PROFESSIONAL COMMUNICATION

MESSAGE AND INFORMATION: ESSENTIALS FOR EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION

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1. Argument

Today, it is widely acknowledged that engineers' professional performances are developed through and greatly influenced by communication, and professional skills are as important as language skills. The demands of the globalizing society and the continuously upgrading technologies have imposed new requirements in transmitting the results of work to other people, understandably and persuasively, both verbally and in writing. This changing environment in which technical communication occurs has placed more emphasis on the psychological, social, and rhetorical principles for effective communication.

If you are a technical professional or planning to become one, you should prepare yourself for work in this increasingly internationalized world. You should seek out opportunities for studying foreign cultures and languages and learn how to deal with people who may not share your cultural norms.

Nowadays, in most organizations one can expect to spend more and more time communicating as one rises in rank. Most technical professionals, engineers, scientists have to face various communicative situations. Excellent technical skills do not enable them automatically to communicate to others what they are doing, why it is important and so on, unless they have good communication skills. Thus, for the engineering students the professional skills may relate to technical, academic and/or business sphere with the involvement of the activation of all the language skills within professional communication.

This state of affairs has provoked curricular changes in the engineering education with emphasis on technical as much as cultural aspect. In what follows in this paper, I shall discuss some aspects of the effective communication in a foreign language with accent on the message and its characteristics as well as on the information that engages students' effective processing with insights into teaching strategies.

2. Technical Language in Communication

The process of teaching foreign languages is to draw out, elaborate, and refine students' language. The process of learning a language is basically "learning how to mean", that is the ability to use language to meet the needs in a social setting, depending as much on patterns of behaviour as on vocabulary and grammatical structures (Halliday, 1975).

However, technical language in communication is more than Halliday's representative model of the language functions (instrumental, regulatory, heuristic, interactional, personal, imaginative, representative). It is not a simple process of conveying information but a process of social interaction. Since technical information is to be shared with particular people for particular purposes, it should be grounded on a broad common accurate understanding. In this view, Gregory Clark has pointed out that "technical communication mediates conflicts between the incomplete understandings of

those who have information and those who need it, helping people develop the shared knowledge that will meet their common needs" (Clark, 1987).

The interdisciplinary character of the present professional communication is increasingly indebted to the collaborative work and brings about people to get involved into prompt activities. The access to computer equipment, personal computers and high-powered workstations highlights the computerisation of communication, which in turn has led to the internationalisation of communication. Opening the "magic box" one can open "windows" on the screen in order to plunge either into the field of his/her strict specialisation, or come out onto the Internet to send or receive the world's messages. A programme in the computer memory can serve, at the same time, as options on the menu, database and access path to other programmes.

The dramatic increase of the more sophisticated software and the expansion of the cobweb (Web) have been interweaving links between personal cultural memory and community cultural memory. It is a labyrinth, a cognitive adventure in which we have become accustomed to the idea that every word in the informative sentence represents a clue, which can open other areas of significance. This means that the hypertext we are to cope with is a galaxy of significations. The computer user as reader has to step into his/her virtual space of the "text" or "book" by accomplishing option-to-option surfing, choosing from diversified programmes, and applying a whole set of decisions. Thus, the text appears in a dynamic perspective where the local interacts with the global. The repeated possibility of "come-and-go" of different words, lines, or whole paragraphs of the text, the easiness with which we can modify, erase or add certain passages determine an efficient editing control, stimulate imagination in view of new developments in an unbounded space of potential creativity.

Knowledge of the generic form of texts is foundational to the possibilities of coherent communication. Actual technical language as the mode of engineering professional communication is coming under increasing challenge with changes in the semiotic landscape, i.e. the landscape of public communication with impact on the broad landscape (Kress and van Leeuwen, 1996), which thus is remaking the place and characteristics of written language in it.

3. Teaching Considerations

Any enterprise to study foreign languages for specific purposes (LSP) (Robinson, 1991: 18) assumes three realms of knowledge: language (including linguistic analysis for LSP accompanied with a multidisciplinary approach to the theory of language, applied linguistics, and other disciplines such as psycholinguistics, sociolinguistics and sociology), content (of the students' specialist disciplines) and pedagogy (both the theoretical and practical aspects of designing students' learning programme and applying teacher's strategies). In a study (Chickering and Gamson, 1991) entitled "The Seven Principles for Good Practice in Undergraduate Education" the authors have stated guidelines for higher education under the form of seven principles, suggesting the importance of interaction, co-operation, engagement, task orientation, communication, feedback, and mutual respect to successful teaching and learning. They are considered to be powerful indicators of teaching in helping students take more responsibility for learning course content and managing their own learning process in more effective ways. This transfer of responsibility from teacher to learner is the key aspect to learning communities in higher education.

General academic and scientific communicative competence in professional communication may have to be the target for the LSP students. Thus, the students'

needs in Cluj-Napoca Technical University should find expression in the appropriateness of the language seminar activities proposed by the language teacher which are supposed to preview possible professional situations that technical students may have to face in their future job.

In teaching foreign languages, the orientation of our technical students' work is towards communicating in a variety of contexts with attention paid to the dimensions of communication (Literat, 2004):

- *The interrelation dimension* as foundation of the communicational exchange within a socio-cultural group appropriate to diversified contextual moments.
- *The language dimension* represented by the linguistic and psycho-linguistic aspects, which is the form of expressing ideas and opinions in the code of that particular language.
- *The thematic dimension*, which includes the verbal stimulus, the communication settings and the possible future areas of action our students have to be trained for.
- *The interpretative dimension* concerning the reception of a message by the receiver simultaneously with its decoding.
- *The dimension of creativity*, which aims at the forms of concrete creativity under its two aspects - linguistic and technical.

The thematic and language dimensions are significant for the choice of the instructional content knowledge, which should best answer the students' immediate and future needs; the interpretative and creative dimensions contribute to the development of the intellectual potential; the interrelation dimension highlights the psychological and behavioural aspects of interpersonal communication.

To improve the communicative performance, the first condition lies in adopting certain verbal communicative strategies throughout the foreign language seminar. The second condition refers to creating learning situations by simulation, role-play on topics of specialty using languages for specific purposes.

4. Oral Communication: Coding and Decoding

Verbal communication is performed in a language and by means of a language. Therefore language can be considered a social context, both an element of communication and the context in which communication takes place. The essence of verbal communication being the dialogue, the partners exchange messages, which are psycho-socially determined, appealing to a code, linguistic and non-linguistic, in a certain situation.

What "circulates" between those who communicate is not information, but the message which contains information. The code, the materialization of information, represents the individual linguistic system as a result of the learning process, while the messages represent individual linguistic facts adequate to the reality of every moment of communication (Slama-Cazacu, 1973). The code is processed, so that the message can be understood by the receiver. The latter makes use of the common basis in his individual system – the sign meaning (lexical and grammatical nuclei in the language), and attempts to interpret the message, finding the connotation of the signs in that particular situation, depending on the contextual points, on the axis *I-you-here-now*.

Within the relation coding-decoding messages, it is absolutely imperative to have a balance between the constant (the code – the social basis common to both partners), and the variable (the capacity of adapting to subjective and objective reality dynamics); its alteration leads to a modified understanding of the transmitter's intention or even to the

interruption of the verbal exchange. The maintenance of the balance in communication is achieved by means of both partners' communicative competence. The communicative competence, viewed as a complex device of abilities in which linguistic and socio-cultural knowledge interweave, is "modifiable and adaptable under the interlocutive context pressure" (Vlad, 1994).

The process of the auditory perception of a message in a foreign language implies two activity levels: the recognition level, i.e. the identification of the words and collocations in their structural correlation, and the selection level, the choice from the message statements of those elements which express the speaker's intentions that are essential to the situation in which the message is received. Thus, the information is filtered and then absorbed by the immediate memory, allowing the receiver to formulate the reply-answer. The receiver's actions imply successive operations of analysis. The synthesis operations performed by the transmitter correspond to coding, while the receiver's analysis ones correspond to decoding.

The success of oral interaction in a foreign language implies, besides the routine conversational strategies and tactics, abilities to make one's understood within the limits of the receiver's vocabulary for which the interaction code is that particular language. An essential role in developing a conversation is played by the feedback by which we check the correct and complete understanding of the message. It depends on the relation speaker-listener as well as on the degree of the information explicitness. The best reciprocity condition brings about conversational adjustments by mental adaptability, active and efficient participation.

5. Characteristics of Messages

Language cannot be used without carrying meaning and referring beyond itself. Meaning is an active process created in cooperation between sender and receiver, speaker and listener, writer and reader. You do not 'receive' meaning, you create meaning. Meaning is constructed out of the messages you receive combined with your own social and cultural perspective (DeVito, 2007).

All parts of the message system, including verbal and nonverbal behaviours, work together to communicate a unified meaning. Messages occur in clusters and may reinforce one another or contradict one another. Before the meaning of any act of behaviour is identified or guessed, the entire package or cluster should be considered.

Every language has rules (the rules of grammar), which native speakers follow in producing and understanding sentences. Nonverbal communication is also regulated by a system of rules or norms that state what is and what is not appropriate, expected, and permissible in specific social situations. Messages are thus tributary to the rules of the culture.

Effective verbal messages include words at many levels of abstraction. They vary from very specific and concrete to highly abstract and general. More specific words guide more effectively the images that will come into the listener's mind.

Messages vary in politeness, a highlighted trait across most cultures. Among English speakers (Haugh, 2004), politeness involves showing consideration for others and presenting yourself with confidence and polish. In Japanese it involves showing respect, especially for those in higher-status positions, and presenting yourself with modesty.

In the business world politeness is now recognized as an important part of interpersonal interactions. It has been established that rudeness in the workplace reduces performance effectiveness and creativity, and increases worker turnover, which

is costly for the organization. Politeness also varies with the type of the relationship (among strangers, friends, intimates). Culture, personality and professional training influence the degree of politeness and the modality of expressing it.

A characteristic of messages largely emphasised at present is assertiveness, a behaviour that enables people to act in their best interests without denying or infringing upon the rights of others. Assertive communication is recommended in making interpersonal contact and in interpersonal conflict. It can be increased by analyzing the communications of other people, rehearsing assertive communication, and communicating with assertive messages.

6. Interpersonal Communication Values for the LSP Seminar

Efficient teaching and learning of languages for specific purposes in university are approached at present from the perspective of the student's personality formation under intellectual and behaviour aspects. Verbal uttering is not only the product of the knowledge and the skills of using the language code, but it also implies the need to communicate. This can be stimulated by the topics discussed within the groups, as well as by the teacher's receptivity to the psychological factors implied in oral communication.

According to Jean Cardinet's opinion, the teacher – students interaction corresponds to a "didactic contract", negotiated and performed gradually (Cardinet, 1986). The instructional model of "negotiation" is a deeply formative model, having as ultimate goal the student's access to learning independence.

The authentic dialogue promotes active participation and enables the students to act, question, reply and express themselves freely, to have autonomy in thinking and take intellectual initiative in simulating exchanges within the seminar. Relations of reciprocity - "didactic relations" (Ionescu, 2000: 124) are being established, whereby the teacher's instructive and affective influences upon the students are being turned, through inner reflection, into participative behaviours favourable to feedback development and progress in knowledge and communicative competence acquisitions. Through interactions and interpretations of those interactions the students come to create a worldview consistent with past experience and present data.

Collaborative interactions among students become a productive way in which a learner forms an interpretation of the environment and develops understanding. The students get more immediate and personal feedback to assist in the monitoring process, being also motivated by participating in a community of practice.

7. Conclusions

1. Looking at how technology intersects with interpersonal skills and how greatly they influence today's international communication, we might have to build new expertise to cope with changes in higher education, with reference to both teaching and learning LSP communication.
2. Communication skills are critical tools for success, or survival, in 'real world' environments. Therefore, the need for good communication skills, which are more people-oriented skills, presume the mastery of technical writing skills as well as oral communication ones such as talking with people, listening, conversing, interviewing, giving oral presentations, etc. Since these communication abilities have gained major importance, they should be acquired and trained starting with undergraduate students, and built up and refined in graduate and post-graduate

students to prepare them for accomplishing with ease the communicative tasks on the job.

3. The multiplicity of textual forms, written or oral, acts as a semiotic, social and cultural netting which reveals the meanings of that society to its members and allows them to act conventionally or against conventions.

4. A deeper analysis of the characteristics of meanings and messages in face-to-face professional communication, the ways in which nonverbal messages interact with verbal messages improve the technical students' learning a foreign language and developing interpersonal communication. A deeper analysis of the students' verbal behaviour together with being conversant with the psychological support can improve the teacher's perception on the process of learning and developing conversational skills, thus allowing to assess the students' progress and, at the same time, to choose new forms of instructional interaction with the purpose of becoming proficient users of a foreign language in their future professions.

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