

CLASSROOM COMMUNICATION IN THE ONLINE ENVIRONMENT - PERCEPTIONS AND DIRECTIONS OF ACTION

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Abstract

Communication, a transfer of information between a sender and a receiver, as a result of which the information transmitted and received is understood and interpreted in the same way by the two parties involved, can be revisited from the perspective of the digital context.

Classroom communication aims to produce changes, positive transformations in terms of knowledge, affectivity and behaviour, of the personality profile of the subjects. Based on this assumption, the following questions are outlined: How can the online communication process be optimised so that the message sent is clearly understood? What is the impact of the online environment on classroom communication?

The current paper represents an investigative approach that aims to provide data on the students' perceptions of online communication-related issues and effects.

Key words: *Classroom communication; Online environment; Stimulating context ; Constructive feedback.*

1. Introduction

Understood in its broadest sense, as a transactional act, unavoidable in interaction contexts, communication becomes essential, i.e., the bedrock of both the personal and social life of the individual.

In the digital age, even the definitions given to the term *communication* undergo constant reshaping. Some authors (notably, Briggs, Burke, 2005) highlight the evolution of the term. Thus, if the basic meaning of the concept was: *offering, transfer or exchange of ideas and knowledge*, etc. through speech, writing or other signs, later, *communication* was described as *the process of transmitting information, especially through electronic or mechanical techniques*. The difference is huge, revealing the role that modern technology plays in communication and information nowadays.

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As a rule, communication leads to a change of the present state of affairs, in terms of both the relationship between the participants and their relation with the external environment (changing the way of approaching a matter, triggering action or adoption of certain behaviour, etc.).

In interpersonal communication, the sender and the receiver go through several stages, each imposing specific concerns for the participants:

a) *Coding the message* - it consists in selecting certain symbols, able to express the meaning of a message; words, images, facial or body expressions, signals or gestures are symbols of communication;

b) *Message transmission* - it means carrying across the encoded message from the sender to the receiver through communication channels (visual, auditory, tactile or electronic);

c) *Decoding and interpretation* - it refers to deciphering the transmitted symbols and, subsequently, explaining their meaning;

d) *Filtering* - it consists in distorting the meaning of a message due to physiological or psychological limitations; physiological filters are determined by total or partial deficiencies (visual, hearing and gait loss or impairment, etc.) and they limit the ability to perceive stimuli and therefore to understand the message; psychological filters may be due to past experiences or sensitivities, predispositions;

e) *Feedback* - it fully rounds the communication process. Admittedly, the sender verifies the extent to which the message has been understood correctly or filtered, the success of communication depending on the adequacy of the content and form of the message to the receiver's perception and understanding, to his/her mood.

Classroom communication can be considered "an axiomatic principle of education that involves an educational message formulated by the subject of education (teacher), able to provoke the formative response of the object of education, assessable in terms of external and internal inverse mapping" (Cristea, 2000 - our translation).

In a more convincing definition, classroom communication is a complex, multifaceted and multi-channel transfer of information between two entities (individuals or groups) that simultaneously and successively assume the roles of receivers and transmitters in the context of the instructive-educational process. Classroom communication is instrumental, directly involved in supporting a systematic learning process (Cucuș, 2006).

Classroom communication aims to produce changes, positive transformations in terms of knowledge, affectivity and behaviour, in the personality structure of the subjects. In this regard, it should be:

- *persuasive* - the adoption of an idea, behaviour by the subjects, based on arguments;

- *able to eliminate breakdowns and obstacles* inherent to communication, which are related to the personality of the two poles of communication, to the promoted psychosocial relations, to the transmission channel;

- *efficient* - a process related to the quality of the message sent: the content received should be identical or close to that intended by the teacher; high degree of

responsiveness, use of corroboration and balance between the communicated information content and the available means; accuracy of the language, using metaphors and imagery to be as persuasive as possible; it depends on the mode of transmission, ensuring the expressiveness of speech, through the appropriate tone and accent used; adjustment of the sender to the quality of the receivers, respecting the dialogue partners, and observing the ground rules: to know how to listen, to know how to analyze, to know how to express yourself and to know how to control, to monitor the quality and performance of the message and its effects (Abric, 2002).

How do we optimise the process of online classroom communication so that the message sent is clearly understood? How to prevent the faulty decoding and misinterpretation of the transmitted symbols? How to proceed if the subjective experiences, the sensitivities of the interlocutor distort the meaning of the transmitted message? What are the ways in which we can have an objective feedback of the communication process in the online environment?

These are some questions that underpin our current study, carried out from the perspective of the teacher who aims at streamlining classroom communication.

2. Communication types

Undoubtedly, communication is interaction. Being a mode of interaction, it presents itself as a dynamic phenomenon that presupposes transformation, which means that it is subsumed under a process of mutual influence between several interlocutors.

Various classifications of types of communication have been put forward in the mainstream literature. In what follows, we shall dwell on two types of communication, of relevance for the online teaching context.

2.1. Nonviolent communication

Nonviolent communication is a method conceived and developed by Marshall B. Rosenberg, PhD in psychology. Nonviolent communication provides us with a series of tools that enable us to move from the language of criticism, blame and claims to the language of compassion, understanding and mutual respect; it supports us in building healthy and long-lasting relationships and in managing our emotional lives. It enhances communication and encourages the use of language that prevents and peacefully manages conflicts when they occur (Rosenberg, 2003).

Nonviolent communication "has as its first condition the attempt not to impose on the interlocutor our system of values, attitudes, motivations, but, on the contrary, to try to accept his/her system, to take it for granted, without a critical evaluation (...)". Empathic understanding involves "a sensitive, adapted and non-evaluative response to the other's feelings and experiences. Empathy consists, essentially, in the capacity to be in someone else's place, without being, however, an effect of the massive identification with the interlocutor" (Georgescu, 2007, p. 149 - our translation).

Among the indicators of empathic deficiency and defensive positioning, the following can be listed (Baban, 2001, pp. 23-24): questions such as "Why?"; brisk interruptions of the other; norm-governed behaviour, ethical judgment: "You are

inadequate, defensive, unable to see what is really happening”; cliché interventions: ”What are you thinking about?”; providing solutions; evaluating, blaming; moralising; analysing; commanding, giving orders; praising; threatening, warning: ”If it happens again ...”; conditioning ”I will value you only if you will ...”, etc.

2.2. Persuasive communication

Persuasive communication occurs in the decision-making process in order to orient it towards the desired decision by changing the attitude of the decision-maker (the receiver), provided that the receiver does not feel in any way constrained by the sender. The sender (the persuasive agent) creates a new context through which his/her message is presented as the best solution (Melnic, 2011). Persuasive communication, according to the author, aims to determine the subject to comply with the persuasive message by:

a) *adjustment to the situation (role play)*: there are roles that the subject plays despite the fact that they might contradict his/her attitudes, on account of the need to adjust to the situation;

b) *conformity to the self-assigned self-image*: it is featured by a specific technique, i.e. the step-by-step request called ”foot-in-the-door”. The subject faces a modest first request, difficult to refuse, in order to involve him/her and make him/her respond favourably. There follows a second request, the real, important one, which, although it was the original objective, was not revealed at the time of the first, modest request. The success of requests in stages (sequences) depends on the time lapse between them. By complying with the first request, the subject assigns a certain image/attribute, attitude, which s/he undertakes to follow by accepting a second request. The subject is convinced that the acceptance of the first request was made by virtue of his/her own personal characteristics;

c) *involvement of the subject in the decision making and his/her accountability*: the specific technique is ”low-balling”, and the fact that it is easier to catch. Compliance with a small, difficult-to-refuse request is obtained, followed by the actual request. Unlike the previously mentioned technique, the costs of the request rather than the actual request are hidden initially;

d) *the perceptual contrast* refers to the ratio between form and substance, materialised in the fact that a request seems smaller if it is presented immediately after a higher one and not directly. The specific technique is ”door-in-the-face”, an exaggeratedly high request is followed by a modest, actual request. If the high request is initially rejected by the phenomenon of self-image dissonance, the subject tends to comply with the next request in order to remove the negative effects of the rejection.

Communication is an interactive, relational act. Communication must function as a circular system and self-regulate. In other words, communication involves interaction focused on feedback on the information conveyed. As far as feedback is concerned, we may state that:

- it is a very important component of communication. T. K. Gamble and M. Gamble define feedback as ”all verbal and nonverbal messages that a person conveys consciously or unconsciously in response to another person's communication”

(Gamble, Gamble, 1993, p. 151). Feedback is needed to determine the extent to which the message has been understood and accepted;

- it is a way to help someone think about changing their behaviour, it means providing someone with data about their behaviour and its effects;

- feedback helps the individual to find out if their own behaviour has had the intended effect, it informs them if they have not missed their “target” as they are trying to achieve their goals;

- it is essential for effective communication and it is the last stage in fully rounding communication. Effective feedback helps us become aware of what we are doing and how we act, giving us the opportunity to change our behaviour. It should be provided in a gentle and supportive way;

- supportive feedback implies that the issue that the other person considers important, significant is equally appreciated by the listener (receiver) as important and significant.

In order to streamline communication in general, and classroom communication in particular, feedback plays a particularly important role. In addition to feedback, there are many other factors that impact on the effectiveness of classroom communication. The identification of these factors in the students' view represents the rationale of our investigative approach, which we shall present in what follows.

3. Efficiency of online classroom communication - an investigative approach

3.1. Main objective

The constative research aims to investigate the opinions of the prospective (pre-service) teachers on the effectiveness of classroom communication in the online environment.

3.2. Sampling and methods

To conduct our investigation, we used a sample of subjects consisting of 97 students from the following faculties: Faculty of Social Sciences and Faculty of Law, University of Craiova, who are also enrolled in the Teacher Training Programme with a view to certifying the teaching competences, level I (Bachelors), 2nd year.

We used the questionnaire-based survey as a research method, which was accompanied by the appropriate tools. The questionnaire administered to the students included 14 items, closed-ended questions (most of them) and open-ended questions alike.

Regarding the structure of the questionnaire, some of its items are dichotomous, others require subjects to prioritise various aspects, and the third category of items uses the Lickert scale, students being asked to express their opinion on an abstract scale, marked by numerical values from 1 to 5, the semantic meaning assigned to the items being "not at all", "to a very small extent", "to a small extent", "to a large extent", "to a very large extent". These were supplemented by two others: "I don't know/can't appreciate", "I don't answer", to capture the students' indecision or unwillingness to answer.

In terms of content, the questionnaire aimed to collect data on the difficulties encountered, expectations, requirements, suggestions that the pre-service teachers outline in relation to the conduct of their teachers, in order to streamline classroom communication on digital platforms.

3.3. Results and interpretation

Below, we shall present a selection of the answers provided by the subjects to the items of the questionnaire, designed and administered in order to provide a clearer picture of online teaching. We mention that the answers collected and analysed were provided only by students who frequently attended the online courses (on digital platforms).

The answers to the question "In your opinion, what were the main hindrances of online communication?" are summarized in Table 1 and represented in Figure 1.

Table 1. Main hindrances of online communication

| Categories | Frequency | Percentage |
|--|-----------|------------|
| students' access to computer/smartphone/tablet technology, software, poor Internet connection) | 20 | 20.61 |
| low level of digital competence among students | 19 | 19.59 |
| maintaining students' motivation | 18 | 18.56 |
| high level of stress associated with video and audio exposure | 14 | 14.43 |
| low level of digital competence among teachers | 10 | 10.30 |
| time management and organisation, considering the workload and the range of tasks to be solved | 10 | 10.30 |
| no difficulties encountered | 6 | 6.19 |

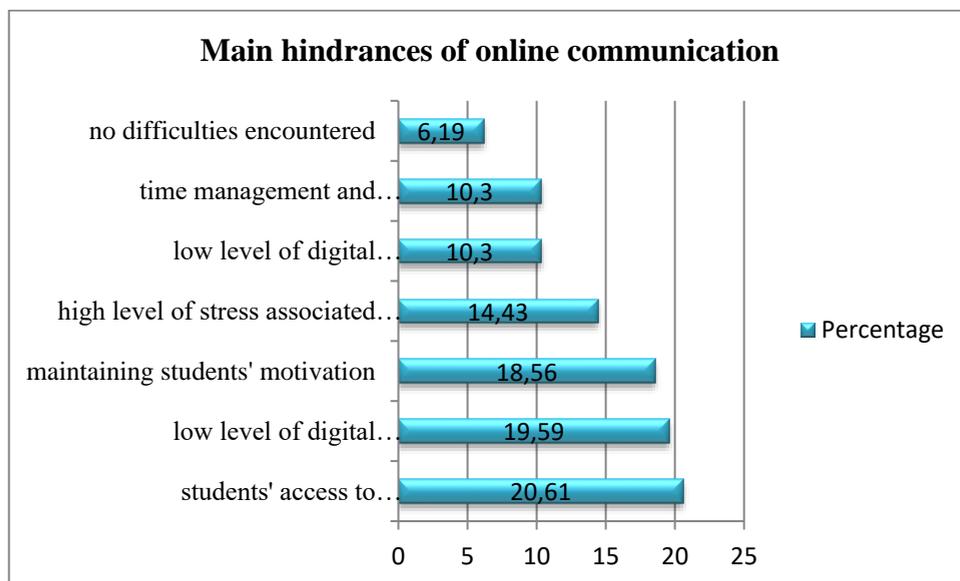


Figure 1. Main hindrances of online communication

The answers to the question "Have you been contacted and encouraged by the teacher to participate in online learning activities?" run as follows:

1. Yes - 54.64%
2. No - 24.74%
3. No answer - 20.61%

Regarding the perception of the quality of the tasks received online, as expressed by the students in the sample, it is found that more than half of the number of subjects (63.91%) appreciate the tasks as *interesting, useful, appropriate*, allowing them to solve the problem situations, other students (25.77%) considering the tasks, as a whole, to be *unattractive, inappropriate*, whereas 10.22% of the students chose the variant "I don't know".

Another item asked the subjects to identify the extent to which the teachers' assessment/responses/observations in relation to the fulfilled tasks uploaded on the digital platforms matter. We present, in the following table (Table 2), jointly with the graphic representation (Figure 2), the results of the data interpretation.

Table 2. The extent to which the teachers' assessment/responses/observations in relation to the fulfilled tasks are considered useful by the students

| Extent | Frequency | Percentage |
|------------------------|-----------|------------|
| Not at all | 4 | 4.12 |
| To a very small extent | 9 | 9.28 |
| To a small extent | 12 | 12.37 |
| To a large extent | 28 | 28.87 |
| To a very large extent | 29 | 29.89 |
| I don't know | 8 | 8.25 |
| I don't answer | 7 | 7.22 |

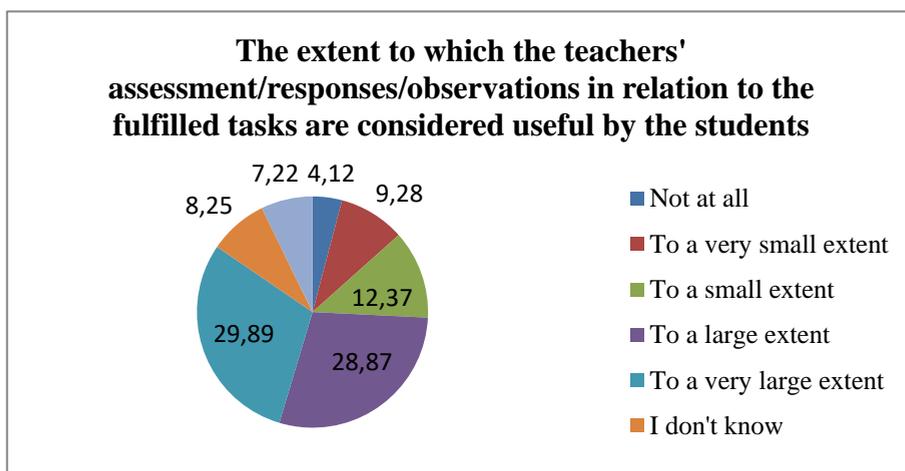


Figure 2. The extent to which the teachers' assessment/responses/observations in relation to the fulfilled tasks are considered useful by the students

The subjects in the sample consider the conduct of the teacher as a prerequisite for academic success. In this context, the subjects considered the following aspects to be particularly important:

Table 3. Teacher's conduct – important aspects according to the subjects of the research

| Teacher's conduct | Frequency | Percentage |
|---|-----------|------------|
| Ensuring emotional comfort | 89 | 91.75 |
| Speech accuracy | 91 | 93.81 |
| Organising, coordinating, facilitating the learning activity of students | 83 | 85.57 |
| Stimulating students' interest and motivation | 88 | 90.72 |
| Providing and eliciting feedback (the teacher asks questions to check if students have understood the new content, and provides feedback on progress) | 95 | 97.93 |
| Concern for creating problem situations that stimulate curiosity and invite reflection (during the online activity) | 76 | 78.35 |

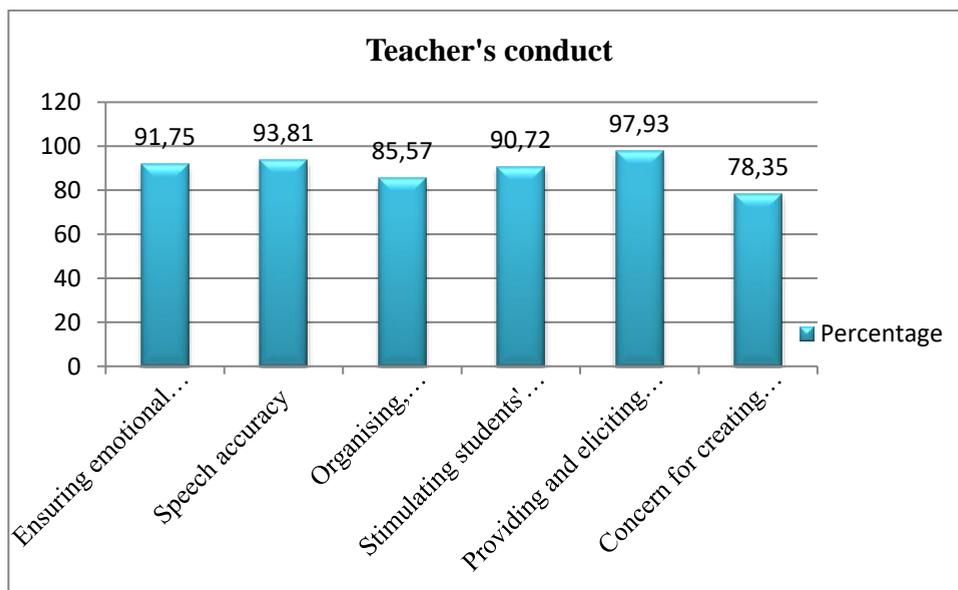


Figure 3. Teacher's conduct – important aspects according to the subjects of the research

The data show that almost all the subjects (97.93%) appreciate that they need feedback regarding task fulfillment, while stimulating interest and motivation (90.72) is another important aspect of the teacher's conduct.

Out of the advantages/disadvantages that the subjects outlined regarding the role of online communication in securing academic success, we highlight the most common ones in the list (Table 4):

Table 4. The advantages/disadvantages outlined by students regarding the role of online communication in securing academic success

| | |
|---------------|--|
| Advantages | Speed in transmitting information |
| | Lack of geographical and spatial limitation |
| | Better organisation of the schedule |
| | Exploring new ways of learning |
| | Comfort (“the best thing about online courses is that we can attend a course in the comfort of our home study room”) |
| | Written/posted feedback on task fulfillment |
| Disadvantages | Open interaction between students and teachers, with no time and space constraints |
| | Greater consumption of time and energy |
| | Communication requires digital skills |
| | Connection technical difficulties |
| | Large volume of work, the wide range of tasks to be fulfilled |
| | Video exposure of the privacy of one's home |
| | Difficulties in perceiving nonverbal messages and gestures |

5. Conclusions

The virtual communication environment can have both advantages and disadvantages. Computer-mediated communication can lead to increased negative tone, low assertiveness and depersonalisation (*Journal of Psychology*, <https://ultrapsihologie.ro/2015/02/02/comunicarea-virtuala-vs-realitate/>).

In order to communicate effectively in an online environment, it is necessary to send a clear and concise message so as to avoid confusion. In order to achieve this goal, both the way of communication (the degree of concordance between the verbal, nonverbal and paraverbal elements of the message) and the attitude of the actors involved (the extent to which an assertive attitude in communication is manifested) are important. In what follows, we shall enlarge upon some paraverbal features on which the effectiveness of communication in the online environment depends:

- *Articulation* - the art of speaking intelligibly and uttering appropriate sounds; diction depends on the correct and complete articulation of the consonants and on the voicing of the vowels. Sometimes, although there are no articulation problems, the accent may not be well used (more intense and higher-pitched pronunciation of a syllable in a word or of a word in a syntactic structure or phrase). Emphasis plays an important role in changing the meaning of words and inducing collateral messages to the one transmitted through words; articulation is an important

aspect of direct communication, it becomes all the more essential in online communication;

- *The rhythm* of speech is given by the speed of the spoken words; in the video communication, the teacher must vary the speed of pronouncing the words according to the content and the overall importance of the message;

- *The pauses* between the words and phrases convey clues both about the intentions and discursive attitudes of the teacher and about his/her emotional state; short pauses parse ideas in a sentence, and long ones mark the end of sentences; tactical breaks can emphasise essential words or ideas, others require a moment of meditation, of remembrance;

- The “use” of statements in concrete everyday situations” is recommended (Dancu, 1999, p. 76). In other words, the meaning of words always depends on the context in which they are embedded.

The difficulties that may arise in the communication process are reflected in the misunderstanding or misinterpretation of the message by the receivers.

When preparing online classroom communication, it is recommended to take into account a series of factors (Table 5):

Table 5. Questions that lead to communication efficiency

| Streamlining communication through questions | |
|---|---|
| Who? | What is the target group? What are the interests, concerns and values of this group? |
| What? | What exactly do we want to communicate: what is the result we expect from communication? |
| How? | By what methods will we convey the message: since each method has its specificity, do we have to think about how we convey the information in order to prepare an appropriate response? |
| When? | Timing is essential in online communication. There may be factors that could negatively influence communication, such as: time slot (according to the effort curve, a time slot in which energy is low would require more activating strategies), the emotional state of the interlocutor, time pressure, lack of information, etc. |
| Why? | In order to draw the attention of the interlocutors, we should inform them on the purpose and objectives pursued at the beginning of the course. |

To be effective, communication must function as a circular system and self-regulate. Correct communication involves flexibility of roles, interaction and not mere transfer (Abric, 2002, p. 32).

Performance in online communication is significantly influenced by the following factors:

- a) setting clear and realistic objectives, easy to achieve in the time available;
- b) awareness of the audience expectations, of their level and psychological characteristics; also, it is recommended that opportunities for additional questions should be provided to clarify the message at all times (Flahavan, Rudick, 2001);

c) building a favourable stimulating environment in terms of communication; an environment in which communication is encouraged is highly recommended (for example, jokes and personal experiences encourage trust, foster a receptive and creative learning environment” (Hrastinski, 2008);

d) speech planning;

e) manifestation of an empathic attitude to secure efficient communication;

f) building a fair ratio between the information and redundancy of the message;

g) active reception of the interlocutor's feedback;

h) continuous adjustment to the situation of communication.

Furthermore, in order to optimise online communications, other suggestions, directions of action can be outlined: (https://www.umass.edu/oapa/sites/default/files/pdf/handbooks/teaching_and_learning_online_handbook.pdf).

Regarding the use of visual materials in virtual communication, they should complement the verbal message, in other words, in the preparation of visual materials we should start from the assumption that they have the role of guiding, facilitating correlations and connections (Graur, 2001, p. 43).

Online communication is essential in the current education system, the use and assistance provided by the new technologies becoming a priority and top ranking necessity in this context.

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