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LANGUAGE AND LEARNING

Theorists also argue that there is a relationship between language and knowledge. Dance (1982) contended that human capacity to use speech, to talk and listen, leads to the development of human conceptualization, which is necessary for the development of intellect, understanding, and knowledge.

Language does more than package or represent something, it embodies an individual's understanding of the world (Langer, 1942; Stewart, 1986). Knowledge, then, is socially constructed rather than individually received. Sprague (1992) argued that individuals interested in instructional communication have focused too much on the role of teacher talk in the classroom. She contended that student talk facilitates learning of all subjects and should therefore, be understood by teachers and researchers as well. Vygotsky (1981), a prominent Russian scholar, contended that mental processes and communication are inextricably intertwined. That is, the ability to learn and think is connected to communication processes. One of Vygotsky's major contributions was the zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1978). The zone of proximal development is the distance between independent problem solving ability and the potential development that can be accomplished through adult guidance or in collaboration with more skilled peers. Communication, therefore, is the mechanism through which these developmental processes occur.

According to Forman and Cazden (1998), communication with more competent peers, teachers, and tutors requires individuals to reconcile different perspectives on an issue or problem and as a consequence experience cognitive growth. Negotiation is one of the communication activities that influences cognition. (Azmitia, 1998; Miller, 1987). As individuals move from childhood to adulthood, they must learn to manage situations involving alternative viewpoints. Negotiation requires individuals to engage in arguments that reveal strengths and weaknesses of a perspective.

Think about the way in which students deliberate on classroom projects.

The tension fueled from these exchanges must be resolved. Learning a new perspective or developing a new insight is one way the tension is resolved. Knowledge, then, is not passively received, but emerges through interaction with peers and teachers.

The relationship between learning and language is at the core of constructivist approaches to education. Constructivism is predicated on the belief that learners construct their own meaning from interaction with texts, problems, materials, students, teachers, and other features of the learning environment (Arends, Winitzky, & Tannenbaum, 2001). Students are not empty vessels to be filled with some type of intellectual fluid. Each student comes to the educational environment, steeped in experiences, competencies, and beliefs. Communication processes play a significant role in the way instructional processes are managed.

Listening

The final aspect of the communication process that we wish to discuss is listening. Meanings are intimately tied to listening ability. Students who are distracted do not focus on main ideas and have difficulty following instructional messages. Wolvin and Coakley (1993) provided a useful typology of listening consisting of five major functions.

According to Wolvin and Coakley, discriminative listening is distinguishing among auditory and visual stimuli. This type of listening undergirds all other forms of listening. In the classroom, teachers and students must sort through a wide range of auditory stimuli. Students talking, shuffling papers, snapping gum, the squeak of chalk, are among the sounds that are processed in the classroom context.

Discriminative ability is fundamental to musicians, auto mechanics, parents and teachers. Each must determine the significance of certain sounds and how to respond to them. The musician learns how to coordinate certain tones and blend them into melodies. The mechanic listens to the “ping” in an engine to determine why it isn’t running smoothly.

Parents learn to differentiate cries for attention from cries of fatigue. Students and teachers must sort out a multitude of stimuli as they negotiate the meanings of instructional material.

Listening for comprehension builds on discrimination of stimuli to an understanding of the message. Many of the educational processes engage this listening function. Students listen to lectures, student reports, classroom discussions, announcements, and the admonitions of teachers.

Successful comprehension requires that listeners avoid an evaluative attitude about the topic being discussed or the speaker. A student, who does not like history, may have difficulty attending to a lecture on the Revolutionary War. Listening is made particularly difficult then the listener does not like the speaker. It is easier to attend to messages from people we like and tune out messages from people we dislike.

Listening is facilitated when the listener can identify the speaker's main ideas. As we have observed, in any instructional context, a multitude of messages are shared. Listeners must learn to discard extraneous information and focus on that which is most relevant to the instructional task.

Comprehension is difficult in diverse classrooms where there may be vast differences in vocabulary. Students may hear many words but not know what they mean. Finally, comprehension requires listeners to store information in short-term memory, rehearse it, and move it into long-term memory so that it can be retrieved later.

Therapeutic listening, according to Wolvin and Coakley (1993) requires that the listener help the speaker solve problems. To fulfill this function, the listener serves as a "sounding board" so that the speaker can identify ways to define and solve a problem. Teachers often play this role when they listen to the difficulties students have at home, or the struggles they have with friends at school. In these contexts, the teacher attempts to empathize with the speaker and show understanding.

However, when students are experiencing more serious emotional difficulties, they should be advised to consult with professionals who are trained in counseling.

Critical listening requires the listener to render a judgment about the information received. This skill is invoked in several ways. When a speaker's purpose is to persuade, a listener must make a judgment about the validity and strength of evidence. Effectiveness in this situation requires listeners to understand the way in which persuasive arguments are structured and supported. Teachers put on their "critical" listening hats when they listen to student accounts for late work or a problematic pattern of behavior. They also model good listening when they help students process good arguments from more problematic ones. Students must learn that criticizing an argument does not mean criticizing the person.

The final function that Wolvin and Coakley (1993) discussed is appreciative listening. Listening to music, the sounds of a mountain stream, of a favorite television program are examples of appreciative listening. This type of listening is subject to individual tastes and standards. Conduct a survey of your class and identify the different music forms that students like.

There are numerous circumstances that make effective listening difficult. One is that listening is always part of an interpersonal relationship. I have frequently heard teachers ask students, "Are you listening?" What they are really saying is that the students are not doing what the teachers want them to do. It is easier for participants to listen to individuals they respect and like and tune out and counter-argue with individuals they do not like. In addition to these relational features, there are other blocks to effective listening worth mentioning:

- Preoccupation: Listeners feign attention while they think about other things. Students may grin and nod, exhibiting attentive behaviors, while thinking about what they want for lunch.
- Noise: As we noted earlier in this chapter, internal and external noise can distort instructional messages and interfere with the creation of meaning.
- Information overload: Listeners process information better in manageable chunks. When students receive too much information, too quickly, they may tune the teacher out.

- Boredom: Listeners easily tune out a speaker who is monotone, slow paced, and uses no vocal variety.

- Selection: Listeners will tune into information they perceive is relevant and tune out information they believe is irrelevant. These choices are based on personal tastes and attitudes.

- Counter-argument: Listeners listen to those features they can refute. As a consequence, they may miss other important features of communication.

- Language competency: Listening is difficult when listeners do not understand the language being spoken. This is especially true when speakers are continually translating the messages they hear.

Listening is often treated as an independent category of the communication process. We believe that listening is part of a host of behaviors that are used to make sense out of instructional material. Cooper and Simmonds (1999) contended that effective listeners are actively involved in the communication process. One effective strategy is to paraphrase another person's message. The goal of paraphrasing is to capture the content and feelings of the other's response. A student who feels that an assignment is too difficult may blurt out, "I don't get it, this isn't clear." A teacher might paraphrase this statement by saying, "You seem anxious about this assignment."

Another strategy that Cooper and Simmonds discussed is perception checking. The purpose of this technique is to assess another's thoughts, feelings, or perceptions. According to Cooper and Simmonds, perception checking involves three ideas: (1) referencing the sensory data leading to a conclusion; (2) the conclusion that has been drawn; and (3) a question asking the other if your conclusion is accurate. For example, a teacher may have a student athlete who has been late with homework and inattentive in class. The teacher may be concerned that the student is spending too much time on the athletic field and not enough time studying. In probing this situation, a teacher may ask this student if she understood the assignment that was due.

There are other ways to facilitate effective listening, however. We want to emphasize that listening is part of an on-going interpersonal relationship that is established and maintained. Effective listening involves more than implementing a few techniques. Good listeners and good communicators are sensitive to a host of behaviors that are involved in the communication process. As your knowledge of this process increases, so will your communication ability.

Summary

Over the years, researchers have come to appreciate the complexity of human communication. Early theoretical approaches were linear and simplistic. Contemporary orientations are complex and circular.

Communication processes are negotiated among participants as they act upon the meanings they construct and share. Verbal and nonverbal behaviors are the mechanisms through which instructional sense making is achieved. Contemporary theorists also emphasize the powerful relationship between learning and communication. How we come to understand instructional material is a function of communication.

References

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