

Effective Communication:
An Emphasis on Clarity

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Abstract

Communication is a process of shared meaning. When meaning is not understood in a communication context the whole essence of communicating with someone is lost due to gap in the process. This paper attempts to fill the gap which is responsible for obscurity in meaning and failure in sharing clear and understandable messages in many of our communication endeavours. It is a discourse analysis of selected writing problems that hinder clarity in writing and make our communication ineffective. It is hinged on the three-part theories of Cognitive Load, Cognitive Learning, and Cognitive Bias. The aim is to comment on the importance of clarity in the very nature of communication and re-emphasize its worth for human survival. The paper appraises the linear, interactive and transactional conceptions of the communication art. The research randomly assembles some factors that affect clarity and constitute barrier to effective communication in daily encounters using documentary and discourse approaches. The results of the field selection uncover some salient principles and anatomy of effective communication based on clarity. The field outcome reveals the need to take clarity seriously if our communication

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must be devoid of misunderstanding, rift and rancour. Hence the report stresses the need for a sender of message to have clear purpose for conveying messages which are received, interpreted and understood by the receiver exactly as intended by the sender in such a way that both (sender and receiver) are satisfied and happy with the communication outcome. The paper recommends a checklist to keep our communication simple, easy to read, understand and to the point.

Keywords: Communication, Communication process, Effective communication, Clarity, Understanding, Misunderstanding.

Introduction

Communication is a basic art of human survival. As the need to communicate continues among humans, survival depends entirely on how communication is handled. People always think they can communicate effectively, yet there are high tendencies of misunderstanding during these communication processes. Poor, ineffective communication could result in conflict, crises and even outright war.

It is so easy to take communication for granted. To assume that we can all communicate because we can talk, reach out and engage in communicative activities. Quite often, we assume we are smart at communicating than we are actually. We think that as unborn babies (fetuses) we communicated with our mothers in the womb and are therefore used to communicating.

As growing babies and toddlers we communicated during birth through verbal and nonverbal sounds and gestures as we uttered the first

cry, etc. We presume that because we are always talking with someone we are communicating clearly. Perhaps, this explains why Saputo (2000) says many people underestimate the importance of communication. After all, it seems like a pretty simple concept – just exchanging information between two people. However, effective communication is actually a complex process that involves several skills.

One of such skills is clarity. This means that our communication needs to be clear without direct or indirect ambiguity capable of causing barrier to understanding. A communicator should be able to express thoughts, feelings, and ideas rather than impress readers or listeners through showy or flowery writing and speaking.

Writing or speaking to impress compromise meaning and understanding in communication. It suggests that the communicator does not care about the intellectual, emotional and perception level of the receiver. Unclear communication is disrespect, an insult to the intelligence and a talk down to the receiver. Hence this paper seeks to appraise the value of clarity in effective communication context.

Theoretical Hinge and Method

This discourse is hinged on three-related theories, namely Cognitive Load Theory, Cognitive Bias and Reader Expectation principles.

In 1988, John Sweller coined this theory (Cognitive Load Theory) after a research to determine how much new information the limited human mind can process at one time. The theory suggests that human memory is only able to hold a small amount of information at any one time and that instructional method should avoid overloading it in order

to maximize learning (Sweller, 1988). In other words, the theory suggests that your ideas are complex; therefore, feed them to your reader one small spoon at a time (Robens, 2023).

The cognitive load theory is relevant to this work as it stresses the importance of clarity through conciseness, e.g: keep sentences short; avoid common phrases, text, the length of your sentences and paragraphs, etc. The Cognitive Load Theory enjoys popular application in instructional research and training, see the works of Marzano, R. J., Gaddy, B. B. and Dean, C. (2000); Clark, R. C., Nguyen, F. and Sweller, J. (2006); Baddeley, A. D. (2003) and others. Thus, selected cases of clarity highlighted in this discourse have clear relevance in the thesis of John Sweller's Cognitive Load Theory.

Cognitive Bias Principle refers to a systematic thought process caused by the tendency of the human brain to simplify information processing through a filter of personal experience and preferences (Gillis and Bernstein, 2023). Explaining cognitive bias, Robens (2023) holds that when you assume your readers have the same information or knowledge as you do. They do not. They have different educations, are reading different papers, and are researching different topics and although the ideas in your head are clear, they can be ambiguous to your readers. When that happens, they will get confused and stop reading your article. And you have lost impact.

This principle is relevant to this discourse as it advocates clarity as follows: avoid ambiguous demonstrative pronouns: e.g: 'this', 'that', 'these' etc. Avoid qualitative words; e.g: 'some', 'few', 'many', etc. Avoid subjective words: e.g: 'interestingly', 'surprisingly', 'strikingly', etc.

Reader Expectations *Principle*, developed by George Gopen (2015) posits writing for your audience, keeping focus on crafting a story reader will want to read. As a guide the communicator gives clues or signs as to where one is taking the reader. The relevance of reader expectation is found in words linkages for clarity sake, e.g:

Contrast	Similar	Addition	Result
However	Likewise	Additionally	Therefore
Although	Similarly	Moreover	Due to
By contrast	Also	Further more	Consequently

Credit: Dr Jeffery Robens (2023).

The paper was designed to use ethnographic method as a qualitative approach to collect data. Primary source data were obtained through interactions, conversations and interview instruments while secondary materials were obtained from library books, journals, documents and ICT soft copies. Data were interpreted, discoursed and analyzed in line with the paper's purpose.

Literature

Communication

Communication is as old as man. Yet scholars are unable to reach agreement on a common definition. Communication however, functions as a survival tool for all humans. It is a skill we need to get things done for ourselves, for others and to stay active in the world.

The word *communication* originates from the Latin word

communicare which means to impart or participate or to transmit. *Communicare* is derived from the root *communis* which means to *share* or to make *common*. Writing on “Communication: History of the Idea” John Durham Peters (2008) in an abstract confirms and sums it when he says:

The word communication is descended from the Latin noun *communicatio*, which meant a sharing or imparting. From the root *communis* (common, public) it has no relation to terms such as union or unity, but rather is linked to the Latin *munu* (duty, gift), and thus has relatives in such terms as common, immune, mad, mean, meaning, municipal, mutual, and German terms such as *Gemeinschaft* (community) and *meinung* (opinion). Its root senses have to do with change, and goods possessed by more than one person; the Latin verb *communicare* means to make common (p.3)

In most simple terms communication is defined as conveying a message to someone else. As a process, communication has no beginning and no ending. As an activity, the communication process begins with the sender and ends with the receiver. Elements in the communication process are the sender, the message, the channel, the receiver, including feedback, noise and the context.

Humans are, by nature, communication beings. They express themselves through communication, relate with others and build bonds through communication, develop ideas and attain goals through communication. It is an access to the minds, thoughts, feelings and souls

of other people. Through speaking, writing, paintings, listening, reading and observation skills man has been able to unravel the mysteries of the universe. For humans, communication is a must do. Hence, Wilson (1997: vii) notes that “communication surrounds his life like water surrounds fish”.

Three Views: Linear, Interactive and Transactive

Times are changing and newer definitions of communication are becoming possible. Scholars have, thus, classified emerging definitions into linear, interactive and transactional views. The linear view holds that communication is a one-way process, a transmission of messages from a sender to a receiver. Adler and Towne (1990) describe this as an injection of messages of some sort into a receiver.

In the interactive perspective, communication is perceived as a command or injection of information to someone else. Participants in the communication process are helped to match their individual mental images through a common sharing of educational background, age, occupation, group membership, lifestyle or habits which tend to erase their differences (Des, 2006). The transactional view holds that the images of the sender and the receiver are not separated because messages are sent and received simultaneously. Adler and Towne, in Wilson (2006) acknowledged that at a given moment in the process:

We are capable of receiving, decoding and responding to another's behaviour, while at the same time, the other person is receiving and responding to ours. In this view, both our verbal and non-verbal skills are constantly being exchanged. (p.26)

In other words, it is difficult to isolate a single discrete act of communication from the events that preceded and follow it because of the continuous transactional process involving participants who are overwhelmed by overlapping communication environments and are often creating relationship by simultaneously sending and receiving messages. Meanwhile, these messages are distorted by physical and psychological noise (Des, 2006) which is capable of affecting effectiveness of the process.

Effective Communication

The principle of effective communication implies that the sender (encoder) sends a message which is received (decoded), interpreted and understood with clarity as conceived, intended by the sender who gets appropriate feedback devoid of distortion from intervening noise in the context of communication. In other words:

Effective communication is the process of exchanging ideas, thoughts, opinions, knowledge and data so that the message is received and understood with clarity and purpose. When we communicate effectively, both the sender and receiver feel satisfied (www.coursera.org).

For effective communication to take place, the process must involve a sender, receiver, message, channel, noise, feedback and context. Besides, the process must be based on trust, respect, understanding, empathy and resolution. This means that there must be

mutual consistence and reliance between the communicator and the communicatee. They must have high regard for themselves. The sender must be knowledgeable of the receiver's ability and vice versa. Both must be able to understand and identify with the thoughts, feelings and emotional state of the other. A will to get it right, to achieve a determined purpose clearly, is necessary to achieve effective communication. To be effective, your communication must be simple and clear.

On Clarity

Clarity is derived from the Latin word *claret* which means 'brightness'. Clarity is an inextricable component of communication. Oxford Dictionary defines clarity as *quality of being clear, coherent, intelligible, easy to see or hear, distinct, and free from ambiguity*. Over the years, scholars, researchers, professionals have defined, re-defined, and expanded the gamut of literature on clarity, especially clarity in communication. See the works of Schnelder (2002); Strunk (20005); Bischof, Nicole & Eppler (2011), etc

Emphasizing the need for clarity, Lingard (2022) says:

Clarity is the prerequisite for everything else a writer is trying to achieve. Aiming for conversational prose? Trying to write lyrically? Mounting a scathing argument? Crafting a subtle one. None is within reach unless the prose is first clear. But if clarity is the cornerstone of everything else we're trying to achieve, then what's the cornerstone of clarity?

(link.springer.com).

What is the cornerstone that Lingard is asking about here? Follow this discourse to the end and we shall read the answer. Meantime, Antoni Team (2022) notes:

So many people feel that they are crystal clear in their communication. But if everyone is so great at communicating with clarity how come there are so many misunderstandings? (antonilacina.com)

This tells us that when our communication is clear, there will be no misunderstanding, misinterpretation and conflict. The sender and receiver of messages would have common, mutual understanding such that both are satisfied and sincerely happy. Their goals or purposes are achieved without a doubt. Clear, effective communication means that the encoder keeps the decoder in mind in the communication process. The message sender did not speak, write or use words, languages, terms, visuals or creative descriptions above the comprehension of the message receiver. The communicator keeps the communication at the level of the recipient.

When the audience is kept in mind this way, it shows transparency and empathy. One, it shows that the message sender has nothing to hide hence he is coming out clean and clear. Two, trust is enhanced as the communicator is able to quickly close the gap with the audience. It shows some respect for the audience as they are easily

carried along. Clear communication, well understood, makes lasting impression and satisfaction to both source and destination. Besides, it increases message integrity (pathos) and sender's credibility (ethos).

A writer online, antonilacina.com said something meaningful and relevant on this subject:

Clarity means you as a sender of a message, will deliver a specific message. Your message should have very specific goals. So rather than trying to say too many things at the same time, make sure that you state clearly what you want your audience to do. So make it clear about the intention of your message. (antonilacina.com)

Scholars have agreed on some principles or tips that are of essence if clarity is actually in mind. See Clarice Brant and Michele Miller (20022); Shalini Verma (2022); Carolyn Kerner Stain (2022); Dean Brenner (2022) and a host of others. Let us summarize these tips.

A Checklist for Clarity

- * Have specific goal or purpose for communicating. Communicating is aimless without a goal.
- * Choose your words. Selecting appropriate words is meaningful.
- * Avoid words that look alike...or sound alike.... They create confusion in audience minds.
- * Verify the meaning of words. Some words are offensive and misleading.
- * Use familiar words or expressions. Jargons and unknown

acronyms are like junk food.

- * Avoid clichés. They are overused trite expressions.
- * If you are speaking, use the pause. It is a form of “speaking punctuation” similar to using a comma or period when writing.
- * Place words in orderly sequence. It lays out meanings in a series.
- * If you are preparing spoken message, use a dictionary to verify pronunciations. To avoid words that sounds alike and confusing.
- * Read your message aloud to ensure that word order does not sound awkward or unconvincing. It is a good check for the ear.
- * Use few words. Short sentences are forceful and emphatic.
- * Every sentence or paragraph should carry only one central idea. It makes for clear understanding.
- * Sentences should never be painted with ideas. They may agree or contradict each other.
- * Limit use of “it” and “there”. Use the name.
- * Position phrases and clauses correctly. You will see a difference in meaning.
- * Use pictures or photos. They speak louder than a thousand words.

5 Examples

- * Check the pattern of placing subject before verb. It usually provides the clearest sequence. E.g.:
 - Wrong | Praise is the Lord
 - Right | The Lord is praised
- * When using a pronoun, make sure the pronoun restates the intended reference, the antecedent. Change the word order or word

choice when any confusion exists between a pronoun and an antecedent.

- * Expression such as “his” or “hers”, “he” and “she”, or “him” or “her” could be confusing to readers. E.g.:

Wrong | Baron spoke with Ashley while he participated in his online space.

Right | While participating on his online space, Baron spoke with Ashley.

- * Be specific with “it” and “there”. E. g:

Wrong | It is said that Celebrity is the most beautiful girl in class.

Right | Celebrity is the most beautiful girl in class.

Wrong | There is a girl with the difference in class.

Right | Daisy is the girl with the difference in class.

- * Incorrectly placed phrases can create unintended humour, cause misunderstanding, and reduce your credibility.

Wrong | Daddy bought a new car for his wife's birthday of gold colour.

Right | Daddy bought a gold colour car for his wife's birthday.

- * Correctly placed clauses make meaning clear. Incorrectly placed clause can create confusion. E.g.:

Wrong | The bizjet was the best which Tuazorte bought 2 days to his wedding in Port Harcourt.

Right | The bizjet which Tuazorte bought 2 days to his wedding in Port Harcourt, was the best.

Conclusion

A popular axiom in communication says: *man cannot communicate*. This means that man cannot help but to communicate because man is by nature a communication being or agent. He is surrounded by communication which he needs to survive, to get things done for him and to reach out to others in his world. The inevitable nature of communication makes one think that it is so easy to communicate. But, frequent breakdown in communication, leading to misunderstanding, rift, quarrel and sometimes war, is an indication that communication is an activity to handle with skill and tact to avoid failure. Saputo (2022) affirms this when she says, it can happen in a fraction of a second. All it takes is a shrug, a sigh, or small signal of body language to turn a well-intentioned conversation into an unhealthy one.

Sales Force Researchers on interpersonal communication found that the process is complex, as about 93 percent of our communication is nonverbal. According to Saputo (2022) what we say is only a part of what we communicate as communication relies on up to 55 percent body language, 38 percent tone of voice and only 7 percent the words we use. The dynamic and mechanistic nature of communication is a call for CLARITY if we must attain effective communication.

Now, Lingard's question comes to mind. What is the cornerstone of clarity? Lingard (2022) says the answer may sound like a standard admonition about academic writing which includes:

Write shorter sentences! Avoid passive voice! And Limit unnecessary jargon! The trouble is that such advice is insufficient: you can follow these rules and and still lose your reader in the boggy prose. That is because the cornerstone of clarity is not just word number, or word choice, or word meaning – it is also word location.(link.springer.com).

Some may say communication in English is tricky, yet one is expected to write easy-to-read and/or speak easy to understand messages. Whatever you think, when next you write, make a bodily movement, or someone says to you, hi there, just remember to keep your communication *clear or perish*.

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