

INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION SKILLS IN ACADEMIC AND SCHOLASTIC PERSPECTIVE: BARRIERS AND SOLUTIONS

SAMEENA FAHEEM¹ & PALLE APARNA²

¹Department of English, Deccan College of Engineering & Technology, Hyderabad, India

²Department of Humanities and Basic Sciences, G Narayanamma Institute of
Technology & Science, Hyderabad, India

ABSTRACT

Language is a backbone of communication. It is a medium through which people communicate. Success of an individual depends to a large extent on his ability to communicate effectively with his colleagues, friends and relations. If he is able to achieve his objective, i.e. elicit the right response, his communication would be called effective otherwise failure to communication. We have to identify the factors which weaken our communication. Factors responsible for breakdown in communication are known as barriers to communication. This paper examines the issues of the barriers to interpersonal communication in cultural, physical, perceptual, emotional, language, and gender aspects which creates communication gap and obstruct smooth flow of communication and at once offers certain possible solutions.

KEYWORDS: Communication, Physical, Perceptual

INTRODUCTION

Interpersonal Communication level refers to the sharing of information among people. Interpersonal communication differs from other forms of communication; here it is the involvement of few participants, the interactants are in close physical proximity to each other, there are many sensory channels used, and feedback is immediate. Also the role of sender and receiver keeps alternating. This form of interaction is advantageous because direct and immediate feedback is possible. If a doubt occurs, it can be instantly clarified. We can note that non-verbal communication plays a major role in the interpretation of a message in this form of communication due to proximity of the people involved.

Communication lays the foundation for two themes; the first is that the communication is by definition interactive and always takes place within a relationship. This means that we need theories of interaction to make sense of it and to distinguish between effective and ineffective communication. It also means that the quality of the relationship and the quality of communication are deeply connected with each other. The second is that communication is context related. It does not happen solely within the confines of a relationship, but in a larger world which affects both the nature of the relationship and the nature of communication that properly takes place within it. Communication undoubtedly 'comes naturally' to human beings, since we are a social species: we seek out the company of other human beings and rely upon our connections with each other for both our physical and psychological well-being (Juliet Koprowska, 2005).

Communication is so central to social life that Paul Watzlawick and his colleagues (1967) famously declared; one cannot not communicate (p. 40). They reach this conclusion by way of the following argument: 'behavior has no opposite ... One cannot not behave. Now, if it is accepted that all behavior in an interactional situation has message value, i.e., communication, it follows that no matter how one may try, one cannot not communicate (Watzlawick, et. al 1967 pp. 48-49).

In this sense, communication just is, and is happening all the time when people are together. Every social situation entails communication and therefore calls up communication skills. Even when we are trying to avoid communicating with someone, we are communicating something (I don't want to talk to you, right now, or I'm angry with you, I'm avoiding you etc.) From the intimacy of the early relationship of mother and newborn baby, through to the much more attenuated 'connections' between strangers in public places, people are using interpersonal skills. Most social work activities take place somewhere in between these two extremes (Juliet Koprowska, 2005).

Moreover, most interpersonal communication situation depends upon a variety of factors, such as the psychology of the two parties involved, the relationship between them, the situation in which the communication takes place, the surrounding environment, and finally the cultural context.

Barriers

Different factors influence the communication process and hamper its flow. To overcome these barriers to communication one needs excellent guidance and continuous practice, and needs to make it into a habit. Following are the barriers to interpersonal communication along with their solutions cited by various writers:

Cultural Barriers

When individuals in a group are not aware of their cultures, there arises the cultural barrier, and there are the chances of misunderstanding. Within a group, communication is possible when everyone included is culturally aware of the behavioral pattern of the group. Even in situations, where communication is to be held between two distinct cultural groups, knowledge of the other's cultural moves can help in communicating successfully and with positive results. The study found that the students could only express their feelings within the range of their cultural background. To remove the cultural barrier an initiation of an open minded approach is required and cultural awareness has to be incorporated in the soft skills' course. The students should be prepared to cope with the skills of multi and mixed cultural environment and they should be made to be culturally conscious and eager to learn, they should not only be the citizens of their own country but become the citizens of the world.

Solutions to Overcome Barriers Arising Out of Cross-Cultural Communication

The key to effective cross-cultural communication and thereby overcoming the pitfalls is knowledge. First, it is essential that people understand the potential problems of cross cultural communication, and make a conscious effort to overcome these problems. Second, it is important to assume that one's efforts will not always be successful and one should adjust one's behavior appropriately.

For example, one should always assume that there is a significant possibility that cultural differences are causing communication problems, and be willing to be patient and forgiving, rather than hostile and aggressive, if problem develops. One should respond slowly and carefully in cross-cultural exchanges, not jumping to the conclusion that one knows what is being thought and said.

If people are aware of the problems that arise out of cross cultural communication and find solutions to them, then they will be able to overcome the following problems in the organizations:

- Miscommunication or lack of communication.
- Lack of motivation, thus lack of performance.

- Lack of team spirit.
- Deterioration in the quality of the company products.
- Deterioration in the quantity of production.
- Delay in decision-making process.
- The problem of absenteeism.
- Problem in the process of team building
- Lack of sensitivity to one another.

Lastly, if they are open to learning about problems from other cultures, they become less lonely. Prejudice and stereotypes separate them from whole groups of people who could be friends and partners in working for changes. Many of people long for real contact. Talking with people different for themselves gives them hope and energizes them to take on the challenge of improving our communities and world (Mousumi Dash & Swayamprabha Satpathy, 2012).

Physical Barriers

Physical barriers are the physical borders or marked out territories that separate people in a sense of status, pride etc. It hinders communication between the speaker and the listener. It can't be overcome until the closed doors are opened. This barrier has been found between the student of cities and villages due to the dominating factor among the students of cities. To control the physical barriers, etiquettes and manners play a very important role for a civilized life and particularly of today's business world. Apart from this patience, honesty, integrity, dependability, dedication, reliability and good positive characters are some of the features that add to an individual's soft skills. Soft skills don't make the learner soft; in fact they make the learner a tough nut to crack. The professional knowledge and expertise get an added edge with soft skills.

Solutions to Overcome the Physical Barriers

Listening Skills

Listening is one of the important skills to remove the physical barriers. Listening is a process of receiving, interpreting, and reacting to a message received from the speaker.

Listening requires voluntary attention and then making sense of what is heard. It requires a conscious effort to interpret the sounds, grasp the meanings of the words, and react to the message. The interpretation of sound signals is a cognitive act, which completely depends on the knowledge of the listener and also on his attitude towards the sender and the message.

Listening skill is one of the important language skills that needs one's success in academic and professional pursuits. Listening makes oral interaction possible, it helps in making decisions and stimulates others to act to achieve individual as well as professional objectives. It develops information and understanding essential for decision making in meetings and conferences. It leads to unification between the activities of individuals as a work team, towards achievement of common business, professional or organizational goals and promotes maintenance of professional relations.

While working in an organization, one will use his listening skills in a variety of situations; listening to distressed and dissatisfied workers, listening during telephonic conversations, listening while taking instructions, conducting a meeting, and many such instances.

If one is effective in listening he will be able to take right decisions, and, make better policies in the organization. Listening patiently to employees enables the managers to feel the pulse of the organization. Harmonious relationships can be created amongst employees leading to a congenial working ambience.

Effective listening is very vital for the success of an open-door policy. When employees are encouraged to freely walk into a manager's room and encouraged to speak up, they no longer harbour negative feelings. Effective listening will thus improve working conditions and nurture harmony and cohesion in the organization if both the management and the employees listen to each other's messages patiently. The morale of the organization as a whole is thereby boosted, resulting in increased productivity.

- To control whatever barriers to physical reception one can especially interrupting speakers by asking questions or exhibiting disruptive nonverbal behaviors.
- To avoid selective listening by trying to focus on the speaker and analyzing what one hears.
- To keep open mind by avoiding any prejudgments and by not listening defensively.
- To try to paraphrase the speaker's ideas, giving that person a chance to confirm or correct listener's interpretation
- Not to count on one's memory, but record, write down, or capture information in some other physical way.
- To improve one's short-term memory by repeating information, organizing it into patterns, or breaking it in to shorter lists.
- To improve one's long-term memory by association, categorization, visualization and mnemonics.

TO OWN THE FEELINGS

Owning the feelings is important to effective communication. Using *I* language to express feelings has two noteworthy benefits. First, it reminds a person that he/she – not anyone else – has responsibility for his/her feelings. When one relies on *you* language (“You hurt me”), one risks misleading himself about his accountability for his own emotions.

A second reason to avoid *you* language is that it tends to make others feel defensive. When others feel on ground, they are less likely to listen thoughtfully and respond sensitively to one's expression of emotion. A person expands the possibility for healthy, rich interpersonal relationships when he takes responsibility for his own feelings by using *I* language (Wood, 2002).

Perceptual Barriers

Every person has a different sense of perception; hence it affects communication process; and leads to problems of miscommunication. This barrier was widely visible in the task sessions, every individual had a different perceiving end of his or her own. This can be removed, when they are taught the strategies of perception and expression.

Solutions for the Barrier to Perception

Perception plays the main role in interpersonal communication, as it has many factors that influence in the life of people and situations. To be a competent communicator, it is important to form perceptions carefully and check their accuracy. Following are the guidelines for improvement of perception and ultimately, the quality of interpersonal communication.

TO RECOGNIZE THAT ALL PERCEPTIONS ARE PARTIAL AND SUBJECTIVE

The result found that all perceptions are partial and subjective. The finding says that every one perceives from a particular perspective that is shaped by the psychology, culture standpoint, social roles, cognitive abilities, aspects and personal experiences. It has both partial and subjective perceptions. It is partial because people cannot perceive everything but instead select only certain aspects of phenomena to notice. People then organize and interpret those selected stimuli in personal ways that are necessarily incomplete. Perception is also subjective because it is influenced by individual background and physiology and personal modes of interpretation.

Objective features of reality have no meaning until people notice, organize, and interpret them. It is the perceptions that construct meanings for the people and experiences in the life. An outfit perceived as elegant by one person may appear cheap to another. It is difficult, if not possible, to determine the truth or falsity of perceptions because they are not objective descriptions. Instead, perceptions represent what things mean to them.

The subjective and partial nature of perceptions has implications for interpersonal communication. One implication is that when two persons disagree about something, neither of them is necessarily wrong or crazy. It is more likely that one has attended to different things and there are differences in one's personal, social, and physiological resources for perceiving. A second implication is that it is wise to remind oneself that one profoundly influences how one perceives others. As it has been seen, the perceptions are based at least as much on oneself as on anything external to one. If one perceives another person as domineering, there is a chance that one is feeling insecure in one's ability to interact. Remembering that perceptions are partial and subjective curbs the tendency to think that the perceptions are the only valid ones or they are based exclusively on what lies outside oneself.

TO CHECK PERCEPTIONS WITH OTHERS

This guideline follows directly from the earlier one, because perceptions are subjective and partial as we need to check our perception with others. Perceptions checking are important communication skills because it has people arrive at mutual understanding with each other and their relationship. To check perceptions one should first state what one has noticed, then the person should check to see whether the other person perceives the same thing.

It is appropriate to ask the other person to explain his or her behavior. When checking perception it is important to use a tentative tone rather than a dogmatic or accusatory one. This minimizes defensiveness and encourages good discussions.

TO DISTINGUISH BETWEEN FACTS AND INFERENCES

Competent interpersonal communication also depends on distinguishing facts from influences. A fact is an objective statement based on observation. It involves an interpretation that goes beyond the fact. It is easy to confuse facts and inferences because people sometimes treat the latter as the former. Our implicit personality theories consist of influences and assumptions beyond what people have observed about others. Influences are not necessarily bad. In fact people must make influences to function in the world yet they risk misperception and misunderstanding if they don't distinguish the inferences from facts. Learning to make the distinction is an important communication skill.

TO GUARD AGAINST THE FUNDAMENTAL ATTRIBUTION ERROR

The next error in interpretation is the fundamental attribution error. This occurs when people overestimate the internal causes and underestimate external causes for undesirable behaviour from others and when people underestimate

the internal causes and overestimate the external causes for their own failings or bad behaviours. Engaging in the fundamental attribution error distorts perceptions of the people. Thus people need to guard against it in their interpersonal interactions.

To reduce the chances of falling victim to the fundamental attribution error, a person can prompt himself to look for external causes of behaviours from others that he does not appreciate. Instead of assuming that the unwanted behaviour reflects the other's motives or personality, one should ask himself, "What factors in the person's situation might lead to this behaviour?" One can ask the converse question to avoid underestimating internal influences on one's own undesirable actions. Instead of letting oneself off the hook by explaining a misdeed as caused by circumstances one couldn't control, one should ask himself, "What inside of me that is my responsibility influenced what I did?" Looking For external factors that influence others' communication and internal factors that influence one's own communication checks one's tendency to engage in the fundamental attribution error.

Emotional Barriers

Emotion plays a vital role in communication, most of the times it causes a barrier to effective communication. An individual passes through any of the emotional touch during communication. The major factors in communication barriers were hesitation, fear, nervousness, shyness, suspicion, mistrust, prejudice and all that hampers the communication process.

On a personal and professional scale our relations depend on how good we are in communicating our emotions, our knowledge and ideas. No matter how true or efficient we are, if we lack in proper communicative skills, our life will be a mess, both personally and professionally. Infact soft or social skills are those personal values and interpersonal skills that determine a person's ability to fit into a particular structure, such as a project team, a rock group, or a company. The skills include personality traits like emotional maturity, eagerness to learn, and willingness to share and embrace new ideas, as also our ability to listen. Emotions give meaning to our expressions. Oral communication is co-related with non-verbal communication or body language like eye contact, facial gestures, hand and body movement, etc. The course in soft skills has to give non-verbal communication its due importance.

Solutions to Overcome the Barriers to Emotions

Following are the guidelines for communicating emotions effectively

TO IDENTIFY THE EMOTIONS

One cannot communicate his feelings if one doesn't understand them. Thus, the first step in communicating emotions effectively is to identify what one feels. This is not always easy. For such, people may be alienated from their emotions, unable to recognize what they feel, especially if they feel multiple emotions at once. Overcoming this entails giving mindful attention to one's innerself. Just as some people learn to ignore their feelings, one can teach oneself to notice and heed them.

Another challenge to identifying emotions is sorting out complex mixtures of feeling. For example, one sometimes feels both anxious and hopeful. To recognize only that one feels hopeful is to overlook anxiety. To realize only that one feels anxious is to ignore the hopefulness one also feels. Recognizing the existence of both feelings allows one to tune in to oneself and to communicate accurately to others what one is experiencing.

When sorting out intermingled feelings it's useful to identify the primary or main feeling – the one or ones that are dominant in the moment. Doing this allows one to communicate clearly to others what is most important in one's emotional state.

TO CHOOSE HOW TO COMMUNICATE THE EMOTIONS

Once a person knows what he feels, that person is ready to decide how to express his emotions. The first choice facing him is whether he wants to communicate his emotions to particular people.

People may also decide not to communicate emotions because they prefer to keep some of their feelings private. This is a reasonable choice if the feelings they keep to themselves are not ones that others need to know in order to understand them and be in healthy relationships with them. They don't have a responsibility to bare their souls to everyone, nor are they required to tell all of their feelings even to their intimates.

If they decide they do want to communicate their emotions, then they should assess the different ways they might do that and select the one that seems likely to be the most effective. Four criteria can help the choice of how to express emotions. First, one should evaluate one's current state. If one is agitated or enraged, one may not be able to express oneself clearly and fairly. In moments of extreme emotionality, one's perceptions may be distorted, and one may say things that one doesn't mean. It is to remember that communication is irreversible – one cannot unsay what one has said. According to Daniel Goleman (1995b), it takes about 20 minutes for one to cleanse one's mind and body of anger. Thus, if a person is really angry or feeling other negative emotions, he may want to wait until he has cooled down so that he can discuss his feelings more fruitfully.

TO MONITOR THE SELF-TALK

A next guideline for communicating feelings effectively is to monitor one's self-talk. **Self-talk** is intrapersonal communication, or communication a person has with himself. One might say, "I shouldn't feel angry" or "I don't want to come across as a wimp by letting on how much that hurt." Thus, a person may talk himself out of or into feelings and out of or into ways of expressing his feelings.

Self-talk can work for the person or against him, depending on whether he manages it or it manages him. This point is stressed by Tom Rusk and Natalie Rusk in their book *Mind Traps* (1988). They assert that many people have self-defeating ideas that get in the way of their effectiveness and happiness. According to Rusks, "feelings are the key to personal change" (p. xix). Unless he learns to manage his feelings effectively, he cannot change patterns of behaviour that leave him stuck in ruts.

To manage his feelings, he must learn to monitor and control his self-talk. Psychologist Martin Seligman (1990) agrees with this point. According to Seligman, "our thoughts are not merely reactions to events; they change what ensues". In other words, the thoughts people communicate to themselves affect what happens in their lives. Therefore, it is worthwhile to develop skill in monitoring the self-talk so that people can choose how to think and feel.

Monitoring self-talk about feelings also allows them to gain more accurate and constructive understanding of themselves and their emotions. As Sally Planalp and Julie Fitness (2000) point out, our feelings and thoughts are interconnected. Put plainly, they say that "cognition relies on emotion, emotion relies on cognition" (p. 372). Thus how a person thinks about feelings affects his feelings and vice versa.

To apply this insight, he needs to learn to identify and challenge irrational thoughts about how he should feel and act. Irrational beliefs are debilitating ways of thinking about his emotions and, by extension, himself. These irrational beliefs hinder the people ability to manage and express emotions effectively.

TO RESPOND SENSITIVELY WHEN OTHERS COMMUNICATE EMOTIONS

A final guideline is to respond sensitively when others express their feelings to someone. Learning to communicate the emotions effectively is only half the process of communicating about emotions. A person also wants to become skilled in listening and responding to others when they share their feelings with him. Another mistake many people make when responding to others' expression of feelings is to try to solve the other person's problem or to make the feeling go away. Scholars who have studied gender (Tannen, 1990; Wood, 2001a) observe that the tendency to try to solve others' problem is more common in men than women. Helping the other person solve a problem may be appreciated, but usually it's not the first support a person needs when he or she is feeling strong emotions. What many people need is just the freedom to express what they are feeling to others.

Language Barriers

Language is the backbone of communication. It is a medium through which people communicate. Inadequate vocabulary, inappropriate structure of sentences is the barrier to effective communication. Similarly language in use should be apt, clear and vivid.

Solutions to Overcome Language Barriers

- The learners may be introduced to the sound system of English. Phonetic script may be introduced to them. Their attention may be drawn to the difference between the phonemes in their mother tongue of the target language. Most of the Indians make mistakes in English pronunciation because most of the Indian languages have a consistent relationship between the sound and the letters used to represent them. This is not always the case with English. So the use of phonetic script may be very useful to help learners overcome this difficulty.
- The second language learning situation in India does not provide the learners with situations to speak the language. So the teacher must create situation in the class. Group activity may be used effectively. The class may be divided into groups consisting of ten or twelve in each group. Each group may elect a leader who is to control the group activity. A topic is given for discussion by the group. Each member may be encouraged to contribute his share in the discussion.
- The use of composition can give the learners a chance to speak. This is very useful in lower classes. For example, the students may be taken to a garden. They may be initiated into a conversation through properly framed questions. Then they continue this conversation. At the end they may be asked to write what they have said.
- Dramatization may be used to train the learners in the art of speaking. This makes the students active and the class interesting. Each student may be assigned to play the role of a character.
- Dialogue pattern drill approach can be used to give the second language learners experience in listening and practice in speaking. Properly prepared dialogue based on an interesting story or incident is prepared. The difficult words are explained to the students. Then the dialogue is read. It is better to present it, acting out the various roles. It is repeated a number of times so that the second language learners memorize or internalize the dialogue. After this, speaking practice begins (S. Ramanathan, 2012).

CONCLUSIONS

All these need training and practice. “The skill of communicating effectively is rarely an inherited gift. The majority of us, not blessed with instinctive flair, can nevertheless develop the ability” (Scott ix). The importance of communication thus advances teaching of communicative and soft skills to a position of great relevance. What to speak, When to speak, How to speak and Why to speak are all important questions that need to be taken seriously and addressed justifiably through proper and relevant coaching of the ability (G. A. Ghanshyam Iyengar, 2011).

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