

Communication and Communicative Competence

Now there is much discussion on communication. It is assuming new meanings, refreshed definitions, and new bearings on the academic world. With globalization, communication practices are gaining new importance and new popularity. When one attempts to define and theorise communication it appears more problematic a concept than its current popularity might suggest. Communication, although, stands very deeply rooted in human behaviour and the structures of the society, it remains a relatively young field of enquiry and pedagogy and integrates itself with other disciplines such as philosophy, psychology and sociology. Looking at the mechanistic, sociological, rhetorical and linguistic point of views of communication we understand that its thoughts and practices are dominated by methodologies and insights of other disciplines. To conceptualise the processes of communication, to define it, to create maxims to understand it as an independent discourse therefore would not receive consensus. It would be inadequate and insufficient too. In the absence of a paradigm it is difficult for learners and scholars to work from a definition. However a simple and working definition can be thought of for learners' convenience. Let's rest on a simple working definition of communication theory and discuss its processes from their functional point of view. A simple model would be a sender transferring message containing information to a receiver. The message can be a linguistic one or a non-linguistic one. The receiver then understands the message, may or may not choose to respond or reciprocate. If the receiver chooses to reciprocate it becomes a reciprocal communication. If the receiver does not reciprocate it is non-reciprocal communication. Listening to a speech, reading a book are examples of the later kind. The process of sending/encoding and receiving/ decoding of a message is possible when both the participants of a particular communication event are familiar and conversant with the coding and decoding process.

Communication is a process by which information is exchanged between or among individuals through a common system of symbols, signs and behaviour. Therefore it is required that both communicators understand the meaning contained in those symbols, signs and behaviour. Communication as a process finds synonyms such as expressing feelings, conversing, speaking, corresponding, writing, listening and exchanging. A common linguistic system is required for the exercises. The two interacting agents share a common set of signs and a common set of semiotic rules. The simple model entails a sender sending information to a receiver or from an encoder to a decoder. In a complex model feedbacks or backchannels link a sender to the receiver. So communication happens when one understands what others say, sign, write and speak, translates sounds and symbols into meaning and learn the syntax of the language. The process of transmission of information is governed by three levels of semiotic rules: syntactic, meaning relating to syntax and its rules, pragmatic, meaning pertaining to the practical point of view (the application) and semantic, meaning pertaining to, or arising from the different meanings of words or other symbol. Communication allows people to exchange thoughts by several methods and in several ways. So when we speak about communication it is important to understand what kind of communication we are talking

about, primarily: who are the agents of communication, what is the objective or proposed result of the communication and what type of things are communicated.

Human beings communicate to understand each other, to interact, establish relationship, and satisfy needs in work and non-work lives. People want to be heard, to be appreciated and to be wanted. They also want to accomplish tasks and achieve goals. A major purpose of communication is to help people transmit their thoughts, ideas and feelings. Transmission can take place via language or through non-language mediums. When message is transmitted through language it is called verbal communication. When message is transmitted through non-language medium it is called non-verbal communication.

“Communicative Competence,” like communication is another frequently used word and assuming new meanings. It is a linguistic term that refers to a learner’s L2 ability. It not only refers to apply and use grammatical rules, but also to form correct utterances; and know how to use these utterances appropriately. It emphasizes that competence should be integrated with performance. The goal of language learning process is the ability to use the language appropriately. Communicative competence is the ability to choose a communication behaviour that is both appropriate and effective for a given situation. It was first coined by Dell Hymes in 1966. Hymes maintained that mastering a language means to have acquired a level of communicative competence. A distinction has to be made between that which a speaker of a language knows implicitly (competence) and how he actually speaks the language (performance). Hymes believes that competence alone is not enough to explain a native speaker’s knowledge, as a native can not only use grammatically correct forms, but also knows when and where to use them. Communicative competence is a concept though introduced by Hymes, had been discussed and redefined later by many authors. Hymes’s original idea was that the speakers of a language have to have more than grammatical competence in order to be able to communicate effectively in a language; they also need to know how language is used by members of a speech community to accomplish their purpose.

Communicative competence is the total effect of several competences such as linguistic competence, sociolinguistic competence, discourse competence etc. Linguistic competence refers to the knowledge of how to use grammar, syntax, and vocabulary of a language, how to use phrases and sentences to make them grammatical sentences. Sociological competence is to know how to use and respond to language appropriately, given the setting, the topic, and the relationship among the people communicating. Sociolinguistic competence involves the use of language appropriate to a mood, attitude, sentiment, feelings etc. For example, how one expresses courtesy, authority, friendliness, respect etc. when one needs to. Discourse competence is the knowledge of how to interpret the larger context and how to construct longer structures of language so as to make a coherent whole. One understands how to arrange and put together words, phrases and sentences to create conversations, speeches, letters newspaper articles and e-mail messages. Strategic competence means how one strategically uses language to avoid and repair communication breakdown, knows how to use cautionary and tentative language.

As we know communication happens at many levels, in many different ways and through many different modes, communicative competence can be achieved with the appropriate

understanding and use of all of the above. The three major dimensions of communication are:

a. **content**

b. **form**

c. **destination**

Communication content is subject to take many forms, including gestures, sign language, body language, writing and speech. Communication content and the form together are sent towards a destination. Thus, to achieve competence writing and speech as well as non-verbal communication should be learnt and mastered. **Effective communication** depends on the following factors:

- A speaker should identify a communication-situation and accordingly express him/her through appropriate language.
- A speaker should take into consideration who is the listener or the receiver of his words/speech and the context in which interaction is taking place.
- A speaker should choose the right/appropriate words to express his/her feelings, emotions and attitude.
- A speaker should use a language that is understood by the receiver/receiver group.
- A speaker should not use any word/language that may offend any social/economic/religious community.
- A speaker should speak without being irreverent to any section of the audience
- A speaker should demonstrate appropriate body language.

Effective Communication Works within Certain Basic Premises:

- i) Effective verbal/nonverbal communication happens when each person involved understands the situation, context, and the language. Each gets their **need to interact** satisfied. Supposing in a communication process ‘you’ and ‘I’ are the two people involved, my definition of ‘effective communication’ may differ from yours. So, the definition that counts is what **we both believe right now**. We are to recognize all the elements of communication at the time of the process, and be satisfied. If the ‘need’ to communicate is not satisfied, communication becomes a failure. Need identification becomes the responsibility of each communicator.
- ii) We communicate with ourselves and with other people to fulfill some “current inner needs.” The needs we each try to fulfill are:
 - to give or receive credible information.
 - to cause or prevent inner and/or interpersonal change; including changing or maintaining the emotional distance between us and others.
 - to feel understood and accepted by others.
 - to avoid something uncomfortable, like silence or a confrontation.

- to feel respected and ‘cared for’ by others in a communication-situation.
- to reduce boredom.

Our ‘needs’ to communicate with others may change or vary as our inner and outer environments change. At the same time some of our needs always remain unchanged. The need to be understood by others and the need to feel respected by others, the need to relate to others, the need to share information are some which among others remain constant.

- iii) In a face to face oral communication, the words and messages we get are important and important also are the messages we receive from facial expressions and body language. In verbal communication more impact may come from any of them, but the general tendency is to focus more on words than the meanings we decode from body languages. Effective communication happens when all people’s current needs match well enough. When our respective communication needs conflict, we have a mutual communication problem. Conflicts and problems occur when there is a gap between the meanings proposed and meanings interpreted from word as well as wordless messages. So, in communication we must pay equal attention to words as well as body language.
- iv) Face to face, we communicate simultaneously on three “channels”:
 - spoken or written words.
 - Voice dynamics: tone + tempo + inflection + volume + accent + wordless sound.
 - Facial expression and body language/non-verbal communication.
- v) In an appropriate communication event R-message (respect message) is important and it controls the success of communication. Spoken words and non-verbal codes send unconscious messages of respectability, in other words, both visible and verbal codes express in a subtle way what value, worth and dignity we are allowing the receiver in a communication situation. Similarly how much we are allowed the same on the return path is important. R-messages are sent and decoded unconsciously. Both communicators are to realise what each one:
 - feels**
 - thinks**
 - needs**

The R-messages are automatically structured and restructured to an effective measure when each communicator attends to these requirements. Problems may arise if there is a gap between how much each communicator deserves dignity, respect and value and how much the other communicator grants him of that; how much value, dignity and worth :

- he feels to have been given**
- he needs to have been given**

□ **he thinks he should have been given**

Effective and good communication happens only when all people consistently decode clear R-messages. Inappropriate R-messages can put people in low self-esteem. They will have trouble communicating effectively.

- vi) A breach position occurs when the non-verbal and verbal codes don't match or they are inconsistent. Verbal content must be congruent with non-verbal signals. Our true feelings and attitudes very often can be read from our non-verbal messages. Verbal messages become confusing if our words are not appropriately chosen. We will be liars and communication will be difficult. Effective communication requires awareness and a committed, cooperative effort among all people involved. Verbal communication skills and effectiveness can be improved with practice and patience.

Features of Good Communication

Awareness, Clear Thinking, Non-judgmental and Unbiased Attitude and Non-violent Compassionate Communication are features of good-communication. While communicating every participant must use his awareness of mutual needs, feelings and involvements. Comprehension of the receiver is equally important and should be taken into consideration. Communication can be successful only when all the participants are equipped to decode the verbal/nonverbal messages. It can happen effectively when all the members in a situation share the same language and culture or are aware of them. Clear and bias free thinking help in achieving the right communication effect. Moreover communication that arouses negative feeling, or insensitive communication leads to a breakdown; whereas respectful and “politically correct” communication (especially verbal communication) helps build good relationships.

Emphatic Listening is important. Good and effective verbal communication requires concentrated and emphatic listening. Remember, listening is not necessarily agreeing. Listening is to be exercised by both (the sender and the receiver). Listening comes from a mutual respect and a mutual need to understand each other. A speaker may get emotionally charged while speaking. The listener must not lose patience, lest there should be interruption. With respectful, emphatic and empathetic listening it is possible to still carry on a good communication. One should cultivate the skills required for a concentrated listening without getting distracted by intense emotions, biased thoughts and relationship-oriented prejudices. Emphatic listening improves comprehension too. An important feature of good listening is a good eye contact. Establish eye contact with the speaker when you are listening. Encourage the speaker by using small words and backchannels like **yeah, hmm, ok, sure etc.** or nodding time to time. Save your questions, queries and doubts for a later time when the speaker finishes. Encourage and appreciate a speaker to bring out the best in him.

Respectful Assertion needs some explanation here. In a communication situation, often it happens that one partner wants to speak more than others. One may have much to speak to convince or persuade or to influence others. Very often we feel the necessity to assert. Effective assertion, once again, requires an awareness of the mutual needs, clear and straight thinking, bias-free attitude, emphatic listening and mutual respect. Effective assertion is opposed to aggression, (focusing on one person's needs only). Submission is as undesirable as aggression. Ideal communication situation avoids conflicts arising from unnecessary aggression or timid submission among the partners. Assertion, in short, can be explained as a declaration a partner makes to the other partners in communication regarding this needs and feelings so that others can cooperate with him/her. The following can be simple steps to effective assertion:

- realise your needs and personal rights.
- put your request/demand politely, clearly and directly expecting resistances from partners. An appropriate understanding of your rights in that particular situation will help you lower or heighten your expectations (of resistances)
- while expecting resistances, you must build up an interest to listen to each of them patiently and restate your need or opinion firmly but politely. Don't show resentment or irritation at resistances.
- appreciate all resistances, objections and opinions of your partners. It helps in improving your thoughts.

Clear Thinking and Use of Appropriate Vocabulary are essential in good communication. When you are interacting with a person/people evaluate your thinking. Some people have a natural ability to think "better" than others. Clear thinking receives more time and attention normally in written communication. In spoken communication usually we pay less attention to thoughts before speaking. In spoken communication one needs to think faster. So concentrate and listen what is being spoken by others. Organise your thoughts quickly. You can develop this skill with practice. Use your knowledge of communication basics. Speeches, if no serious and clear thinking has gone into it, may contain improper and inappropriate vocabulary. Periodically make a mental summary of words and sentences you are using. Vague and ambivalent words and phrases must be avoided. Some common vague words are *it, that, them, they, those people, sometime, sort of, get over, stressed out, work through* etc. Use specific and direct English to make your communication effective. Avoid words that may raise your participants' emotion levels. Words such as *rape, addiction, gay, homo, wimp, coward, stupid, childish, bitch, loser, weak, selfish, irresponsible, unreasonable, illogical, overemotional, oversensitive, hysterical, self-centred, negro/negress, pathetic, miserable,*

handicapped etc. and words indicating racial, social and economic bias should be used after proper evaluation, in most cases they should not be used.

In Public Communication the Basic Premises of Communication assumes changes. In interpersonal communication it is easier to recognise or get an awareness of mutual needs, feelings and accordingly, tailor a talk or a conversation. To customise one's communication to any precise degree becomes difficult in public speaking, especially with a large audience. Secondly, the diction meant for interpersonal communication will differ from that designed for public speaking. Usually public speaking is formal. Everyday conversational language will not be appropriate there. Conflict resolution through language communication can be more effectively done in interpersonal speaking. In public speaking the scope narrows down. Both sender and receiver are present in an oral communication situation. Communication forms a link between the two. In public speaking it is more difficult to form a link between the two (sender and receiver) than interpersonal speaking. The larger an audience the more difficult it is to establish personal contact with everyone. In an interpersonal communication reaction is quicker and immediate. It reaches a speaker faster. In public speaking sometimes the audience reaction may not reach the speaker. Public speaking needs advanced skills of communication. So in public speaking:

- know your audience.
- recognise the needs
- organise your thoughts
- design your talk
- use sensitivity
- use politically correct language
- avoid slang and profane language
- use neutral expressions
- use simple, straight and direct expressions
- establish eye contact with a roaming gaze
- don't get affected if you find some sections of the audience disinterested.
- be comfortable with occasional silence