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The Communication between Students and Teachers: Barriers and the Ways to Overcome them

Introduction

It is widely believed that the level of communication competence affects the quality of life of an individual (McCroskey, 1982). Effective communication can be impeded by obstacles called communication barriers. In order for interpersonal communication to be effective, everybody needs to develop his/her own communication competences, among others, by becoming aware of the existence of communication barriers, as well as by actively working on overcoming these barriers.

One of the basic competences in the teaching profession are communication competences (Jagielska et al., 2019; Bakic-Tomic et al., 2015). Barriers in the process of communication significantly impede and limit the communication of the teacher and students, which often results in low effects in the process of teaching – learning. A reflective teacher, striving for professionalism, should be aware of his own communication barriers and barriers on the part of students. In the modern world, in which permanent change is the only certainty, a reflective teacher (Schön, 1987) who analyzes his actions, in uncertain and exceptional situations, looks for solutions adequate to the current situation, is desirable. On the way to professionalization, the teacher should constantly reflectively and critically watch his work, develop his competences. Pedagogical thought assumes that the stronger the teacher's and the students' relationships are, the more positive they are, the more students feel motivated to strive for better learning results, and emotions play a special role in the process of building relationships with students. Therefore, it is worth undertaking the effort to break the communication barriers to strengthen relationships with students and improve teachers' style of work.

Communication competences and communication barriers

Communication competences are related to knowledge, skill and motivation to use the language in a way that is adequate to the given situation and adapted to the social role of the speakers, as well as the ability to adapt the message to the recipient (his capabilities, skills, social position, etc.) (Hymes, 1966; Canale, 1983). Communication skills are commonly associated with the ability to precisely and clearly express

and understand the interlocutor's statements. A language user engages his own cognitive, emotional and social capabilities in order to select appropriate language structures for the intentions of his speech, situation and recipient. The effectiveness of communication depends on the level of integration of these possibilities.

An important element of communication competence is the ability to overcome communication barriers. Communication barriers are all those factors that distort, hinder or prevent communication between the sender and the recipient of a statement. These barriers may be physical, cultural or psychological.

Cultural barriers

When we look for the word culture in the dictionary it has some definitions. If we check the Cambridge Dictionary we find culture defined as "the way of life, especially the general customs and beliefs, of a particular group of people at a particular time." Cultural barriers are therefore considered as the consequence of differences associated with norms, values or behaviours predetermined by the cultural group or community to which we belong. Therefore this aspect is probably the one that gives our way of communication the highest level of diversity and complexity. As a result, we might find some discrepancies related to values, interests, traditions, or knowledge when we are trying to communicate with each other. Also having this level of complexity and diversity has an important influence for us as teachers. Depending on the situation we may have to focus on one specific aspect of culture or another. For example, when we are teaching to Erasmus+ students the main cultural aspect that we are focusing is probably the nationality. However, the main cultural aspect that every single teacher in the world has to be always aware of is the age or experience difference, also called generational barrier. It does not matter what type of teacher you are, most likely you will be from a different generation than your students. Depending on the level of education that you are teaching, this difference changes. One of the most obvious example, is when we compare kindergarden or pre-school teacher to any other type of teachers. Just think for a moment on how many times a day has a kindergarden or a primary teacher has to overcome this specific barrier each time he or she wants to explain or tell something to their pupils. However, watching how these professionals deliver such incredible examples of how to deal with this barrier can make us think that it is an easy task. But this impression is very far from reality.

Before approaching these barriers as teachers, we should start with a more general point of view. First of all, if we want to overcome these barriers, we must focus on developing empathy (Rani, 2016). What we are trying to explain is how to familiarize ourselves with other people's cultures and backgrounds is the first step. For achieving this goal, we suggest some tips on creating empathy that can be found in our presentation. Taking back our role as teachers we would like to emphasize how we should not only just respect these different cultural backgrounds and teach our pupils how to respect each other. Instead, we can go one step forward and study these differences found in our classroom and use them in our lessons. And consequently, our pupils will not just learn how to respect and be aware of all the different cultures presented in our daily context. Also, they will learn about them.

Furthermore, depending on how we develop this practice we can even make our pupils protagonist of their own learning process by making present or explain their own culture to the rest of the group.

Overcoming this type of barrier can be considered one of the biggest challenges in our daily lives as teachers. But it is probably one of the most relevant of them all. As I have mentioned before our students will need to develop some level of empathy in order to be able to communicate with each other. If we study this “empathy” aspect a little more we may discover it involves many other ideas that are key for them. Being able to view themselves and the world through the eyes of others and as a result developing the ability to communicate with others is often recognized as part of the success of many students (Cotton, 1992). Furthermore, when we take a look at the European Union’s key competences for lifelong learning we can also appreciate this idea. For example, understanding the codes of conduct and rules of communication generally accepted in different societies and environment is an essential aspect for achieving successful interpersonal relations and social participation. This idea is present in the personal, social and learning to learn competence. If we continue in this same competence we will also appreciate the relevance of acquiring respect towards others cultures. However, probably the most obvious competence related to cultural barriers in communication is the cultural awareness and expression competence. Even in the name of this competence we can appreciate the relevance of being familiar with other cultures for our students.

Psychological barriers

When we talk about psychological barriers we are referring to any aspect related to the state of mind of every person participating in the communication. First, the most obvious solution to overcome them is basically avoiding this feeling when we want to deliver a message. However, as teachers, we must avoid any type of attitude of disinterest or unwillingness. As students we may have experienced such a situation more than once, so we should know how frustrating it is. It can be even a logical idea if you are not interested in what you are teaching that you pretend to make your students interested in it. Another very common psychological barrier in our classroom will be probably a lack of attention. There are several techniques for dealing with it and we suggest some of them, that we consider more useful for teachers (Jiménez & Hernández). On the one hand, we have the stimulating contrast, there are three types:

- Sensory contrast: changing your voice tone or use visual or auditory contrast. But we must be careful with them because we can only use them sporadically and ONLY with a likelihood of success.
- Thematic contrast: it is basically changing drastically the theme of the conversation, for example asking about what they did during the weekend, telling an anecdote...
- Procedural contrasts: it does not matter the type of activity that you are developing if it is in excess it will end up being very boring. However, you can avoid it changing your teaching procedure, adding new elements...

Digital generation

This last barrier is considered a type of psychological barrier, however, we can see some characteristics of cultural barriers as well. It is related to how technology has influenced recent generations and its effect on the way they communicate and process information. Based on that Mark Prensky (2001) established a difference between digital immigrants and digital natives. Teachers will be in the first group because although they have learnt to manage and use these new and their minds have adapted they still have some kind of an “accent”. It is similar to learning a new language when you are an adult versus learning it as a little kid. Because of this the students are considered digital natives who have been raised with all these new technologies. Some of the main differences of the new students that Prensky highlights are:

- They thrive on instant gratification and frequent rewards,
- Prefer games to “serious” work,
- Prefer graphics before text,
- Like to parallel process and multi-task,
- They function best when networked,
- Prefer random access (like hypertext),
- Receive information really fast.

If we take all these aspects into account we will have to introduce some changes or modifications to our way of teaching and consequently to how we communicate during the learning process. For example, applying this to our methodology will make us go faster, less step-by-step, more in parallel with more random access, among other aspects. Also some changes of the content should be made, like not just focusing on past contents and trying to use more future contents that are more interesting to the student (robotics, politics, sociology...).

Conclusion

Although all these barriers may seem extremely complex, overcoming them may not be very difficult. In the beginning it can be very exhausting and even complicated, but once you interiorize and get used to change, those little aspects of our teaching practice will progress easily. Especially when we are talking about cultural barriers everything becomes more interesting and enjoyable for everyone, particularly the children.

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Abstract

The purpose of this article is to explain some of the barriers that teachers can face when they are trying to communicate with their students. At the same time we will suggest some ideas to overcome them, as well as examples of different situations experienced by teachers. Also, there are some cases where we can even use these barriers as a way to improve the learning process. More specifically, we are going to focus on cultural barriers and psychological barriers. Another topic that we will be focusing on is the digital generation and how these differences can generate a new type of barrier.

Keywords: communication barriers, psychological barriers, cultural barriers, digital generation

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