

Communication theory applied to the professional development of the communication student

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ABSTRACT

Teaching students to develop a professional identity for themselves involves using a combination of elements from (intercultural) communication theory, applied psycho- and sociolinguistics and technical language pedagogy. The article discusses how a refocusing of elements from Gudykunst's Anxiety/Uncertainty Management Theory (AUM) of Effective Communication on the problems the individual faces in becoming a mature, professional communicator is one means of assisting the communication course instructor to help students develop a professional identity. Additionally, we focus on the issue of communication and the importance of communicative competence in this process.

There is a need to stress the socio-cognitive approach to teaching language students professional communication. The socio-cognitive approach suggests that the ultimate reason for and aim of language learning is to develop a complexity of competences in foreign language learners that allows them: 1. to communicate 2. with a L1-L2 socio-cultural awareness and 3. to be able to use

L2 for their cognitive/professional development (Kramersch 1998). The competences required for this can be summarized as L2 literacy (Kasper 2000), which basically presupposes and incorporates four sub-competences: 1. functional linguistic competence, 2. academic language competence, 3. critical language skills and 4. socio-cultural language competence. (We can surely add electronic competence as number 5, which requires no further explanation.) If our students are equipped with this kit of L2 literacy tools, we can trust that they possess an efficient tool for developing communicative competencies that are required for high quality functioning in a multicultural professional environment. Each of the sub-competences would deserve further analysis, but presupposing that our students have already acquired basic L2 literacy, this paper will focus on the issue of communication and the importance of communicative competence for the development of the students' professional identity, in particular.

Professional communication courses should arm students with the understanding that there always exists a fluid relationship between themselves and the people in their work environment, and that the direction that relationship will take depends largely on them being capable of becoming their professional self. The student can only develop this capability by developing methods of cognition that will allow him/her to see themselves and their role in a given environment clearly. But this requires maturity, and maturity can only be developed through experience, over time. Maturity is, of course, an inconsistent variable that differs from individual to individual, both temporally and in degree. For this reason, we emphasize the social aspect of acquiring and using the linguistic tools we seek to provide our students through our courses, putting our students through a kind of 'apprenticeship' in public speaking which places them in specified situations and environments in which they must shape their message to be as realistic as possible. (Gee 1996)

Relying on the *experiential learning paradigm* (Nunan, 1991), we have our students work on authentic tasks and projects (i.e. pedagogical tasks), because we want to expose our students to the same kinds of situations they will face outside the classroom after graduating and gaining employment (i.e., we employ target tasks). (Long and Crookes 1992) We agree with Nunan (2001) in that if *pedagogical tasks* anticipate and enhance *target-tasks*, students' motivation to identify themselves with the pedagogical aims will noticeably increase. The apprenticeship they undergo has two primary benefits: 1) it affords them the possibility to mature as thinkers and speakers by challenging to think for themselves under the critical eye of their peers and an instructor, and 2) the assignments prepare them to handle the type of cognitive challenges faced daily in the real world which students are otherwise rarely exposed to before graduating from university. We teach this way, as, in our understanding, most communication on the professional level actually meets the definition of interpersonal communication. Specific definitions differ, but generally, interpersonal communication involves the management of messages for the purpose of creating meaning. (Littlejohn 1992)

Since we are teaching Hungarian students not only communication as such, but rather communication as a mode for ESP use, an understanding of how communication takes place between non-native speakers and native speakers, and especially those of how communication may take place between two non-native speakers, both using a second language as a means of interaction within a given professional context is vital. The bi-lingual or multi-lingual environment, evidently, has its own socio-cultural consequences, and students have to be well prepared to face the challenges both sets of environments bring. Roy and Starosta's (2001) words are particularly applicable here:

"Since meaning is born in a socio-cultural-historic context ..., given that knowledge and understanding of the world unfold through language ..., the way by which persons interpret communication patterns, stems from the historical situatedness in which the linguistic process emerges."

One could not agree more, but with the agreement there comes the question: Is communication between cultures *ab ovo* impossible? The answer, of course, is: no. Inversely, students have to be

made aware that cultural differences exist, and although they cannot (and should not) be eliminated, the gap between them can be bridged by properly acquired and adequately used communicative techniques (F. Silye 2003). Houser (2003) notes that the related issues of audience identification and analysis are crucial components of successful communication, and both are emphasized in the material we present in class that students must master.

The inherent danger we saw in designing our courses for students not majoring in English language studies was that the results would better serve what Speier (1973) defined as conversation, i.e. people seeking “each other out for the predominant purpose of talking”, rather than having speech in the classroom which developed communication in such a way as to enable students to become professional ‘strategic agents’, a term Wiwczaroski (2005) borrows and transforms from James (1996). By this, Wiwczaroski means individuals who can be changed enough in their thinking strategies to provide them with the tools of reflection and empowerment they need in order to effectively communicate for personal professional success. We did not want to develop good conversationalists, but focused effective communication professionals who use ESL as a means to an end.

As stated, students learning the tools of professional communication must approach each communication task armed with the understanding that there always exists a fluid relationship with one’s audience. Vital to establishing this relationship is the ability of the speaker to fully utilize his/her own uniqueness as a professional, in order to have the greatest positive impact on the listener. Most beginners at public speaking are hampered in their ability to recognize their own roles in establishing this relationship by their lack of a ‘professional identity’. Involved in the creation of such an identity are the elements of professionalism, open-mindedness, self-discipline, confidence and experience. Teaching students who lack any public speaking experience to develop a professional identity for themselves involves using a combination of elements from (intercultural) communication theory, applied psycho- and sociolinguistics and technical language pedagogy, but these alone are not enough to initiate the average student into the world of professional communication.

We have been struggling with how to best address the problem of developing a professional identity in our students for a decade. This element of professional growth became a focus of our attention because of our socio-cognitive approach to teaching communication. Questions to which we wanted answers included: How could we open our students’ minds to strategies which promote professional social interaction in order to perform well in real-life imitating tasks when they had no real-life job experiences? How could we develop trust in our students, when the educational culture many of them grew up in precluded, even rejected, students’ communication of original thinking or opinions to instructors? How could we build the self-confidence they needed in order that they might develop proactive communicative strategies which rely on aggressively projecting original arguments and ideas, so that the students might successfully engage the critique the professional world brings with it? These questions had one point in common: their solution required that the students take the crucial steps necessary to begin to develop mentally from adolescents into adults. Yet, how could we develop mature thinking in immature thinkers?

One of the characteristics of student life that initially caught Wiwczaroski's attention after arriving in Hungary 10 years ago was the organization of the students from each class year into subgroups (csoportok). Although any researcher must admit to variance between groups, there generally exists in these subgroups a type of special intergroup communication, based on strong intergroup identity. Tajfel (1978) discusses the importance of social identity, and Gudykunst (1985) developed from this a model of intergroup communication that we feel applies to our Hungarian students. Gudykunst’s model is applicable because it defines the basis for interpersonal communication, especially as relates to anxiety and uncertainty in communicating with members of other groups, whom Gudykunst terms ‘strangers’. Rogers (1999) discusses the role of the stranger in intercultural communication research in detail. We have chosen Gudykunst, because

his thinking best reflects the twin stimuli of anxiety and uncertainty our students face when they first enter our classroom. At that moment, the majority of our students are being confronted with the challenge of speaking before an audience in a formal way for the first time. These feelings are further compounded in Wiwczarowski's classes by the fact that he is a native speaker, a textbook example of a 'stranger' in intercultural communication theory research.

Gudykunst was also influenced by Doise's (1986) analysis of how communication and culture interrelate. Doise argues that there are four levels at work: the individual, interpersonal, intergroup and cultural. The individual level involves those factors that motivate one to communicate at all, i.e. the creation and interpretation of messages all individuals are involved in everyday, which define the line between their self-concept and their need to be included in a group. The interpersonal level refers to the level of intimacy we allow ourselves when dealing with others communicatively, whether at home or at work. The intergroup level influences our messages and their creation by appealing to our social identities and collective self-esteem. The cultural level involves those factors that lead individuals to communicate similarly or differently across cultures. Gudykunst built on these points, among others, in developing his Anxiety/Uncertainty Management Theory (AUM) of Effective Communication.

There are many other theories under debate in the field of communication theory about how one relates to others in various social settings, whether within groups or with strangers. (Littlejohn 1992) There are even theories about how the image of the self may affect interaction with others. (Berger 1979) What we needed was an effective means of identifying and managing the creation of a new self in our students, in order to allow for professional communication to replace conversation as their focus for using English in their professional lives. After much reflection, we found that by refocusing AUM on the problems of achieving a mature, professional identity, we could develop strategies for assisting students in this process. AUM is particularly relevant, because the individual is normally only limited in self-growth and development by emotional (psychological) dilemmas. These arise whenever an individual confronts a new problem that requires action, and is unsure of its outcome.

AUM discusses the elements of anxiety and uncertainty as prohibitory factors to effective communication. Although explanations vary widely, anxiety is best defined as the affective (emotional) equivalent of uncertainty, which is based on the anticipation of negative consequences of one's actions. (Based on Stephan & Stephan 1985) Anxiety is a natural element influencing the communication process, especially in situations new to students, such as when they have to give their first professional presentations in front of an audience.

However, anxiety is not always a negative factor. Janis (1985) even argues that anxiety can, though strictly at moderate levels, lead to "adaptive processes". These processes, of course, reduce anxiety levels enough to facilitate learning. Gudykunst (1985) writes that anxiety is bridged by time and the development of trust. Trust, in our opinion, relates not only to the stranger becoming a familiar, but to an unfamiliar situation becoming a familiar one. Trust brings confidence, mainly in the intention of a stranger (other), in the reaction of one's environment to one, or in the outcome of a situation for the actor. Trust is that element which overcomes anxiety, but which cannot exist without anxiety's initial presence. Anxiety is therefore something which is dialectic, involving both fear and trust.

The incidence of trust on the part of the speaker initiates the creation of an environment in which basic communication may take place. This environment is based on the direct extension of trust, which we would consider to be the positive perception of a stranger's discourse. When a speaker feels that responses to a message are positive, even if their intuition is false, he has taken the first step towards building understanding. Effective communication is, however, more demanding, as it involves what Rogers and Kincaid (1981) call "mutual understanding" and McLeod and Chaffee (1973) term "accuracy".

We now arrive at the problem of mature thinking, as to build mature thinking in the communication student requires not only that one overcome one's anxiety and uncertainty to communicate specific messages, but also that the student learn to develop thinking strategies which are based on the proper assessment of one's audience and its capability to properly receive, evaluate and interpret one's message. Gadamer's words are noteworthy here:

"In a communication context, *sensus communis* signifies making 'communal sense' of one's listeners while *judgement* involves cultivating a capacity for saying the right thing to one's audience depending on the context. *Taste* involves a sense of timing and attention to what is appropriate." (Gadamer, 1989)

The development of such abilities in the student requires a level of self-awareness and an awareness of otherness that allows the speaker to manage their uncertainty to communicate effectively, even if the speaker is unsure of an outcome. Gudykunst (1995) terms this level of self-awareness mindfulness. Students first attempting to professionally communicate usually fall outside this criterion for effective communication, as they remain unaware of their behavior, i.e. their appearance to others.

We teach our students that they always have a 'stage presence' when they give a speech, and that they must work to enhance their public personae as much as possible, in order to build credibility with their professional peers. The problem is that the students' inexperience, especially their lack of work history, precludes their being able to step outside themselves and to see themselves as they truly are when speaking. Most people have little knowledge of what they sound like in front of an audience, and are obviously uncomfortable in front of one. Especially when speaking extemporaneously, most students fail to convince even the most uncritical listener, much less demonstrate any natural talent for speaking. Of course, this only comes with years of careful practice. Langer (1989) correctly posits the theory that most beginners communicate mindlessly or automatically. Yet, this is often a problem in the professional communicative setting, in which precision and an aura of command of special knowledge are expected. Our experience in the classroom shows that it is indeed the case that the majority of our students speak in class in a careless manner, even when more focused speech is demanded, and we must therefore motivate our students to transform their unpolished efforts into communication that exudes the kind of confidence that comes with thorough preparation and practice. For this reason, we must teach students everything from proper posture, gesticulation, articulation, and voice management (e.g., pitch, rate), to the use of note cards or extemporaneous speech.

Good speakers are involved in a form of automatic information processing which involves many levels of cognitive activity, albeit attention, awareness, intention, control, or reevaluation, restructuring or interpretation in general. Langer argues that the effective speaker must be able to generate new categories of thought, be open to new stimuli, and become aware of the many degrees of perspective. We would argue that these latter categories, taken together with the processing elements we discussed previously, go far to reflecting maturity in a person's cognitive and communicative activities. All these processes inform mindfulness. When we are mindful, we do not focus on outcomes, but on the audience, and therefore are open to the subtleties of the communicative and receptive acts. We see our behaviors reflected in the reactions of our audience members. We can recognize that our audience responds differently to our messages, and interprets them differently, than we can or do, and this understanding allows us to see more clearly the communicative choices we have which can help us to create the response and interpretive intentions in our audience we are seeking. Recognition of one's own ability to 'feel' an audience, especially in cases when this feeling is validated by the audience's reaction to a message, creates self-esteem, which abrogates anxiety, and leads to professional growth. Self-esteem building in the communication classroom should therefore be the greatest goal of professional language communication courses.

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