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Teacher's communication competences as a part of pre-gradual preparation

1.1. Communication skills – means of socialisation

Communication implies more than one person. There must be someone to transmit a message and someone to receive it. People communicate with each other in various different combinations and in very different ways. When they have a lot in common, they communicate most easily.

Communication is undertaken for a purpose. There is always a reason to share ideas and meanings. This social situation involves people together. They need to establish and maintain personal relationships.

In case of classroom communication, the primary purpose is a pedagogic one. Therefore, the term of pedagogic communication has to be mentioned. It is realized during the learning process. The teacher is a part of interaction with an individual student or with a group of students within the class. These participants' communication can be seen as a process of mutual accommodation. All members of this community spend a lot of time talking to each other, asking questions or giving answers, giving or getting information and instructions etc. It can be termed the pedagogic communication. But the verbal contact is not the only means of communication. It is also achieved by a body language. Generally said, the way people dress, the way they move, sit and stand can say a great deal about their attitudes towards the people they are communicating with. Facial expressions and the tone of voice used when speaking can all say much more about how a person feels

than the words that he or she actually utters. In the area of classroom communication, nonverbal resources as an instrument of communication play just as important part as a language does (Malamah-Thomas 1987, p. 17).

The successful communication is based on reciprocal interaction. In case of conflict in the interaction, communication breaks down. Only where there is cooperation between both sides involved in the interaction can communication take place effectively.

1.2. Pedagogic communication as a basis of learning process

The pedagogic communication is the basic constituent of the learning process. This is the reason why the ability of that is a very important part of teacher's skills and professional competence. The communication competence is usually created during the whole life as a means of socialisation. As for professionals (teachers), it has to be developed and improved on the theoretical and practical basis particularly during the stage of their educational preparation.

Just the requirement of the practical realisation seems to be the difficult one. The practice shows that most of the students as future teachers are not able to use the spoken language at the standard level. They often can not express their thoughts appropriately and fluently. Almost none of them have any knowledge as regards nonverbal means of communication and strategies. Paradoxically, such a kind of speakers will be supposed to realise the pedagogical communication in the future giving the good example of using a language in its spoken form.

It is a very important aim to improve the communication skills of future teachers during their pre-gradual studies. The teacher's speech as a means of contact mediates information and knowledge but it also forms a pupil's personality and character. The teacher's role as a cultivated speaker is really huge. Particularly the young learners at the primary school level imitate intensively. That is the optimal period to acquire the basis of cultivated communication which can not be usually developed in the family. The learners at school also master the princi-

ples of public speech gradually. They start to consider it a means of own presentation. The role of the school seems to be not replaceable in this process. Other areas of public life (e.g. the media or politics) do not provide suitable models and examples of cultivated communication. Its level and quality have been declining lately. Changes of the social climate lead to changes of the notion of cultivated communication. Contemporary speakers are mostly self-centred without any attention to the audience. They do not solve whether their speech is comprehensible enough and not facilitate its perception. Such a kind of approach shows a lack of responsibility towards listeners who have to cope with speakers' bad pronunciation or unbearable sounds of hesitation and with their disability to distinguish any communicative styles and to respect the standard level of spoken language.

2.1. Pre-gradual preparation of the future teachers

Previous facts prove the necessity to improve communication skills of the future teachers. That is the way to create their communication competence in accordance with all requirements of contemporary tendency to communicative approach in the learning process.

The oral communication courses and seminars at the college level are realised with the aim to provide comprehensive, organized, and authoritative resources for the future teachers' training and development. The whole process is based on practical exercises. It begins with abstract (theoretical) inquiry and extends into practical actions using the learners' own experience of practical speaking. The success can only occur where learners (individually or collectively) explore principles and experiments. This procedure is activated by combination of different tasks and supported by teacher's guidance. The learners are required to take direct action themselves being cast in the role of critical observers of the efforts of others. All participants of the learning process are engaged in such a practical training.

2.2. Initial phase of the training process

At the beginning of the course, it is very useful to encourage the learners. In following learning situations where individuals will be required to act and interact with others, there will be many potential social and emotional constraints and pressures that may interfere effective learning. The learners may be embarrassed because of their poor performance and become reluctant to speak for fear of making a fool of them. The self-conscious students may not wish to speak in front of many pairs of critical eyes and ears. The shy students may be unable to speak continually for fear of making mistake in pronunciation or breaking the standard level of language.

The learning process has to be supported by declining of these affective barriers. When learners feel relaxed and surrounded by friendly environment, it encourages a wider sharing and exchange of ideas and experience. In this atmosphere, learners gain the confidence to lend and receive support from others, to take risks with speaking in front of the audience, and to relate to their colleagues without the fear of possible ridicule and correction (Vale 1995, p. 21).

It is very important to establish a positive relationship among the learners. In addition, factors such as motivation, confidence, interest or social grouping have to be mentioned. Creating a supportive learning community is inevitable. In this case, the learners feel comfortable and also responsible for their work. They try to do their best.

The teacher's role consists of the position of motivator, coordinator, and organizer. During the consolidation phase the teacher uses the confidence and experience gained by the learners to encourage them to speak focusing on specific verbal and nonverbal language points. This stage has to be supported by suitable practice activities. First of all, the learners are required to present a prepared speech, the topic of which is their personality. They have to introduce themselves and describe their hobbies and qualities which make them unique (including negative features of their character). It helps them to become socialised in the community and gain needed self confidence. To keep sufficient eye contact is a very important part of this activity. The final

evaluation is based on the analysis of speakers' feelings more than on a strict effort to delimit verbal or nonverbal mistakes. It can make the learners think about themselves and about the way they express their thoughts. They have to know that the words are not empty vessels but the component of a particular human being, said exactly – the part of them.

2.3. Cultivation of verbal means in communication

The basic activities are focused on the improvement of learners' readiness for expression. These introductory exercises are performed in the group seated in a circle. They can be described as short and non prepared mini-acts of speech the aim of which is to complete a cohesive, coherent, and comprehensible spoken text for any particular topic.

The activity starts with narrative or descriptive approach and extends to ability to use symbols or metaphors. The learners are required to produce their own short texts or finish incomplete stories or create texts collectively. Later they are able to keep their point better, finding the words faster, and expressing their thoughts fluently.

The following activities practice more complicated and longer speech events which are based on reflections. The learners are supposed to realise 4 to 5-minute prepared speech standing in front of the audience and using different means of contact (e.g. addressing, rhetorical questions, expressions indicating relationships and reciprocity, etc.). On the other hand, they learn to avoid undesirable words, repetitions, or functionless expressions and sounds of hesitation. The necessity to speak in accordance with the standard level of spoken language and accurate articulation have to be also mentioned. It is recommended to point the importance of timing and the way to manage the time limits.

What is said can be recorded to identify problem areas. These authentic data can be analyzed, categorized and described by all participants. All strengths and weaknesses have to be named. Then it is necessary to make generalizations and set down the basic rules of

successful speaking in order to implement them later. That is the illustrative way to set standards which learners are expected to follow.

To analyze recorded speech acts from the media seems to be worthwhile as well. TV and radio moderators and speakers embody a wide range of positive and negative examples in the area of spoken communication which can be clearly demonstrated and judged. In other words, the ability to recognize the quality of someone's speech helps to improve own production and reach the higher level.

2.4. Acoustic means and their communicative function

Acoustic aspects represent speaker's personality in his acts of communication. They reflect his character and temperament as well as his attitudes and emotions. As bearers of nonverbal meaning, they have the power to illustrate the utterances and enrich them with other elements. With respect to this fact, they can be used very thoughtfully to maximize the effect of the communication and keep an intensive contact with the audience including its attention.

Sound means include e.g. intonation, volume, speed, locating of pauses, voice emotional modulation, rhythmical and logical phrasing, etc. (Minchew 1983, p. 21). All these elements have to be practiced and improved regularly through sets of special rhetorical and dramatic exercises which deal with respiratory activities just as with a training of the voice and articulation.

The respiratory exercises are focused on the right rhythm of breathing during speaking and on the economical use of that. They finish with reading the text – the learners compete with each other who reads as much of text as possible under one breathing in.

The voice training leads to knowing the function of vocal cords and to ability to work with them usefully. The learners try to project their emotions and attitudes into own speech to make it more impressive and effective. It is also a very important task to manage a correct intonation. In case of interrogative clauses (type called WH-questions) the intonation has to be falling which is broken very often. On the other hand, the falling intonation is required as an acoustic ending of sen-

tences which provides the listeners with a good orientation in the text and possibility to understand and remember most of shared information. The voice means give the liveliness to the speech and help to organize and structure that. Working with the voice properly, the speaker is able to prevent any stereotypical or boring and puzzled communication.

The inseparable part of the activities mentioned above is represented by the training of articulation. It can be realized by exercises containing the particular type of vowels or consonants used in appropriate words including tongue twisters. The learners are supposed to fix a correct articulation of all sounds.

A final activity includes and finishes all previous exercises. That is the reading of a part of a favourite novel or fairy tale/story. The texts with epical features are preferred since the direct speech of characters and dynamic plot provide better conditions for acting and interpretation. First of all, the learners share the given text and analyze its content. Then they listen to recorded professional reading of that to inspire own creativity and to imitate the model or show own interpretation. Finally, they present different texts of their own choice, trying to apply all gaining experience and skills.

2.5. Body language as a part of communication

Nonverbal means, especially a body language refers to the oral expression very closely. It functions as a bearer of information without even someone's speaking. Used in harmony with the words, it intensifies a final impression and power of the speech. The body language is typical for every human being. It includes e.g. posture and proximity to participants, dressing, facial expression, eye contact and gestures (Minchew 1983, p. 21). All of the means have a social basis and function as a way of the interpersonal contact. They can refer to real speaker's opinions and feelings much more than his words. Sometimes they are realised in a wrong way and disproportionately taking the listener's attention which complicates the communication situation. Occasionally they reflect and show the feeling of nervousness or

fear caused by a lack of self-confidence. Such a kind of the body language becomes a big problem for future teachers who could be considered ridiculous. Recorded learners' speech can clearly demonstrate all possible mistakes. They have to be named and described. Such a friendly discussion reduces the worries and fears which caused learners' consequent nervousness and undesirable behaviour.

The ability to keep the eye contact appears as the biggest problem. Such a kind of nonverbal means it is a basis of the successful communication. Breaking of the eye contact may relate to speaker's shy character or fear and also to his problem to find words easily and express ideas properly. The friendly environment as well as activities in pairs or small groups can help to minimize it.

3. Basic methodological principles

Successful learning and speakers' progress are connected with mental factors which means with learners' psychic. The first condition is obviously a positive atmosphere in the group, the members of which are linked with feeling of confidence in each other. The group working and the teacher's individual approach influence it very positively.

There is evidence that to give a feedback to learners is the basic rule for achievement of given goals. Any worthwhile analyses of communication activities lead to the needed results. The most important thing is to show a personal progress during the course. Comparing the initial and the final performances in the group, the learners notice their successful advancement and gain so much useful self-confidence.

The ground of such a successful learning process consists in a suitable motivation. The learners have to realise the importance of cultivated communication for their professional future. At the college level, they understand the necessity to communicate properly. Nevertheless, they are used to keeping the standard level of the language only in its written form. As for a spoken form, they do not distinguish between interpersonal and public communication including their specific verbal and nonverbal means. The theoretical background of that is also omitted as well as any practical training.

There is a principle called voluntariness which has to be respected. Each personality is original and individual and therefore it needs own space and time. At the beginning of the courses some participants join unwillingly. They appreciate a chance to observe or participate passively. Later they are able to take part spontaneously.

Another important principle has to be seen in conscious rehearsal and practicing. The learners are required to know what they are doing and what the reason of that is. The function of means and elements used from the communication point of view has to be emphasized. Knowing the theoretical background and drilling consciously, the learners reach the aim to use needed means automatically and correctly.

The effectiveness of the whole learning process also depends on a quality of individual preparation for different given tasks. In other words, without the planned and well-thought preparation according to teacher's instructions, the desired effect can not be achieved. Although the improvisation varies the training process, it can not be accepted as the basis of that.

Last but not least, the time factor has to be mentioned. The learners are supposed to practice acquired knowledge and skills continually and continuously, drilling and repeating them in different communication situations and under various conditions. As a time consuming activity, it has to be organized very carefully to avoid a chaos in the class and minimize a lack of learners' interest. To apply mastered skills and to present them working in other courses is the clear evidence of learners' successful progress.

Conclusion

Teacher's communication competence is an essential condition of the successful learning process. The effective communication skills can be learned. The skills which are necessary for public speaking are similar to skills which function in the interpersonal communication; they are just adapted and refined for more structured situations. The best way to master these skills is to combine the cognitive and skills

approaches to education. That means to know the basic principles and to put them into practice. Such an activity-centred training emphasizes active participation, not passive absorption, and helps the future teachers to reach the required level of their communication competences.

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Summary

Communication is the basis of all our interpersonal relationships. This paper deals with oral communication as a means of realisation of pedagogic interaction. Improving communication skills to achieve required standard of communication competences is an especially important goal of pre-gradual preparation of future teachers.

The initial part of the following text provides a short introduction to verbal and nonverbal means of pedagogic interaction realised during the learning process and emphasizes the importance of cultivated communication at school.

The central section relates to pre-gradual preparation of future teachers, which includes cultivation of verbal means and purposeful usage of acoustic means. Also some principles of body language with their function are mentioned. This part provides a conceptual framework for communication courses at the college level.

The final part is concerned with basic methodological principles which influence the successful pre-gradual preparation.