MESSAGE CONSTRUCTION - A PREREQUISITE TO EFFECTIVE DIDACTIC COMMUNICATION

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Abstract: Communication and understanding processes are significant needs in any educational community. The present paper discusses didactic communication and the teacher's specific methods in message building and conveying. The comprehension of any message depends on the way it has been built. Teaching experience shows that the knowledge a teacher conveys is perceived differently by students having the same level of physical and mental development, even if the message is being conveyed to them by the same source. Their different perceptions of the message lie with the students' individual specificities, their amount, and system of knowledge, the teacher-student relationship, and the teacher's ability in message-building and conveying.
Key words: didactic communication, message construction, research, teacher

1. INTRODUCTION

The message is the core of all human communication, because it represents the meaning and the significance that are being conveyed between the source and the receiver. It is clear that in order to decode the message, the two actors in the process of communication, the source and the receiver – or, in our case, the didactic communication, the teacher and her students – need to use the same code. Yet this is not always enough. Sometimes, the conveyed message requires a fast answer, which translates into immediate behaviours or reactions. This is why one can say that "the message is always a certain type of summary of the meaning of deeds, events, or phenomena; a lesson that one must apply" (Vinţanu 2008, p. 211). Other times, the receiver's response is more difficult to get, because of the noticeable differences between the source's intention and the receiver's ability to comprehend. The two poles of communication have their own respective realms of ideas, meanings, and significances about the world and the life - the dominant elements around which the contents that lie at the basis of message constructions gravitate.

To communicate with others, regardless of their education level/type (humanities, science, technical, or technological) does not mean only to express a piece of information, but also to process it - and effective communication implies: to convince and get the adherence of the audience; to develop the receivers' personality and ability to think; and to apprehend, and become aware of, the receivers' reactions, attitudes, and behavioural alteration. All this is possible only with the help of messages – even in their most simplistic definition as mere combinations of signs that are being

conveyed by a source to a receiver. The twofold dimension of the message is to be noted, as an element in the communication circuit and in a representation process, acting as an "intermediary between a reality and its image" (DRĂGAN 2007, P. 91).

2. THE IMPORTANCE OF MESSAGE CONSTRUCTION IN EFFECTIVE DIDACTIC COMMUNICATION

Didactic communication is the specific shape taken by educational or teaching communication and is considered a specialised form of inter-human communication in its own right, as well as a dynamic, complex, and interactive process. Any communication – including the didactic one – is done according to a model which includes: the agents of communication (teacher and students/pupils); the distance between them and their spatial layout – both important in defining the channel of transmission of the message; the institutional framework and context of the communication, which determines a certain type of code; the enunciative situation (lesson, debate, dissertation session, etc) the sources's/receivers' active or latent repertoires; the feedback, and the jamming factors (cf. Cosmovici/Iacob 1999, p. 190).

In didactic communication, through the prism of the present paper, analysing the message and, implicitly, the source/teacher takes priority. Thus if the teacher has prestige, teaching tact, expressive and elocutionary skills or otherwise said s/he renders his/her message credible and attractive, we may say that the act of communication is achieved for its most part, as the pupils/students will also become actors in that process. The message, the codified information that is expressed in various forms, (linguistic, gestural) signs, and images can be analysed in statistic terms - when only the quantitative information sent between sender and receiver is considered, without meaning - and in semantic terms, when the focus is on the quality of the information, as well as on its content and significance to the actors in the communication. If the message does not hold any novelty, it will not retain the receiver's attention.

If the message contains too many new elements, it will be difficult to integrate the information into what is known in a short time and the likelihood of the receiver's lack of interest will grow. Consequently, a midway option that will provide maximum message intelligibility to most of the receivers is advisable. The effectiveness of

the receptiveness to the message depends therefore on factors such as: the complexity and difficulty of the information content, the context in which the didactic communication takes place, and in particular, on the way in which the message has been structured.

Laurenţiu Şoitu (Şoitu 2001, p. 38) distinguishes three main stages of message construction: the identification - by the individual/group - of the message to be conveyed; the description of the message, which involves: the conveyed information, the channel through which it will be sent, the problems it may raise with the receiver at the time of its decoding, the identification of possible differences (experiences, knowledge, expectations) between the sender's background and the receiver's one, the sources of noise/disturbances that may disrupt either the clarity of expression of the message, or that of its reception, and making sure there is a feedback, in order to remedy dysfunctions and achieve a correct understanding of the message.

Message coding or construction has to do with the development of a text/speech, in which the sender/teacher uses a specific code and goes through the stages mentioned above.

Message decoding or re-building means the decoding of the message by the receiver, with the help of his/her own code. Decoding is the opposite of coding, as the receiver starts from the surface elements of the message and reaches its deep structure.

Starting from the main elements of the communication process, David Berlo suggests the SMCR model: source, message, channel, and receiver (apud Keltner, p. 18).

Source	Message	Channel	Receiver
Communication skills	Elements	Seeing	Communication skills
Attitudes	Structure	Hearing	Attitudes
Knowledge	Content	Touching	Knowledge
Social system	Code	Smelling	Social system
Culture	Transmission	Tasting	Culture

Tab. 1 Berlo's Model

The model describes communication in terms of organisation rather than in terms of process, because the feedback – the closing link to the communication chain seen as a process – is missing. In accordance with Berlo's model, the *source* and *the receiver* are in a commensurate relation to the communication skills, the attitudes, and the knowledge they possess at a certain point regarding a certain topic. Neither their social background, nor their culture will be neglected. *The message* is built, developed, ~~it~~ has a meaning and is received if the following factors are taken into account: the constitutive elements or the content; the coding system used by the source, and the way in which the message is transmitted to the receiver. The channels of transmission of the message are linked to the five senses: sight, hearing, touch, smell, and taste.

A more complex model, developed by Miller *et al.*, focuses on verbal communication and physical behaviour in a communication situation (*apud idem*, p. 18-19):
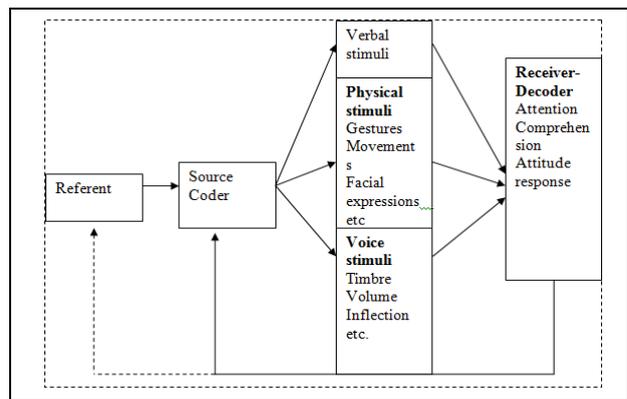

Fig.1. Miller's complex model

Two new elements distinguish this model from the previous one: the referent and various stimuli (verbal, physical, and vocal). The Source-Coder builds a message starting from a referent. In Miller's model, the referent is not the *immediate object* (that is the referent per se, without which the sign does not exist, but that does not cover all existing possibilities), but the *dynamic object*, a wider referent, which means what the sign cannot express directly and the receiver must interpret it through his/her experience. The Source-Coder builds a message that can refer to a wide range of objects, various situations, documents, ideas, and experiences: the referents.

The total, coded message contains at least three main factors: verbal, physical, and voice stimuli. Although in the Miller model the stimuli are connected to the Source-Coder by three separate arrows, the connection of the arrows with the dotted lines indicates that all the three dimensions of the message are coded simultaneously and that the message functions as a whole.

The message is conveyed to the Receiver-Decoder, who responds differently to the vocal, physical, and verbal elements coded in the message. In any communication, the Source-Coder's first objective is to draw the Receiver's attention. Once her attention is focused on the message, the Receiver-Decoder produces a set of meanings, which will in turn generate non-evaluative responses (comprehension) or evaluative ones (attitude-based behaviours). The total comprehension results from the specific combination of the three types of stimuli.

The arrow that starts from the Receiver-Decoder, goes to the Source-Coder and is further extended to the Referent indicates the fact that the Receiver-Decoder can respond simultaneously to at least two categories of stimuli: the ones linked to the referent itself (in principle, the verbal stimuli) and the ones associated with the individual that codes the statements about the referent (the physical and respectively the vocal stimuli). Obviously, the Decoder-Receiver's responses to both the Source-Coder and the Referent will interact with each other in order to determine the total comprehension which he/she attributes to the whole situation. In psychological terms, the Receiver-Decoder cannot respond to the Referent without responding to the Source-Coder, but can focus his/her entire attention on

the physical and vocal stimuli coded by the Source and ignore the verbal stimuli linked to the Referent.

The potential problem the Source-Coder usually faces in such cases is the possible loss of meaning attributed by the Receiver-Decoder to the three sets of factors coded in the message. In that context, efficient communication depends on the harmonious combination of the verbal, physical, and vocal stimuli.

I considered it useful to present these communication models because each of them can be specifically explored in didactic communication, *particularly on different levels of complexity thereof.* The level of complexity of the didactic communication determines – in a commensurate relation – its level of comprehension.

Berlo's model presents didactic communication at a higher level of complexity, both in terms of its components (Source, Receiver, Message, Channel) and in terms of the characteristics of the Source and of the Receiver. The success of the teacher-student communication is ensured – besides the attitudes – by their communication skills and their knowledge, as well as by their cultural and social backgrounds. That is where the teacher's *experience* plays a particularly important part, since it will help him/her not only to build and code the message according to the student's level of knowledge and background, but also ~~to~~ use the most appropriate channels to convey the message. We believe that this model can be adopted in the planning of one's didactic activity and communication. Even if it lacks feedback – the element that measures the success/failure of the communication act – we believe that the *effects/results* of the didactic communication as viewed through this model as well as through the prism of the receivers (pupils, students) may be classified as: *cognitive* (acquired knowledge); *emotional* (changes in attitudes, interests, and motivations) and *behavioural* (more openness, communication skills).

Through their model, Miller *et al.* have brought to our attention a communication scenario whose correspondents in the real life are: the knowledge to be conveyed (the Referent), the teacher (the Source-Coder), the words (the verbal stimuli), the gestures, the movements, the mimics - in a word, the non-verbal behaviour; the rhythm, the intensity, and the quality of the speech; the volume of one's voice – therefore, the paralanguage (the vocal stimuli), and the pupil (the Receiver-Decoder). In the light of the presented elements, we conclude that an effective communication, characterised by attention, comprehension, positive attitudes – therefore, messages that are understood (materialised by responses on the student's part) is obtained by the teacher's ability to combine verbal signs (words), indicators (paralanguage and non-verbal behaviour), icons, and symbols.

To stress all of the above, E. Năstăşel and I. Ursu point out that the verbal message does not result only from the mere utterance of words and that one can speak but of *three levels of message expression* (Năstăşel/Ursu1981, p. 89-90), namely: *words*, which contain most of the information or content; *gestures*, whose role is to emphasize or even illustrate what is being said verbally (one's hands, eyes, and body can have their own language which most often than not help us go beyond what words tell us); and *"spontaneous decryptions of the message content"*, when although one of the interlocutors does not utter the whole message, the other one understands it nevertheless. That level of message expression and comprehension – which is not very frequent, for that matter – is common among persons who know and understand each other very well

3. SPECIFIC TRAITS OF THE TEACHER WHO FACILITATES THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE DIDACTIC MESSAGE

The answer to the question: *What is the teacher supposed to do in order to propperly convey the knowledge to the students?*– an action that proves that there is such a thing as effective didactic communication – makes the object of a research paper in which I aimed to identify the levels of comprehension in didactic communication. Ever since the beginning of my teaching career, I have had an on-going interest in the students' understanding of the didactic message, regardless of their field of study (social, humanities, technical, science), as I consider that message comprehension (involving message construction and transmission) has and will always be the key to any successful activity.

One of the operational objectives of my research has been to determine the relation between the teacher's specific characteristics and the comprehensibility of her didactic message/discourse. My working hypothesis started from the premise that there was a positive correlation between the way in which the teacher builds her message and the students' understanding of its content; and this, from the viewpoint of my paper, leads to the premise that the latter depends upon the former.

The target-group has been teachers who work in pre-university education. The dependent variable is comprehension and the independent variables will be: the teaching degree, the education level, the rural/urban geographic setting of the school, and the presence of a local university that can provide teaching/specialised improvement. The end – which consists in the identified solutions – offers a model of comprehension, whose effects can be measured by an impact analysis of the students as end users of any teaching.

The group of subjects consists of 152 elementary school and high school teachers in eight counties in different regions of the country, including Bucharest, whose average age was 43,7 and having an average education activity of 17,7 years.

An important stage in my research consisted in developing a questionnaire focused on the issue of didactic communication, i.e. on identifying the teacher's specific characteristics that ensure comprehension of the didactic message as well as of all the actions that s/he undertakes to facilitate its understanding by the students.

Below are some of the questions aimed at identifying the teacher's characteristics that facilitate conveyance of

the didactic message in a way that it enhances its understanding by the students:

Do you see construction and comprehension of the didactic message/teaching discourse as being dependent upon certain specific traits of the teacher? If so, please list them.

Of all the respondents, 122 said "yes" and 30 said "no". The answers to this question provide the basis for verifying my research hypothesis according to which comprehension of the didactic message/discourse depends on certain characteristics of the teacher and of his/her approach during their teaching activities.

Upon reviewing the positive answers, I was able to identify 57 traits that in the respondents' opinion would have a positive influence on the didactic message construction and comprehension. The list of some traits is as follows: pedagogical tact; competence; flexibility; spontaneity; creativity; intelligence; patience; empathy; professional dedication; ability to make jokes/humour; interest in/being close to the students; knowing how to make oneself understood; calm; balance; good psychological and pedagogical sense; ability to heed personal interests and aspirations; tolerance; clarity of discourse; ability to direct learning; good communicator; using adequate language and terminology, etc.

The next step consisted of grouping them according to their frequency in the teachers' answers. Thus, we have compiled the hierarchy/ranking of the most frequent traits, as follows: discourse clarity (22 appearances); the ability to communicate(18), empathy (16); good professional background(16); good teaching method (14); teacher's personality (10); precision (10); interest towards the students (8); delivering skills (8); tone and timbre of one's voice (6); attitude and behaviour particularities (6); language and proper terminology (5); open-mindedness (5); availability (5); others with a frequency of 1 to 4.

Therefore, we remain interest on what L.Şoitu call prerequisites of a successful didactic communication, keeping a clear distinction between the perspective of students and that of the teachers. (Şoitu, 1997,pg.117). We will list only those identified by the students, as most of them concide:

"A teacher is good if s/he has a correct rapport with his/her students, their parents, former students, his/her colleagues, and other influential persons (…); if s/he respects all students. [A good teacher] has a positive attitude towards everyone; s/he accepts mistakes without ridiculing; s/he personalises his/her interventions and is demanding, yet just. S/he is demanding towards herself/himself; s/he is competent and interesting; s/he re-words; s/he congratulates and encourages; s/he is creative and inventive. S/he knows how to make jokes that do not sound obsolete and s/he is up to date with various fields of knowledge. S/he has carried out research and production activities both inside the country and abroad (has work experience in other fields); s/he has published books and organised exhibitions (…), s/he goes to shows, reads (…), and is interested in problem-solving. If s/he knows something, s/he says so and does

the same when s/he doesn't; the same when s/he is afraid or when s/he feels s/he has a «hung-up»; s/he radiates energy and will happily share it with others, too. S/he knows how to create a very good climate; s/he is not alien to other disciplines and respects them; s/he leaves time for formulation yet s/he imposes a fast working pace; s/he is proud, dignified, but s/he cultivates and respects such qualities in others, too".

Although we have identified various alternatives of grouping teacher characteristics/skills upon which the comprehension of the didactic message/educational discourse depends, we have focused on classifying teacher characteristics based on their frequency and similarity, which we believe generate three main categories: one's ability to communicate; one's professionalism/professional experience; one's psychological, pedagogical, and relational skills.

4. CONCLUSIONS

The teacher's performance in didactic communication, otherwise said effective didactic communication is influenced significantly by the following factors: the construction/structure of the didactic message, the students' knowledge, the choice of a favourable context for one's lessons; lesson planning (contents; operational objectives that must be specific, measurable, and tangible within a certain time; strategies; evaluation); displaying an attitude indicative of direct communication; an active reception of the students' answers; permanent adaptation to communication circumstances.

Another determining factor in effective didactic communication is conveying the didactic message. The answer to the question: "How should one convey the didactic message to its pupils/students so that the comprehension process is facilitated?" – which also demonstrates the existence of an effective didactic communication – makes the object of an on-going research paper, and the result of my interest in the pupils'/students' understanding of the didactic message, is a continuous one.

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