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A contrastive study of on-line communicative functions between undergraduate and postgraduate students

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ABSTRACT

This paper is based on a contrastive study conducted with on-campus and off-campus students in a university context with a focus on communicative functions. The main aim of the study was to examine the nature of undergraduate and postgraduate students’ communication in teaching and learning in terms of three communicative functions: procedural, social, and cognitive. It attempted to identify the underlying reasons why students wanted to communicate with their lecturer via email communication. The data analysis of undergraduate students indicates the predominance of procedural functions in their communication and strongly reinforces the assumption that students were mainly concerned about academic procedure and conformity. This is against the view held by many academics in different levels of education that communication in teaching and learning should be fundamentally a meaning making process and teaching is to facilitate the minds of learners to make sense of knowledge. However, the communication of on-line postgraduate students shows a balance of three clusters of functions. This phenomenon can be explained in terms of curriculum control and interpersonal relationship in an academic discourse.

1. Introduction

Communication in teaching and learning is the most important factor in an educational discourse as communication permeates virtually every aspect of education. It is logical to state that educational failure is primarily caused by communication failure. Similarly one would argue that educational success depends heavily on communication in teaching and learning. The emergence of on-line learning or e-learning has been praised by many ‘e-enthusiasts’ and also has received sceptical reaction from traditional face-to-face advocates.

This paper starts with a discussion of the role of communication in teaching and learning, particularly from a functional perspective. It examines different discourses of communication in a tertiary education context and finally presents a case study on the use of emails in face-to-face and online teaching and learning.

2. Communication as a sense-making process

The concept 'communication' denotes three important kinds of process:
a. Communication is an interactive process: People involved in communication are participants, who make some commitment to the process: there must be at least two people to communicate and each participant acknowledges the others' involvement. There is a communication protocol which should be followed in the interaction. A doctor and a patient interaction has a different protocol from that of a shopkeeper and a client. As an interactive process, communication is not just a linear process starting from the speaker and ends with the hearer. It involves initiating, receiving, exchanging, interpreting, modifying etc.

b. Communication is a meaning making process: We communicate in order to make sense of the world: the physical world, the human world and the inner (spiritual) world. Through communication, we discover the world around us, understand other people and most importantly it is an inward journal to discover about ourselves.

Making sense of the physical world: Young children often bombard us with questions such as 'where does the sun come from?'; 'why does the sun go to sleep?'; 'why does the ice melt?', etc. They ask questions because they are very curious about the new territory: the physical world. It is not just children who are fascinated by things in the physical world. Adults are puzzled by its mystery. For instance, farmers are very observant about the change of cloud movement in the sky. Fishermen ask questions about the movement of sea waves to make sure that they are not accidentally caught in a storm.

Making sense of the human world: People are not always at home with one another. There are conflicts in almost every human interaction. Communication helps to solve a conflict or can cause further conflicts. Human relationship is mediated by communication. In other words, communication reveals a great deal about the depth of relationship between people. When two neighbour conduct a gossip over the fence, it reveals how close they are, how they value the victims of their gossip, how they perceive their social norm. Even when we talk about the physical world, we may use it for social relationship, for getting on with one another. Just imagine that three or four friends sit around a coffee table chatting about things in this world. This is a social activity which binds them together and enables them to know each other more. When parents talk to their babies whose language is very minimal, if not non-existent, they are engaged in building and maintaining a bond and an intimate relationship. Through this communicative socialisation, babies start to discover who their caretakers are and how to get things from them. The initial bond based on such communicative interaction give the parents and their children a firm emotional foundation for later development. This can be seen as a critical stage of emotional development. In some cultures, this bond is strengthened by having the children to share the same room or bed with their parents.

Making sense of the inner world: When we travel to a new country, we learn a great deal about that country. For some, the new learning is an inward journey. We need a different context to find out more about ourselves. Similarly, interacting with different people in different context provides us insights hidden our inner world. What do we want? What are the reasons of our existence? What do we value most in life? These are questions about our self-concept, which is a world of mystery and interestingly enough we are strangers in our own world.

c. Communication is a social process: As briefly mentioned in the discussion about the human world, communication is a means for us to discover others. It is important to recognise the significance of the social context of communication. It is a dynamic
context which generates its social meaning and norms of communicative interaction. When we say 'how are you?' to someone, we don't expect them to tell us how healthy they are. What we expect is a simple acknowledgement of our greeting such as 'fine, thank you', or 'just fine!'. This is the social meaning. People who share the same culture understand the social meaning in their communication, otherwise they are considered by other members of that culture as cultural monsters. Sociolinguistics is a study of communication in its sociocultural context. For example, it examines how people speak differently in different social situations. Discriminatory language is another topic dealt with in sociolinguistics: What is sexist language? What is the power relationship between males and females which is revealed in genderlects?

3. Discourses of communication

Scollon and Scollon (1995, p.xi) introduce the term 'interdiscourse communication' to cover the entire range of communications across boundaries of groups or discourse systems from the most inclusive of those groups, cultural groups, to the communications which take place between men and women or between colleagues who have been born into different generations.

Before we examine different types of communication. Let's look at some instances of communication which often happen in front of our eyes:

- A group of students are arguing.
- Three neighbours are gossiping over the fence.
- The editorial in a newspaper
- The news on TV at 6 pm
- An Italian talked to a Japanese about foods.
- A company director wrote a memo to his staff.

Communication takes place in those instances. However, there are some specific characteristics in each type of communication. We can group them into four major types of communication: Interpersonal, intercultural, organisational, and mass communication.

Interpersonal communication

As the term 'interpersonal' indicates, it is a 'personal communication' between two people or in a small group of people. This is a narrow sense of interpersonal communication. It is normally seen in a conversation between two lovers, neighbours, students and teacher, doctor and patient, police officer and traffic offender etc. In a broader sense, interpersonal communication means communication between people which is in contrast to intrapersonal communication (which takes place within a person, e.g.mumbling, egocentric speech in children, swearing to oneself). In this sense, a public lecture is an interpersonal communication activity.

Organisational communication

Organisational communication takes place within or across organisations. The most common examples of organisational communication are memo, staff meeting, report etc. The way directors of a company conduct a meeting with their employees indicates an adopted protocol of communication. There are specific steps to follow and the choice of language appropriate to the meeting. Organisational communication is
crucial to an organisation’s success. Poor organisational communication tends to lead to poor performance. Lewis and Slade (1994, p. 215) points out that ‘analysing companies in terms of their organisational communication climate and their culture are important ways of understanding how well the organisation is working’. Basically there are three communication directions in an organisation: Downwards, upwards and laterally. According to Lewis and Slade, the more formalised an organisation, the more emphasis will be placed on downwards communication. The downwards direction reflects the pyramid model of power sharing. The top people have the most power and they are the source of communication whereas people at the bottom of the pyramid are the passive receivers of information.

**Interdiscourse communication**

Human beings have many needs to fulfil. They are physical, mental and social needs. One of the basic needs of human beings is to communicate. Communication helps us to discover and to live with our physical world, social world and spiritual world. As social beings, we use language to function in different social contexts and constantly engage in interdiscourse communication. For example:

- a mother with her children at dinner
- a doctor with her patient in a hospital
- a parent talking with teachers at school.

Interdiscourse communication includes the entire range of communications across boundaries of groups and discourse systems: Italian and Chinese; men and women, young and elderly people, nurses and teachers etc.

Communication breaks down when members of different discourses interact and each side uses different principles of discourse to organise its presentations.

**On-line communication in education**

Teaching and learning are primarily communicative activities. The interaction between teachers, students, and various significant others which take place in different discourse is carried out through communication. These communicative activities include questioning, explaining, commenting, arguing, describing etc. The four traditional primary areas of communication are speaking, listening, reading and writing, which are manifested in different academic discourses such as lecture, test, essay writing, seminar, group discussion, note taking and project.

In a traditional face-to-face teaching, the classroom discourse can be very interactive or passive communicatively. This depends on the teaching model and theoretical views of learning held by the teacher and adopted by the school authority. If the learner-centred curriculum is adopted, the communication discourse is organised in such a ways that learners take an active part in learning, cognitively, socially and emotionally. For example, questioning is not aimed at testing learners’ knowledge but challenging knowledge and examining learners’ assumptions and misconceptions. In classroom behaviour management, communication helps teachers and learners to examine behaviour and issues from different perspectives and learn how to solve conflicts by communication.
However, if the curriculum is predominantly teacher-centred, classroom discourse tends to be governed by strict control, lack of flexibility, and teachers’ instruction. Communication is limited to a number of speech acts. Questioning is used to reinforce power and control. Interpersonal communication is discouraged.

4. The case study

This is a case study conducted in a specific university discourse involving undergraduate and postgraduate students.

Undergraduate students enrolled in a compulsory core education unit of a B.Ed course. The unit was primarily based on the traditional mode of face-to-face teaching: weekly lectures and seminars. The Internet was used as a tool for students to undertake literature search for their seminar presentations and essays. Students were encouraged to communicate via email with their lecturer. However, face-to-face communication was available if students preferred this mode. The aim of this study was to identify different meanings and functions of students’ email communication with their lecturer in learning. The postgraduate students enrolled in an on-line course. Most students lived overseas or interstate. Those living in Tasmania had a chance to meet the teaching staff occasionally if they wished.

There were 621 emails in the first year of data collection and 857 in the second year of the study. The increase of email-communication in the second semester could be due to the increasing availability of computer access and more encouragement of the lecturer in the use of email communication due to his increasing teaching load in other units. In another data collection, the focus was on postgraduate students who participated entirely on the whole on-line course. Thus, email communication became the crucial aspect of the teaching and learning interaction.

The emails were collected in a period of two consecutive years. Excel was used to handle the data analysis. Each email was treated as a case and was entered into the Excel database. It was a very brief and simple entry as each case (i.e. email) had two variables: gender and function. The gender is either male or female and function includes 10 categories, which can be grouped under three main clusters: Procedural, Social and Cognitive. Clusters 1 and 2 were each divided into different functional categories.

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The data analysis was based on the following categories of functions.

Cluster 1: Procedural Function
F1 Confirming: confirming about certain procedure (to be on right track)
F2 Requesting: asking for something, for example borrowing lecture notes
F3 Complaining: complaining about a certain procedure
F4 Clarifying: wanting to clarify about a certain procedure

Cluster 2: Social Function
F5 Greeting: mainly students introducing themselves.
F6 Referring: discussing about another person.
F7 Thanking: thanking teacher
F8 Complimenting: praising the teacher
F9 Sharing: sharing their life experiences

Cluster 3: Cognitive Function

F10. Discussing (explaining, arguing, discussing)

Sample 1
Firstly, I must apologise for asking you a silly question!
I am not sure how many discussions I replied to last semester, it was either three or four. Could you please let me know how many I did last semester as I may need to do another one?

Thank you and have a great weekend!  (F1)

Sample 2
I was wondering do you have to pass the test to pass the education course? I was just wondering for instance if you already have say a HD and a D for the presentation and essay which would equal to about 50% out of 100% for the course .(F1)

Sample 3
Sorry to be a pain but I have just posted a discussion under the wrong heading. I have corrected this by putting the same text under the correct heading. Under post 810 in classroom management is the mistake and I cannot delete it so could you please disregard it altogether. (F4)

Sample 4
I find that different tutors tend to have different expectations about essay writing. Sometimes our marks differ because they are marked by different tutors. It think it is fair to say that students’ assessment results tend to depend on which tutor they have, not on the quality of their essays. (F3)

Sample 5
I hope you had a nice trip to Sydney. It rained a lot these few days here. It was great to have a few days off as I could take my family to the East Coast for a break. My kids had a good time there. We did some fishing and it was fun! (Actually we did not get any fish….but lucky them! (F9)

Sample 6
I am your second year student, doing Ed this year. You would be surprised to hear that my father told me that he was your family doctors years ago. He now retired. Actually I am doing Ed1 and Ed2 at the same time. It is nice to write to you first and I ‘ll catch up with you in the lecture. (F5)
Sample 7

In your lecture, you mentioned ‘affective communication’ and ‘cognitive communication’. I think it is very hard to separate them as when we communicate our feelings and emotion, it does not mean that thinking is not involved. When a mother communicates about her feelings to a friend, it is a complex message, connecting the heart and the mind. (F10)

Sample 8

Many thanks for your help. It is great to have you as our lecturer. Your suggestions are very helpful. Thank you very much. (F7)

Sample 9

How’s Sydney? Do you enjoy your time? I had a wonderful time in Melbourne. My trip in Melb is sensational. I really like Melbourne a lot. My friend said if I study in Melb, I might be busy for dating not for studying...>_=<....Obviously Tasmania is a nice place for studying. hahah

..However, I have been so sick since I got back from Melbourne. Can I meet you this Thursday??? (F9)

The following functions dominate students’ email communication: . F2 (requesting), F7 (thanking), F1 (confirming) and F4 (clarifying)

![Frequency Distribution of Functions](image)

The overall result of the data analysis indicates clearly the reasons why students wanted to communicate with their lecturer via email. The predominance of the procedural functions in their communication strongly reveals that students were mainly concerned about academic procedure and conformity. In other words, their communication was motivated by the desire “to do the right things” or “to be on the lecturer’s right tract” as this factor determines their academic achievement in its narrow and pragmatic sense. This is against the view held by many academics in different levels of education that communication in teaching and learning should be fundamentally a meaning making process and teaching is to facilitate the minds of learners to make sense of knowledge.

However, according to the on-going analysis of postgraduate students’ data, the communication of on-line postgraduate students tended to show a balance of three
clusters of function. This phenomenon can be explained in terms of the learners’ independence and the learner-centred feature of the teaching and learning discourse.

The emails texts of postgraduate students tend to be multifunctional, even with short emails. For example:

**Sample 10**

Good morning,

Lovely to see you yesterday. I am e-mailing to remind you to please leave out all the documentation and readings you have on 'narrative research' as this will be my final unit. I will be in Launceston tomorrow- Thursday- to pick everything up.

I am presently working on researching Ethnography and some implications for TESOL and will send this to you by the end of this week.

**Sample 11**

Phew! I'm so glad!

I loved doing it, just at the end I lost my bird's eye view of the whole thing and began picking, picking, picking at things I should have just left alone...

It's cold here, not very beautiful at all because it's just damp and grey... in a month or two we'll have snow, I guess, and that makes even the most horrid landscape look lovely.

Anyway, I'm going to start reading for the next module, so I pace myself a bit better...

Enjoy your week, hopefully I'll 'talk' to you soon,

Best regards,

**Sample 12**

In any case, I sometimes think that the TEFL world contains some of the most idealistic as well as some of the most cynical people there are. Thankfully more idealists than cynics. So maybe the reality of (crass) commercialism is more shocking for us, because a lot of us are in the business because of a love of our students, our subject, our language(s) and culture(s)... and not to make (a lot of) money. But it is a business and at the end of the day, we expect to get paid. It's a very interesting subject, isn't it? I'll think about it and get back to you when I have done some 'proper' reading and ask you for your opinion about some more definite ideas...

Re. Commercialism in TESOL - I'm going to read the Phillipson book, thank you for recommending it - it's a good start! I might have to add a slightly different direction because I have no contact to universities and have never had to prepare students for the TOEFL and IELTS tests so I don't know if I would have enough practical experience or knowledge to do the subject of commercialism and 'sponsoring' at uni level full justice.

There are many factors which determine the choice of genres that postgraduate students use in their email texts.

- Firstly, as it was conducted off-campus, online communication between teachers and students became essential. Students were required to use emails
to discuss study plans with their teachers. The nature of the discourse reflects the choice of genre and its multifunction.

- Secondly, all postgraduate students had their first degree and were experienced enough to handle interpersonal communication for different academic purposes.

- Thirdly, postgraduate students who enrolled in this course were ‘warned’ that independent learning was a feature of the course. It was not a rigidly structured course. Negotiated curriculum was encouraged.

- Finally, the teachers used a multifunctional genre in their emails to students and encouraged close and informal interpersonal communication.

5. Conclusion

Communication is essential in teaching and learning. It is a means for teachers and students to discuss ideas and issues, to make sense of knowledge, and to explore the intellectual and social world together. On-line communication provides an excellent tool to achieve these goals. However, communication reflects strongly the kinds of discourses in which students are situated. This study gives some insights into the functions of email communication in different academic discourses.

REFERENCES


