Digital communication through effective verbal language in the 21ˢᵗ century classroom

Topic: intercultural communication

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Abstract: The paper presents a piece of small-scale research carried out with 17-year-old students who follow an intensive five-year course in EFL. In accordance with the curriculum for the eleventh grade, they are presented with classical British and American literature. To motivate students to participate in classes and develop their skills to interpret and analyse short literary texts, the teacher relies on students' digital literacy and digital technologies. The author's aim is to describe the participants, the messages, noise, feedback and channel of communication in a new context, i.e. the 21ˢᵗ century classroom where students often communicate with each other and the teacher not only face-to-face but most of the time digitally while performing various tasks and completing assignments. Involved in project work and student-centred activities on themes discussed by classical authors, the students are asked to share ideas and opinions, comment on written assignments and assess formatively peer work on digital platforms. This in turn requires the usage of verbal language for communication. And here come the two questions:

1. Are students prepared to use appropriate verbal language to foster digital communication within a group?
2. How can teachers help students foster a dialogue based on mutual respect, understanding and friendly criticism?

Keywords: digital communication, verbal language, 21century classroom, peer assessment.

Introduction

This small-scale research was carried out with a group of thirty 17-year-old students at Second English Language School "Thomas Jefferson"- Sofia, Bulgaria, who follow an intensive five-year course in English as a foreign language. The author's aim is to describe the participants, as well as the messages, noise, feedback and channel of communication in a new context, i.e. that of the 21ˢᵗ century classroom where students often communicate digitally performing various tasks and completing assignments. The focus is on the verbal language the participants use to comment and evaluate peer written assignments published on digital platforms.

Theoretical observation

For the purposes of this paper before describing the methodology and summarizing the results from the small-scale research, I would like to begin with an overview of the concept of the 21ˢᵗ century classroom and my understanding of intercultural communication.

What is meant by a 21ˢᵗ century classroom?

There are probably as many answers to this question as there are educators: some comment on the learning and innovation skills – the 4 Cs (Critical thinking, Communication, Collaboration and Creativity) [1], others discuss the core subjects (English, reading or language arts, world languages, arts, mathematics, economics, science, geography, history, government and civics) and the interdisciplinary themes to be incorporated into them (Global Awareness, Financial Economic, Business and Entrepreneurial Literacy, Civic Literacy, Health Literacy and Environmental Literacy) [2]. What matters most to me as a teacher is the learning environment, i.e. the teaching and learning strategies used in the classroom. This is an area of particular interest to active teachers world-wide since taking into consideration their teaching experience, colleagues across countries have come up with a different number of characteristics of the 21ˢᵗ century classroom. Taking for granted that the learning environment

is student-centric, that the teacher is a facilitator and there is mutual respect between the participants in this learning environment, my idea of a 21st century classroom is as follows:
- New technologies;
- Collaboration;
- PBL (Project-based learning);
- Creativity;
- Performance-based assessment.

What do I understand by interpersonal communication?
Of course the commentators, the environment, etc. in interpersonal communication are important, but for my short-scale research the channel and the message play a leading role. I believe that the most important part of interpersonal communication is the production and interpretation of messages. This is in tune with Burleson's understanding of interpersonal communication which is 'a complex, situated social process in which people who have established a communicative relationship exchange messages in an effort to generate shared meanings and accomplish social goals'. [3]
Following Burleson's idea of a message-centered approach to interpersonal communication: the interactants (the students), being part of one class and members of one blog, have established a communicative relationship where a specific structure of "reciprocal expressive and interpretive intentions among interactants" exists. [3] And here comes the question: Are students prepared to use appropriate verbal language to foster digital communication within a group?
In an attempt to answer this question, the teacher plays first, the role of an observer, collecting information on the following questions: What is the context of communication? Who are the communicators? What messages have they exchanged commenting peer work? Who are the communicators? What messages have they exchanged commenting peer work?

What are the Elements of Interpersonal Communication?
Communicators' profile:
A. Communicators
School: 2ELS "Thomas Jefferson", Sofia
Time: 4 weeks
Number of students: 30 (17 boys : 13 girls)
Age: 17
Proficiency in English: B2+ – C1 (CEFR)
Course: intensive five-year course in English as a foreign language
Syllabus: British and American Literature (XVIth - XIXth century)
Method: English through Literature
Challenges: Motivation to Read, interpret and analyze short excerpts from literary works

B. The message: verbal language used to convey meaning

C. Noise: the use of inappropriate language, complicated jargon, etc.

D. Feedback: the messages the recipients return

E. Communication context (Applegate and Delia: 1980) in terms of:
▪ the physical setting (blog)
▪ the relational setting (classmates)

- the institutional setting (home/school)
- the functional setting (the primary goal pursued – formative peer assessment)
- the cultural setting (Bulgarian teenagers studying English intensively).

Figure 1. The five dimensions of context (adapted from Applegate and Delia: 1980)
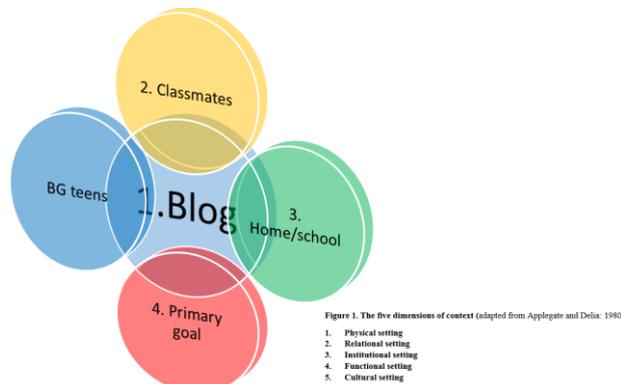
The interpersonal communication occurred in the intersection of these five dimensions of context.

F. Channel: messages transferred online in the blog. Interestingly enough, although there is an audio channel available as well, no one from the communicators has recorded their comments.

What are the characteristics of the interpersonal communication in question?

- Asynchronous communication through a blog (Seesaw) for a limited period of time (4 weeks)
- Closeness between the communicators (experience a sense of closeness since they are members of one class and know each other)
- Usage of verbal language for communication
- Lack of non-verbal language for communication
- Teacher-moderated (blog comments require Teacher approval)

Data collection

Following the curriculum for the eleventh grade, the students are presented with British and American literature from XVIth through XIXth centuries, i. e. classical writers belonging to the literary canon of British (Shakespeare, Jane Austen, the Bronte sisters, A. C. Doyle, Dickens) and American (W. Irving, N. Hawthorne, M. Twain) literature. To motivate students to participate in literature classes and develop their skills to interpret and analyse short literary texts, the teacher relies on the students' digital literacy and the latest digital technologies.

The teaching and learning methods used are a combination of the traditional and the flipped 21st century classroom in which students communicate with each other and their teacher not only face-to-face but most of the time digitally. Involved in project work and student-centred activities structured around different topics and themes discussed by classical authors, the students are asked to share ideas and opinions, discuss written assignments or comment on and assess formatively individual, pair-work or group work on digital platforms. This in turn requires the usage of verbal language for communication.

A. Roles of communicators:

The students were allotted two main roles according to Burleson categorization:

1. The source (a pair of students) whose aim (the expressive intention) is to convey/ share their idea of a 21st century interpretation of Hester Prynne's trial scene from

Nathaniel Hawthorne's novel The Scarlet Letter to their classmates by either producing a short digital video or a PowerPoint presentation.
2. The recipients (the rest of the class) whose aim (the interpretive intention) is to comprehend/recognize the expressive intention of the source so that they reach the goal - giving formative assessment.

Figure 2. Communicators' roles according to Burleson's categorization
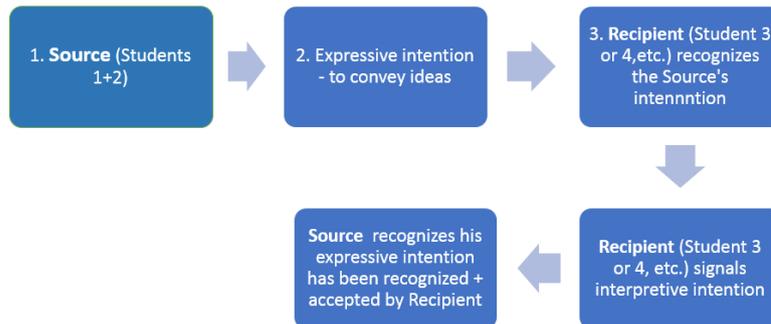

Figure 2. Communicators' roles according to Berleson's categorization

These roles are reciprocal in the interpersonal relationship.

B. Stages**:**
During the research, the communicators went through two stages of training:
    1. Pre-training stage:

    In the beginning, more than 80 % of the messages sent by the recipients were:
    a. closely following the communication patterns typical of online communication nowadays, i. e. various emoticons in the form of smilies, hearts, etc. used in e-mails, chat rooms, blogs, interactive internet platforms, etc.;
    b. rewarding one-word/ two-word comments imitating short text messages sent via mobile cellular phone networks.
    To change the situation from a conversation end to a conversation starter and make the channel of communication more effective, I used in class a discussion on 'What makes a good comment?' and the suggestions offered by Seesaw platform (Digital Citizenship Guidelines). The students were given recommendations and useful examples how to add comments and participate in blogs by being curious, respectful and positive. After the short training session, the students were asked to use these tips when giving formative assessment to peer work on the Seesaw platform.

    2. Post-training stage:
    In this CMC the students appeared in reciprocal expressive and interpretive intention roles: first, they acted as sources expecting signals from the recipients, then as recipients sending signals of recognition to the sources.

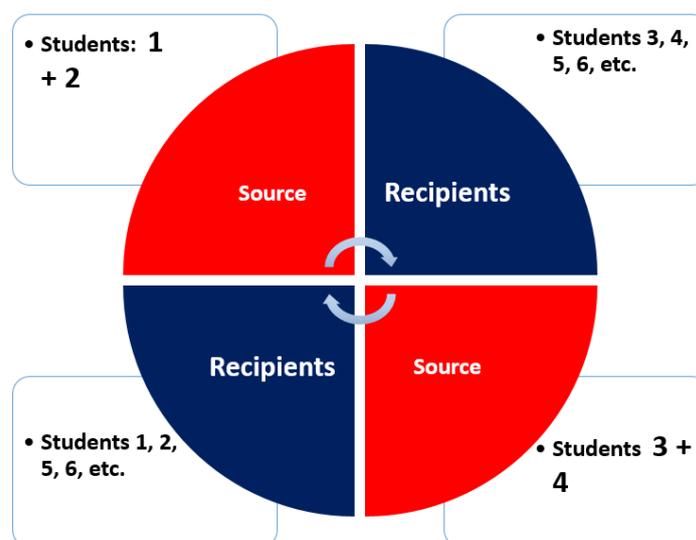Figure 3. Reciprocal roles of communicators.

Figure 3. Reciprocal roles of communicators.

What objectives did the students pursue in their roles?

The objectives pursued by sources were related to giving a modern interpretation of a trial scene, support their ideas with explanations and entertain through the messages produced

The objectives pursued by the recipients were related to understanding the messages sent by the sources, to requesting clarification and offering useful suggestions.

In order to accomplish the ultimate goal (give formative assessment to peer work), the recipients have made an attempt to recognize messages/meanings through verbal language and the use of a very few emoticons.

Summarising the findings:

In terms of the content of the exchanged verbal language, the recipients' comments come under the following headings:

A. Positive reinforcement: 16 students, just over 50 % used language of appraisal:

Examples:

1.

A: *It's cleverly presented and I love the font and backgrounds... (Approved)*
B: *Hahah it's funny. I like such hilarious presentations with animations and recognisable characters. I also like how you edited one of the pictures. (Approved)*

C: *I really enjoyed watching your presentation! I like it the most. I find the pictures really entertaining and they definitely capture my attention. You did a great job presenting the story in a modern and accessible way. (Approved)*

B. Negative reinforcement: 1 student expressed negative feelings

1. A*: This video is poorly produced, but I get the appeal of it. Commenting on the state of Sharia law and Muslim culture as a whole, maybe in a hostile way, but fair points are risen. Plato must hit the gym*!

C. Neutral statements: 1 student didn't express directly feelings

1. **A***: I got the point, to interpret the whole thing, as a fluid, rather than a story set in stone with no room for abstract thought. (Approved)*

D. A combination of positive reinforcement and making suggestions: 10 students, one third of the students not only enjoyed the production of the sources but used friendly criticism offering helpful suggestions to the sources as well. In terms of functional language they used appropriate grammatical structures, for example, if-sentences, modals expressing suggestions, subjunctive.

1.

   A: One thing that made impression on me is the long silence when the picture is switching between characters so you could find a way to fix that the next time you film something.

2.

   A: *There are two seats at Marvel Comics waiting for you.*
   B: *I really like the way you've presented the story of adultery with pictures and every picture tells a bit of the story but without any text I couldn't really understand what's going on. So you could add 3-4 words just to make clear what's happening and you could add to the story a bit of the trial.*
   C: *I got the point, to interpret the whole thing, as a fluid, rather than a story set in stone with no room for abstract thought. (Approved)*

3.

   A: *I loved every slide of it.*
   B: *Your presentation is intended to be a banter and you succeeded, pretty neat done! Congratulations!*
   C: *I find your presentation really entertaining. The way you've presented the court and the dialogue is original and I really like the troll face. I suggest you make the presentation longer*
   D: *It really is a modern interpretation. I love it.. The court and the memes are perfect ideas. Maybe Viki is right and it should have been a little longer. (Pending Approval)*

4.

   A: *I like your work and how the trial is presented in details so I get a clear idea of what's going on. However, if I were you I would try to use less text on the slides.*

   B: *Your presentation flows really good. I like the photos you've added instead of plain slide designs. The only thing I'd recommend is using less text, instead; maybe one or two words to summarise the information.*

E. No comments – two of the participants in the research did not comment.

F. Since this is interpersonal communication, it is normal for the interactants to ask questions. Only three questions are used, two of them are closed questions (Yes/No type questions) and one tag question of the type simple lead which serves a particular response. What is interesting is that although a very short minimal answer to Yes/No Questions is expected, the source gives a full, elaborate one.

Questions:
   1. A: *The woman is not Martin, is it?*
       Response – B: silence
   2. A: *Did you find out if there is such kind of law in Bulgaria?*

Response:
B: Unfortunately, no, but I think that there is no such law.
3. *A: Did you know Joshua means Jesus in Israel?*
Response: silence

Management of the interaction
An interesting point is that unless there is a question asked, the source group of students did not show in any way that they have accepted or recognized the recipient's interpretive intention, i.e. the comment on the PowerPoint presentation or video they have produced, This leaves the interaction open since there have been no moves towards closing the interaction on either side of the interactants.

Conclusion
How can students use verbal language more effectively for their learning purposes? Definitely through more practice. As it is seen from that small-scale research, most of the students have started applying some of the suggested techniques for proper language of reinforcement. Very few of them have, I believe purposefully, been trying to evade the issue of appropriateness. Taking into consideration the number of rewarding comments, the offered suggestions and the limited time during which the students have been involved in that interpersonal communication, it is obvious that what they need is more practice. Besides that, I firmly believe that the teacher's role of a moderator by default, on whose judgment pend all written comments, is of crucial importance in such learning environments. Without it learners will never be able to fully realize that good communication irrespective of the channels of communication is built on mutual respect.

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