

PROFESSIONAL COMMUNICATION AND LANGUAGE EXPERTS

Oana-Celia GHEORGHIU

“Dunarea de Jos” University of Galati, Romania

oana.gheorghiu@ugal.ro

Abstract

This paper aims to develop a model of a potential syllabus to be used for the academic subject Professional Communication (in English) taught to second-year students in Applied Modern Languages, starting from the premise that they may become good communicators in areas that go beyond their domain. The model is based on Jakobson’s functions of communication, aided, for enhanced cross-cultural comprehension, by Hofstede’s six dimensions of national and organizational culture.

Keywords: communication, professional environment, culture compass, academic programme

Introduction

Professional communication as an academic subject refers to a specialized subfield of Communication Studies, anchored in Language Theory, with all that it entails, but also in various elements of Business Management, Behavioural Sciences, Information Technology, etc. It is, in fact, a dynamic interdisciplinary domain with wide applicability at all societal and professional levels. A more concentrated definition would place Professional Communication in a workplace context or environment, stressing the communicator’s listening, speaking, reading and writing skills in relation to the specific domain of the respective organization. In this case, one speaks about professional communication in factories, business companies, administration, courts of law, hospitals or medical offices, schools and other educational sites, on the internet, etc. The problem with such a restrictive definition is that neither of these organizational areas (nor others) exists in a vacuum; they interact, communicate with each other, borrow elements from each other, etc. In short, one can hardly speak about a professional communicator who can only act/activate within a single, clearly defined area of expertise, even less so in contemporaneity, which has been placed under the sign of interculturality. “Intercultural communication can become especially problematic for business communicators when they begin to believe that the way people in their dominant culture communicate is the only or best way, or when they fail to learn and appreciate the cultural norms of the people they do business with” (Waldeck et al 2012). This new reality elicits the necessity of identifying a more comprehensive definition of professional communication. Communication trainers are bound to soon give up “sectarian” approaches in favour of more inclusive ones. This is not to say that a spokesperson of a governmental organization, for example,

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Non-Commercial 4.0. International License

should be versed in ‘Medicalese’ or that a legal communicator should compulsorily ‘speak IT’ fluently but simply that communicators from various areas should definitely be able to address other communicators, and especially audiences, from other fields.

Professional Communication and the Academia

Steps are being taken at the moment, throughout the world, with the establishment of academic programmes which offer B.A. and M.A. degrees in Professional Communication to people with different backgrounds, who intend to apply the knowledge acquired in as many fields. Such programmes – a good case in point is the M.A. in Professional Communication offered by the University of Tampa, Florida – should design their curricula carefully so as not to insist too much on a specific area in which communication may occur, nor to end up disregarding possible communication instances. Such a programme would ideally offer courses in Leadership, Global Communication, Digital Communication, Conflict Resolution, Strategic Communication, Ethics, as well as various courses teaching students the most banal “how to”: how to speak/ behave, how to make yourself understood according to the audience addressed. It goes without saying that a specific piece of information can be delivered in multiple ways, in various degrees of linguistic complexity or with innumerable versions/variants. If one takes, for example, an event of global magnitude, like the COVID-19 pandemic, its narrative will vary in length – from 1-2 minutes in news programmes to hours in televised debates/talk shows -, in the intended audience – it is one thing to explain the lockdown to employees that would continue their work remotely, a whole different thing to those who will not, who will lose their jobs, and yet another story if one needs to provide the necessary information to the so-called “essentials” or “first responders”. Furthermore, audiences vary in age, education level, social condition, etc. (Prompted by habit, I had added ‘gender’ to this traditional list of sociological categories but I deleted it on a second, perhaps feminist thought, as I believe that men and women can and will comprehend a message in the same extent.). Academic programmes throughout the world are currently providing expertise in dealing with these and many other aspects of communication in professional environments.

Romanian higher education also offers an extensive area of programmes in the field of Communication Studies. To quote just a few, the Faculty of Communication and Public Relations of the National University of Political Studies and Public Administration (SNSPA, Bucharest) lists Brand Management and Corporate Communication, Audio-Visual Communication, Leadership and Political Communication, Management and Business Communication, Communication and PR, Social Media and Online Marketing, Communication and EU Affairs, Communication and Advertising, etc. The Cross-border Faculty of “Dunarea de Jos” University of Galati, the only faculty in the country with a clearly delineated intercultural profile, owing to their teaching exclusively abroad, offers students in the Republic of Moldova two M.A.s in Communication Studies – a more educationally oriented one, Multicultural Communication and Multilingualism, and a professional one, Institutional Communication, mainly dedicated to graduates interested in a career in public administration.

Besides these programmes, courses in communication may (and should) be encountered in the curricula of B.A. or M.A. programmes with a completely different specialization. A good case in point is the subject Professional Communication (in English) present in the syllabus of the M.S.

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Non-Commercial 4.0. International License

in Advanced Information Technology, at the Faculty of Automation, Computers, Electrical Engineering and Electronics (“Dunarea de Jos University of Galati”), a combination of Communication Studies and English for Specific Purposes. Such interdisciplinary encounters are, nevertheless, still the exception rather than the rule. If IT experts understand – surely based on personal experiences – that communication *in English* is key nowadays, other domains still need to catch up with the idea and are content with providing their students only the compulsory English class in the first year of their undergraduate programmes. As much as we, as a worldwide academic body, would advocate and support cross-disciplinarity in the academia, when it comes to the 4 language skills, to “speaking, listening, writing, and responding both in and beyond the workplace, whether in person or electronically” (Nordquist 2018), which should be basic knowledge baggage for *everybody*, regardless of their specialty, they are mostly left for *language experts* to deal with.

Since this is the situation, and with consideration of the fact that “effective professional communication is a practical skill underpinned by a framework of values” (De Beaufort et al 1996), in what follows, this study will attempt to identify ways in which professional communication in English undertaken by (future) language experts can be improved with the help of a syllabus designed for second-year students in Applied Modern Languages.

Applied Modern Languages and *Professional Communication*

In Romanian higher education system, the undergraduate programme *Applied Modern Languages* is included in the homonymous branch of the domain Philology, as the alternative to the two-language programmes in Language and Literature. Considered to have wider applicability than the latter, which is, unfairly so, regarded as a sort of ‘teachers’ training’ programme, the Applied Modern Languages programmes throughout the country (and in the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine, in the case of the Cross-border Faculty) are generally successful in terms of the number of candidates opting for them at the admission to universities, based on their potential impact on the labour market. Possible career paths advertised for graduates of Applied Modern Languages programmes include translators, interpreters, editors, cultural counsellors, public clerks, PR relations officers, research assistants, etc.

In an attempt to point out the shared aspects emphasised by the proponents of this type of philological programme in more Romanian universities, with a view to rounding off the discussion on *professional communication*, the aims and features of this type of programme are quoted below from the presentations posted on the official websites of several faculties which administer and offer it.

“Dunarea de Jos” University of Galati, the Cross-border Faculty (also present in the offer of the Faculty of Letters)

The B.A. programme in *Applied Modern Languages* sets out from the interdisciplinary approach of Linguistics and Translation Studies. In the context of globalization, which also entails a genuine dialogue of cultures, the formation of experts capable of mastering the principles of **cross-cultural communication at a professional level** becomes of the essence. The aim of the programme is to train specialists familiar with the communication issues, the intercultural relations, and the European present, from a linguistic and cultural perspective.

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Non-Commercial 4.0. International License

“Babes-Bolyai” University of Cluj-Napoca, Faculty of Letters

The *Applied Modern Languages* specialization trains and develops superior competencies of general and specialized translation, terminology, **multilingual professional communication**, applied information technology and multimedia, text editing and proofreading, economics, accounting, marketing, management, law, public relations, international relations.

University of Bucharest, Faculty of Foreign Languages and Literatures

The aim of the *Applied Modern Languages* specialization is to provide professional, multidisciplinary, theoretical and practical higher education able to train students in optimal conditions for their work in corporations or enterprises and, at the same time, to support the specific research activities. The specialization in Applied Modern Languages includes at least two foreign languages associated with applicative subjects from the areas of law, economics, international trade, **professional communication**, translation tools and techniques, computer-assisted translation, etc.

Mention should be made that *Applied Modern Languages* B.A. programmes are also offered by technical or highly specialized universities, like the Polytechnic, the University of Economic Studies, or the Technical University of Civil Engineering (all from Bucharest). As one should expect, these programmes are more ESP-oriented than the homonymous programmes provided by general universities. Notwithstanding, it is obvious from the short presentations above that professional communication and intercultural communication are keywords and common denominators for this type of academic training.

Professional Communication (in English).

An undeniable advantage of the undergraduate programmes in Applied Modern Languages is that they are delivered in foreign languages, which, at least partially and theoretically, evades the inherent difficulties encountered by a foreign language trainer who teaches the same subject to students enrolled in a non-philological study programme. Freed from the constraints of language teaching (which is *de facto* allocated to Contemporary English Language and Practical Courses), the course tutor has at his or her disposal a sufficient number of hours (28 hours for lectures and other 28 for practical seminars per semester) to train students in professional communication, considered, for this didactic purpose and not only, “writing or speaking that is accurate, complete, and understandable to its audience—that tells the truth about the data directly and clearly. Doing this takes research, analysis of the audience, and the mastering of the three interrelated elements of organization: language, design and illustration” (Eisenberg 1989).

One should not underestimate, however, the importance of the use of English in professional communication, all the more that the situation ‘in the field’ is more often than not, below reasonable expectations/ minimum requirements. Ideally, second-year students in Applied Modern Languages are advanced/independent users at the B2 level, according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages, which is to say that they:

- Can understand the main ideas of complex text on both concrete and abstract topics, including technical discussions in their field of specialisation.

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Non-Commercial 4.0. International License

- Can interact with a degree of fluency and spontaneity that makes regular interaction with native speakers quite possible without strain for either party.
- Can produce clear, detailed text on a wide range of subjects and explain a viewpoint on a topical issue giving the advantages and disadvantages of various options.

In the absence of a language test to be passed at the admission to the programme, however, it may happen that not all students meet the criteria above, which may hinder the intended development of a course in Professional Communication. In this case, the tutor should resort to techniques pertaining to ELT to help his/her students understand what is required of them, and improvisation should be in order. Ideally (again), this course, designed for students whose level of English is B1-B2, benefits from good coordination among disciplines, which entails that students are already familiar with the notion of communication and may be introduced to the communication model proposed in the 1960s by Roman Jakobson. He outlined “six constitutive factors in any act of verbal communication: ‘The addresser sends a message to the addressee. To be operative the message requires a context referred to, seizable by the addressee, and either verbal or capable of being verbalized, a code fully, or at least partially, common to the addresser and addressee (or in other words, to the encoder and decoder of the message); and finally, a contact, a physical channel and psychological connection between the addresser and the addressee, enabling both of them to stay in communication.’ Jakobson proposes that each of these six factors (addresser, message, context, contact, code, and addressee) determines a different linguistic function.” (Chandler and Munday 2011). These functions (i.e., referential, emotive, conative, phatic, metalingual and poetic) (Jakobson 1960) and the relation between them should also be discussed and understood by students with the help of very specific examples. Next, types of professional communication should be addressed, for all categories (spoken, written, digital – both spoken and written – and non-verbal). Communication experts emphasise that non-verbal communication, which includes facial expression, gestures, outfit, space and time management, and visual aids (like PPTs), represents more than half of what is important in professional communication. Equally important are the tone, pitch and rhythm. Students should be made aware of the existence of two types of communication within an organization, namely formal and informal. Formal communication is of four types:

- **Upward or Bottom-up:** The communication in which the flow of information goes from subordinate to superior authority.
- **Downward or Top-down:** The communication in which the flow of information goes from superior to subordinate.
- **Horizontal:** The communication between two employees of different departments working at the same level.
- **Diagonal:** The communication between the employees of two different departments working at different levels (Surbhi 2018).

Informal communication, on the other hand, is less organized, can take different routes, but needs special attention from communicators because it can easily be twisted in the process, resulting in disinformation or misinformation. Though it may not always be supported by documental evidence, informal communication has its definite roles within an organization, which is why

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Non-Commercial 4.0. International License

students should be required to approach it. A possible type of exercise is that of asking students to communicate the same piece of information both formally and informally, both in writing and orally, to various age/education groups (explaining something to a child/pupil should be different from explaining the same thing to an adult/student or graduate).

Moving further to communication strategy, it can be useful to introduce students to the six dimensions of culture developed by Geert Hofstede for better communication in organizational management at the world level:

1. Power Distance, related to the different solutions to the basic problem of human inequality;
2. Uncertainty Avoidance, related to the level of stress in a society in the face of an unknown future;
3. Individualism versus Collectivism, related to the integration of individuals into primary groups;
4. Masculinity versus Femininity, related to the division of emotional roles between women and men;
5. Long Term versus Short Term Orientation, related to the choice of focus for people's efforts: the future or the present and past.
6. Indulgence versus Restraint, related to the gratification versus control of basic human desires related to enjoying life (Hofstede 2011: 8)

Based on the *Culture Compass* available on Hofstede's website, which provides reports on 6 different roles of a communicator (subordinate, colleague, superior, negotiator, person transferring know-how, long-term visitor) and country to country comparisons, role-playing exercises can be designed, e.g., asking or delivering information on a certain matter from any of the positions above, in students' own country or in a country arbitrarily selected. This aspect will also prove helpful to students in another related course they are supposed to take within the programme, i.e., Linguistic and Cultural Mediation, in their third year of study.

The seminars can complement these more theoretical lectures with various applications, such as CV/resume writing, answering job offers, filling forms, sitting in an interview, asking for a recommendation or writing one for a colleague, delivering a presentation (either academic or commercial), pitching a project to a manager/evaluator. An interesting and useful exercise is "the elevator talk" (see Kwok 2013), which starts from the premise that you are in an elevator, someone asks you "what do you do?" and you have the limited amount of time that one normally spends in such an environment (20-30 seconds) to answer. Since this time interval rarely allows the speaker to utter more than two or three sentences, this will help students select and focus on the essential aspects of their (imagined) professional activity. Further, the exercise can be expanded to a full personal presentation (10 minutes) based on the key points identified in the 'elevator talk'.

Conclusions

In teaching professional communication to students in foreign languages, who are linguistically and culturally aware, possibilities are endless, and all contribute to the expansion of students' horizons in accordance with a culture that favours intercultural relations in a(ny) professional

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Non-Commercial 4.0. International License

environment. Teaching students how to communicate in various situations, to various audiences, in both formal and informal manners, can do much more than just prepare them for a profession in a corporate setting: it can stimulate their communicative skills, improve their linguistic and cultural competence and help them become genuine 21st-century world citizens.

References

- Chandler, Daniel and Rod Munday. 2011. *A Dictionary of Media and Communication*. Oxford UP.
- De Beaufort, Inez, Medard Hilhorst, and Søren Holm. 1996. *In the Eye of the Beholder*. Oslo and Boston: Scandinavian University Press.
- Eisenberg, Anne. 1989. "Writing Well for the Technical Professions". London: Harper & Row.
- Hofstede, G. 2011. Dimensionalizing Cultures: The Hofstede Model in Context. *Online Readings in Psychology and Culture*, 2(1). <https://doi.org/10.9707/2307-0919.1014>
- Jakobson, Roman. 1960. "Linguistics and Poetics", in T. Sebeok (ed.) *Style in Language*, Cambridge, MA: M.I.T. Press, pp. 350-377.
- Kwok, Roberta. 2013. "Communication: Two minutes to impress". *Nature* 494, 138 (2013). <https://doi.org/10.1038/nj7435-137a>
- Nordquist, Richard. 2020. "Professional Communication Definition and Issues". *ThoughtCo*. <https://www.thoughtco.com/professional-communication-1691542> (accessed April 10, 2021).
- Surbhi S. 2018. "Difference Between Formal and Informal Communication. Keydifferences.com
- Waldeck, Jennifer H. Patricia Kearney, et al. 2012. *Business and Professional Communication in a Digital Age*. Cengage Learning.
- The Cross-border Faculty of "Dunarea de Jos" University of Galati
<https://www.transfrontaliera.ugal.ro/index.php/ro/educatie-2/programe-de-licenta/limbi-moderne-aplicate>
- Faculty of Letters, Babes-Bolyai University of Cluj-Napoca
<https://lett.ubbcluj.ro/departamente/departamentul-de-limbi-moderne-aplicate/>
- Faculty of Foreign Languages and Literatures, University of Bucharest <https://engleza.ils.unibuc.ro/lma/>
- Graduate Student Orientation for M.A. in Professional Communication and M.A. in Social and Emerging Media <https://www.ut.edu/graduate-degrees/ma-in-professional-communication/orientation-for-graduate-students-in-the-college-of-arts-and-letters>
- The CEFR Levels <https://www.coe.int/en/web/common-european-framework-reference-languages/level-descriptions>