particular framework of meaning that is supposed to generate certain content expectations, thus saving the effort of the first step in decoding the message. Useless to say that they are likely to initiate manipulation, but this is a completely different issue, which does not make the object of the present study.

Receivers can and often do resist the 'gulping' of the message exactly as offered; they decode it according to their own education, common sense and perception. Finally it is the receiver who decides upon the meaning of the message and the meaning encoded is not necessarily the same as the one decoded.

In ESP teaching this model applies in situations where the deceptive use of language can be involved, like the language of advertising, the language of marketing, NLP or any other persuasion techniques.

As we can see, there is no one particular model that can cover the complexity of communication, neither is there a model that can be completely discarded. As usual, the truth lies[2] midway and we need to capitalize on the pluses and, sometimes even on the minuses, of such theoretical patterns. However, before moving on to a more pragmatic section of the paper let us pay tribute to Laswell and his theory of communication who emphasizes the functions of communication in society. Functionalism could be the common thread running through all these models because it considers communication as vital to the maintenance of society: "…communication works towards the integration, continuity and normality of society…" (apud McQuail, 2000: 46).

3. Student Survey

Communication is an extremely complex process especially because it is a never-ending one, the 'rules of the game' as well as the players changing continually. Therefore, a teacher's job is 'never done', they need to adapt all the time to new needs, to new situations and, ultimately, to new paradigms. The aim of the following study is to take the pulse of the student community at hand as far as communication is concerned, in an attempt to see how successful teaching English is within the academic environment to which I belong.

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[2] Intended pun.

The study that I have conducted is based on questionnaires filled in by my Business English students, on their own accord, over a period of two academic years, since October 2013 until May 2015.

The number of respondents participating in the survey was **104** Romanian students and **7** foreign students. They were 1st and 2nd year students from the Faculty of Business Administration in Foreign Languages (FABIZ), as well as 1st year students from the Faculty of International Business and Economics (REI).

As the number of foreign students was much lower than anticipated, I decided to compile only the data obtained from Romanian students and refer to data concerning foreign students only as special comments or class observation without comparative relevance.

The questionnaire used in the survey (see table 1.1) contains mostly *exploratory questions* (Adèr et al, 2008: 32), to be more exact, nine closed ended questions and a contingency one (question 8). The table also contains the quantitative results expressed in number of students as well as percentages from the total number.

The issues touched upon in the survey refer to communication preferences and hindrances as well as the extent to which the subjects were exposed to foreign cultures. The comments and details given by the students will be analysed further on in the paper.

Table 1.1 Questionnaire on communication and survey results

1. Do you find it easy to communicate with other people, as a rule?			
a. yes 81 Ss[3] = **80.1%**	b. no 5 Ss = **4.9%**	c. it depends (please comment) 15 Ss = **14.8%**	No Answer: 3 Ss
2. Which kind of communication do you prefer? Why?			
a. oral 78 Ss = **75%**	b. written (please mention) 24 Ss = **23%**	c. other (please comment) 2 Ss = **1.9%**	
3. Do you use a lot of body language when you speak? Feel free to comment.			
a. yes 70 Ss = **67.9%**	b. no 29 Ss = **28.1%**	c. more than I would like 4 Ss = **3.8%**	No Answer: 1 S
4. Have you been abroad yet?			
a. yes (please detail – what country/ies, for how long…) 83 Ss = **79.8%**		b. no 21 Ss = **20.1%**	
5. Do the foreigners you know have a different communication style than your fellow citizens?			
a. yes (please detail) 53 Ss = **51.4%**		b. no 50 Ss = **48.5%**	No answer: 1S

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[3] 'Ss' stands for 'students'.

6. **Did/do you have communication problems due to cultural gaps (fellow students, customs officers, etc.)?**			
a. yes (please detail) 5 Ss = **4.8%**	b. no, never 38 Ss = **36.5%**	c. insignificant ones 61 Ss = **58.6%**	
7. **Did/do you have communication problems due to generation gap (parents, teachers, etc)?**			
a. yes (please detail) 14 Ss = **13.4%**	b. no, never 32 Ss = **30.7%**	c. insignificant ones 58 Ss = **55.7%**	
8. **If yes, how did you manage these communication problems?**			
- explain, rephrase - more communication, better preparation - being patient, listen more - compromise			
9. **Do you have a role model of a good "communicator"?**			
Yes: 32 Ss = 30.7% No: 32 Ss = 30.7 % ▪ family: mother, father, sister, uncle, aunt ▪ teachers: high school teachers, university professors (no names given) ▪ public figures: Oprah Winfrey, Steve Jobs, Les Brown, Daniel Goleman, Jordan Belfort, Tim Minchin, Eric Thomas, George Carlin, Andreea Esca, Klaus Iohannis, Tudor Chirilă (none of them mentioned more than once) ▪ myself (1 student)			No answer: 40 Ss
10. **Could you improve upon your communication skills? Please comment.**			
a. yes (how?) 101 Ss = **98%**	b. no (why not?) 2 Ss = **1.9%**		No answer: 1 S

3.1 General aspects of communication (questions 1&2)

A. Students' perspective

As can be seen from the data obtained, the students participating in the survey are not afraid to talk; an overwhelming majority expresses their confidence in their ability to communicate (**80.1%**) and almost an equal number opts for oral communication **(75%)**. Looking at these figures I believe that it is correct to deduce that most of them associate communication with speaking, almost to the point of identifying the two, which is a perception worth noting.

As to the reasons given for their preference, the students say that in oral communication they get instant feedback in the form of facial expressions, gestures and the body language of their interlocutors, in other words the *kinesics* of communication. Other advantages, in their opinion, are that it is "easier", "faster", "more expressive", "more personal" and "more enjoyable" and that you "get to connect better".

The students opting for the written type of communication account for their choice by saying that they can better organize their "thoughts", "words" and the "text" without having to "watch the other person in the eyes". Some of the students feel "pressure" when faced with oral discourse therefore they feel more comfortable when writing.

It is somewhat surprising that only very few students (one of them from Austria) mentioned text messages, e-mails and social networking in this category, that is why in the next round of the survey I felt the need to introduce two more questions overtly about online communication.

B. Class observation

The above mentioned situation also reflects in the seminar activities therefore I would appreciate the students' self-assessment as being correct and corresponding to the real life situation. Of course there is still room for improvement regarding grammatically correct productions. However, their not completely perfect "grammatical competence" (Canale, 1993: 7) does not affect message comprehension.

Another thing that needs to be mentioned has to do with the register – given the fact that most productions are oral ones, including oral presentations. The students are particularly accustomed to the colloquial register and proficient when it comes to informal speech, which, in my opinion, is illustrative of the way English has been acquired by most of them – to use a splendid self-explanatory description offered by of one of my students, they are the "Cartoon Network generation". Thus I believe that greater accent should be placed on what Canale calls the "sociolinguistic competence" (Canale, 1993: 7).

As to the feeling of language security or insecurity that transpires from any oral production, I have noticed that Romanian students feel somewhat less secure than the foreign students. The "noise" mentioned beforehand in the *transmission model* translates in the fear to make language mistakes. Being afraid of speaking publicly is an issue that I have remarked especially with 1st year students, the solution being a written assignment as an alternative for their semester project which normally consists of an oral presentation.

By contrast, the international students with whom I have had the chance to work are, by a large majority, less accurate in pronunciation and even less correct in grammar, but extremely fluent in their speech. The idea of transmitting the message 'no matter how' prevails. Of course, this approach sometimes impedes the very purpose of their speech, which is when 'negotiating' the meaning steps in as a procedure for getting the message across. The foreign students are less preoccupied with making language mistakes, which means that the "noise" is not so loud with them.

3.2 Body language (question 3)

A. Students' perspective

The propensity for colloquial communication is also reflected in the body language considered as a means of communication and used as such by **67.3%** of the respondents. Only a limited number of students (27.8%) consider it to be a tension defusing resort, as they put it: "only when I'm nervous", and even fewer (3.8%) perceive it entirely negatively, as: "escaping personal control". These results actually tell us that our students are mostly focused on the pragmatic-interactive aspect of communication.

B. Class observation

The main negative aspect that I have remarked in connection with the oral presentations delivered by my students was their tendency to actually turn their back to the audience so as to look at the big screen. This gesture is usually accompanied by an effusion of body language as if it were its side effect. By contrast, the international students under my supervision have displayed a more temperate body language.

3.3 Intercultural and intergenerational communication (questions 4-10)

The next part of the survey focuses on communication within a cultural context as well as an intergenerational one. An impressive majority of the students questioned (**79.8%**) have been abroad, even to more than one country, most of them Western European ones. Even though the majority has travelled as tourists, which means short periods of time and certain contexts which do not always allow for complete exposure to the culture of the respective country, the experience as such is remarkable taking into consideration the young age of the respondents (about 20 years).

The answers to the fifth question (*Do the foreigners you know have a different communication style than your fellow citizens?*) yield an incredible tie, as they partially represent opinions of students who have never been abroad and it is not clear how they have come to know foreigners. That being the case, it is likely that many answers are based on preconceived ideas and biased perceptions rather than on personal experience.

As to the differences in the communication style, most of the comments favor foreigners by pointing out a more relaxed and open attitude towards the interlocutor: "more friendly", "more polite", "calmer", "nicer", "more

spontaneous", "more communicative". However, the students also remarked on the "different accent" (sometimes a hindrance to communication), on the body language (used on a larger scale), as well as on the faster way of speaking. The students who have travelled to several countries do not fail to remark that there are clear differences from one country to another.

Within the context of the *expressive model* these comments show that there is still much work ahead in brushing up our students' language. However, this is not exclusively a tuition process - time and individual experience have their own contribution to enhancing language proficiency from this perspective.

Communication problems due to cultural or generation gaps seem to be insignificant. However, the percentage is slightly higher, namely 13.4%, in the case of generation gap problems as compared to 4.8%, in the case of cultural gaps. Whereas the latter seems to be generated by language barriers, which is to be expected when travelling abroad, the former is generated mostly by mentality differences, especially in the case of grandparents, that is within a two-generation span.

Mentality is not the only cause for generation gap miscommunication, another one being language barriers, due to word borrowings especially from English. These are used either in connection with technology or simply as 'socializing slang'.

The comments on how to manage communication problems focus on two directions:
1. *language performance:* explain, rephrase – in the case of interpersonal communication, and prepare more, learn the speech, more communication – in the case of professional communication.
2. *personal attitude*: being patient and understanding, listen more, compromise.

These comments are largely reinforced with the final question, of how can communication skills be improved - to be remarked that an overwhelming majority of **98%** believe that their communication skills can be improved - there is only one student who explicitly says that she needs no improvement upon her communication skills. The 'how' focuses almost entirely on practice, either *individual* – talking to friends, talking in front of the mirror, reading, watching movies, listening, or *organized* – public speaking, participating in debates, going to meetings, learning new techniques, learning foreign languages.

Another amazing draw appears in the case of a role model for a good 'communicator'. As we can see, from the 64 students who choose to give an answer, 32 students answer affirmatively, while the other half says 'no'. As to the

examples given as role models, they are extremely varied, which is positive as they show a large range of preoccupation.

Applied to the *reception model*, this means that the students participating in the study have a real propensity towards processing information on their own rather than assimilating it automatically. However, this needs continual reinforcing, which makes it, perhaps, the most challenging effort in the education process.

4. Final Conclusions

The present study was initiated as a type of *needs analysis*, a means of finding out the main communication habits of our students and consequently of better understanding their communication needs in order to tailor and adjust both seminar activities and course topics accordingly.

A first conclusion would be that the students are extremely concerned with communicating accurately, which involves both the content and form of the message as such, as well as the social and cultural context. Therefore, a possible selection of the topics to be touched upon would have to focus on three directions: *language structure, sociolinguistic context* and *cultural environment*.

Another conclusion drawn from the comments provided by the students is that young people communicate a lot and their medium of preference is English. This has a positive impact on the whole, because English can be a most effective communication instrument. However, it proves to be a main ingredient in the generation gap. Perhaps teaching English to parents and grandparents will become a compulsory component of our curricula; lifelong learning will acquire new meaning and perspective.

Last but not least, the question chosen as title for this paper is rather rhetorical; it was a mere pretext to look into several facets of communication at a pragmatic level. English has always been and probably will continue to be one of our most precious instruments in communication. Does it influence our native tongue in the process? Most certainly yes, but to deem such a phenomenon as negative is to ignore the workings of language which is a living organism per se. Since the phenomenon cannot be controlled, we could still turn it into a conscientious process. This is exactly where English teachers intervene, English teachers in general and ESP teachers in particular: monitoring the process into cultural and educational awareness.

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