

## A PSYCHOLINGUISTIC APPROACH TO COMMUNICATION IN ESP CONTEXT-BASED LEARNING. CASE STUDY

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**Abstract:** *Communication is universal to all human beings and represents a central element to our lives, regulating and shaping human behavior. Communication is an integral part of human life and it includes activities such as talking to each other, disseminating and exchanging information and feedback. In other words, society cannot survive without communication. When communicating, people generate meaning through the exchange of verbal and nonverbal messages in specific contexts. This paper highlights the importance of the psycholinguistic approach to communication in English for Specific Purposes (ESP) context-based learning (the maritime field), taking into consideration the fact that, by the very nature of their job, when communicating, seafarers must be concerned with the decisions they make, the orders they give and the provisions of international maritime law and regulations. For this reason, they are constantly in an international context, even when sailing in territorial waters. This context influences their motivation and their English learning methods, especially since the messages (most often standardized and vital) transmitted in the maritime field must be clear, accurate, concise, unequivocal and fast.*

**Keywords:** *communication, psycholinguistics, English for Specific Purposes (ESP), maritime field, seafarers*

### Introduction

Communication is universal to all human beings, representing a central element to our lives, as it regulates and shapes human behavior patterns, being an integral part of one's life. Communication is important both at the individual and social levels. Moreover, it represents the requirement of social existence and a resource for engaging in the sharing of experiences, since it is also the means by which people relate to one another. In this regard, the society in general cannot exist without the relations built and strengthened through communication.

The term “communication” has been used since the 14<sup>th</sup> century with the meaning of “pooling”, “being in a relationship”, “sharing” (in Latin) ; in the 16<sup>th</sup> century and especially in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, with the development of road network, mail and transport means, “to communicate” becomes synonymous with “to transmit”. Most often, communication was reduced to a simple exchange of information, or to the establishment of a relationship between people, meaning communication action or the result of this action (what is communicated has a material form - documents, data, etc. or immaterial - ideas, feelings, etc.) (Kaufman, 1973). Another approach argues that communication is rather a process, i.e. a complex intervention involving changes in those who enter the communicative relationship. The classical models of communication are described and explained by J. Fiske in his book, *Introduction to Communication Studies* (2006; see also Dimpleby and Burton, 2007; Mattelart and Mattelart, 2001).

Interpersonal communication can take several forms, but regardless of these forms, research has shown that no communication is complete if we do not have control over its effects on the recipient (Nadler, 1977: 57). Disturbing elements may interfere in the communication process, and these elements are called “noise” generators that are responsible for distorting the message (noise, odor, poor physical condition, etc.). Through feedback, the success of the communication process is measured (Vlăduțescu, 2010: 21).

Our contemporary world bears the mark of the constant increase in the number of contacts. This fact enhances the communication between people from a wide range of linguistic and cultural backgrounds, in fields such as business and economics, science and informatics, education, mass media, politics, entertainment etc. This was also triggered by the increase in the number of immigrants, caused by unemployment, economic crises or political conflicts.

### 1. Communication as a psycholinguistic object of study

Tatiana Slama-Cazacu (1968) states that the object of psycholinguistics is the “study of the changes occurred in the message during the concrete act of communication, due to the relationships established between the transmitter and the receiver, together with everything that this entails, such as mental ability, mutual influence, the influence of the general context in which they are situated” (translation by the authors, pp.42-43). Psycholinguistics must study facts of the language as a „living reality”, the relationship

between these speech acts and the situations where the subjects are (Slama-Cazacu 1991: 144; see also Titone, 1981).

The psycholinguistic research of the last decades (see the Proceedings of ISAPL Congresses) confirmed T. Slama-Cazacu's assumptions (1954, 1991) on the need for studying and investigating the linguistic facts as living reality, in a context, influenced by what is concrete, particular, psychological. Hence, the consequences of this research for linguistics:

- 1) linguistics has obtained more data on the spoken language;
- 2) there have been accumulated more data on the „additional” means (intonation, gestures, linguistic context, situational correlates, etc.);
- 3) we have more information about dialogue - almost "forgotten" - in the past by linguistics. One cannot operate with an "ideal" speaker, neither can real communication be ignored, nor isolated the utterance from the context of communication (T. Slama-Cazacu, 1980: 21).

When teaching/learning foreign languages uses the contrastive analysis from a psycholinguistic perspective, the teacher is studying and comparing the two systems, the native language/mother tongue and the target language, anticipating the occurrence of errors. According to T. Slama-Cazacu, the proper methodology for learning a foreign language (1983: 187) must include two key phases: identifying the „hot spots” through objective proceedings (experiments applied to a large number of people in different stages of learning a foreign language) and interpretation of preliminary data.

### **1.1. Communication during various activities**

Generally, linguists paid insufficient attention in the past to the relationship between language and human activities. They sometimes aimed to analyze a comprehensive material, derived from research carried out directly in the field (especially dialectology, glossaries related to occupations). Therefore, different views relating to the relationship between work and language have been expressed over time. Often, however, the linguistic material collected was only part of the communication that was taking place during activities. Many studies in general or applied linguistics today refer exclusively to the terminology used in one field or another.

In „The History of Linguistics” (2003: 83-104), Lyle Campbell presents “an overview of the major developments in the history of linguistics” and how it will evolve): the grammatical traditions, Universal Grammar, the Comparative Method, Philosophical-Psychological Approaches, Structuralism (Ferdinand de Saussure, the Prague School, Franz Boas as “the founder of American

linguistics and American anthropology”, Edward Sapir, Benjamin Whorf (according to Aronoff and Rees-Mill (2003:99), Sapir-Whorf hypothesis “holds that a speaker’s perception of the world is organized or constrained by the linguistic categories his or her language offers, that language structure determines thought, how one experiences and hence how one views the world”), Leonard Bloomfield, Noam Chomsky (with his book, *Syntactic Structures*, 1957), the “functional-typological” approach, which compares patterns or structures across languages.

Many sociologists, linguists and psycholinguistics influenced by behaviorism reached pragmatic statements (see Bloomfield, 1933, Dewey, 1938). Pragmatics studies the "relation of signs to their interpreters," dealing with "all the psychological, biological and sociological phenomena which occur in the functioning of signs" (Morris, 1938: 30). G.N. Leech (1983: 4) believes that "grammar (the formal abstract language) and pragmatic (principles of language use) are complementary fields in linguistics" semantics being a part of the grammar. C.S. Levinson (1983: 32) recognizes the importance of the "pragmatic component in an integrated theory of linguistic ability" and J.L. Mey (1993: 42) considers pragmatics as "the study of human language terms of use" in relation to "social context".

The first major paper, which proposed a psycholinguistic approach to studying the role that language, as a means of communication, plays in the work process, and the influence exerted by work on communication is "Communication in the work process" ("Communication on the job") by Tatiana Slama -Cazacu (1964). The book has both theoretical and practical importance, providing new arguments for supporting the assumption that the communication function is extremely important in the language. The author demonstrates that whenever and wherever working activities unfold, be them simple or complex, but in a group or team, or at a distance, communication is necessary.

The fundamental cause that leads to communication is the involvement of several individuals in the development of various production activities. The conditions and situations in practical reality play such a trigger and motivating role.

There a lot of reasons for communication during work activities, primarily for the transmission or retransmission of information, when one locutor possesses specific knowledge or data and transmits it/them via different channels, when a person does not have all the necessary information, when someone has few bits of knowledge, gives orders, provides information, collaborates with others. That person may have

some theoretical, technical and practical knowledge and in this case s/he is asked to help with communication or may have additional knowledge about the whole process, prior or future issues. Sometimes, information is needed when each team member possesses a piece of information, when communication itself must be controlled, especially when changes occur in the situation, etc.

Communication can be generated by the need for adjusting movements in a team, when action must be executed synchronously or with certain intensity, or where it should be done in a certain period of time. There are cases where lack of communication can attract damage, accidents, injuries, even human casualties. Sometimes discussions, meetings, debates are required for team members to communicate their knowledge by jointly examining the situation, while sometimes verbal communication can be reduced, even null in conditions of too much noise (e.g. in the engine room). Some other times, the ample instructions provided at the beginning or making decisions for various movements in advance make unnecessary the direct communication during that activity. Communication is therefore necessary to receive or give information, to make a decision, to begin action at the right time and with certain intensity, to communicate the results of the work (for some other reasons, especially for communication in organizations, see Dimpleby and Burton, 2007).

Communication through language plays a major role in learning, training, planning, organizing, controlling and in the whole management of work activities. Various conditions and situations may influence, in turn, communication through language leading to the selection of the speech-production and understanding system, a certain way of distributing the changes occurring in the message. Work has a huge impact on the code or system of signals and the actual process of encoding and decoding the message.

The language can play a self-regulatory and cognitive role, especially nowadays, when everyone has many problems to solve but also a regulatory or interregulatory role, having an impact on the work of others and receiving information from people. Adjustments to work are performed by getting updated information, or through dynamic mobilization. By informing, strict cognitive elements are activated to cause various actions. The adjustment of actions through communication is based on uniform information, on understanding specific descriptions characteristic of a profession with the aim of achieving maximum accuracy.

## **1.2. The choice and modifications of (verbal and nonverbal) signs in communication production and delivery**

During work activities human mind has the power to choose the system of signs and the distribution modality of communication. One fundamental system is the articulated language, i.e. speech. Interjections or rhythmic sounds are developed and used in or as phrases, simple, compound or complex sentences. Speech can be achieved in a normal tone or as a whisper or shout. Communication is made directly or through telephone, radio, TV, internet, etc. The articulate language can be accompanied or replaced by: signs, gestures, eye contact, face expressions, different body posture and distance, inarticulate voice (whistling), acoustic signals produced by a physical means (bell ringing, siren, etc.), visual signals (movements made with a lantern, flag, figurative graphic signals, flares, etc.). The manner of communication delivery varies depending on the number of partners, the degree of knowledge to be transmitted, the activity type, conditions, context, environment. In noisy working conditions, for example, gestures, signs, signals may become the only means of communication, replacing whole sentences. Factors such as noise, darkness and poor visibility affect the choice of communication systems and networks (e.g. the complex maritime communication system at sea and ashore).

The studies conducted by the members of Bucharest Psycholinguistic School, under the guidance of Professor T. Slama-Cazacu, showed that communication suffers quantitative and qualitative changes during work activities. The amount of communication varies primarily according to the prior common knowledge or skills of the team members and the acquired specialized vocabulary/terminology. There are circumstances where it is necessary to communicate more frequently, to announce every move, the rhythm and intensity, etc. If the people engaged in the act of communication possess a well-defined, previously established and agreed-upon code, and other knowledge, then communication is reduced quantitatively. Qualitative changes occur on lexical, phonetic, morphological, syntactic and pragmatic level.

It has been found out that sometimes, in vital situations of great responsibility, of noise or distress, additional communication elements can bring clarification to the message, leading to redundancy. Unlike the general concept of "redundancy", such "necessary redundancy" (T. Slama-Cazacu, 1964: 231) gives the speaker the certainty that the message can be received correctly, despite some unfavorable conditions, complementing a message, stimulating and

attracting attention, etc. Redundancy usually involves the repetition of some elements or of the entire message by completing or emphasizing the message, through intonation, gestures or other means of communication besides speech (pp .226-227). The "necessary redundancy" is opposed to "unnecessary redundancy," the latter usually occurring in cases of disruption of work and communication and having a negative effect (p. 234).

### **3. A psycholinguistic approach to language learning and texts reading in a foreign language**

A strategy consists "of a mental or behavioral activity related to some specific stage in the overall process of language acquisition or language use"(Ellis, 1994: 529). According to the same author, "individual learner differences (beliefs, affective states, general factors, and previous learning experience) together with various situational factors (the target language being studied, whether the setting is formal or informal, the nature of the instruction, and the specific tasks learners are asked to perform) determine the learners' choice of learning strategies" (Ellis, 199: 529).

In order to improve the English learning process in international contexts specific to seafarers, different factors must be taken into account: age, training and education, ethnic identity, mechanisms of language processing, psychological traits, context, environment.

Seafarers by the nature of their job must be pragmatic, think carefully, but at the same time think quickly of the decisions they need to take, the commands they give and the way they apply the international maritime law and the International Regulation for Prevention of Collisions at Sea. For this reason, they are constantly in an international context, even when sailing in the territorial waters. This context has an impact on their motivation and the means of learning and improving their communication in English. The messages (most often standardized) must be clear, accurate, concise, unambiguous and fast. There are many situations when maritime officers must take a decision on the spot and transmit it as soon as possible.

English is the official language used in communication at sea. Therefore, both officers and ratings specialized in navigation and mechanics working on maritime or military vessels need to improve their general English skills and to acquire a minimum specialized vocabulary. Seafarers acquire and develop their reading, listening and communication skills through courses taken at centers for maritime training by taking notes, strengthening their technical

vocabulary on navigation or engines, broadening their general knowledge about ships and their operation. Some of them must also be able to interpret drawings, charts, maps and nautical tables.

#### **3.1. Brief review of research relating to understanding written texts**

Reading was considered sometimes "passive" but even since 1917 Thorndike showed that it is, in fact, an active process related to solving problems. K.S. Goodman (1986) and K.S. Goodman and F. Smith (1971) developed a psycholinguistic perspective of reading, focusing on the active, cognitive processes, on the reader's ability to predict what the text means, depending on their knowledge, experience, and textual suggestions. Such a psycholinguistic model of reading based on "guessing" the vocabulary and syntax was presented by W. Grabe (1991). The interactive approaches related to reading are based on the two types of cognitive skills: identification and interpretation. Fluent readers can automatically recognize words quickly and then understand and interpret them (ibidem). However, many existing studies on improving the efficiency of reading as a result of visual-motor skills training overlook the complexity of this process.

The role of the context in emitting and receiving the oral and written language has been an issue of interest for specialists. T. Slama-Cazacu (1980: 271) defines context as "general assemblies meaningful to language" and refers to its properties, which are given by "the intention to communicate, meaning and its interpretation by the receiver". Texts can be shown to the reader with or without a linguistic and visual context, key-words or key-concepts which might influence the speed of reading and the comprehension of the text.

The title is a fundamental part of the text, the "key-component", briefly presenting the content, boosting expectations, facilitating predictions and providing "support for the contextual interpretation" of the text. Its main function is to "announce what follows", being a summary or a comment on the text (offering "the key to its interpretation" and "arousing people's interest to read a text") (T. Slama-Cazacu, 1991: 41-42).

Intensive and extensive reading are two ways to approach a text: the first aims at "understanding the profound and detailed", and the second is generally applied in the case of long texts (see Harmer, 2007). A. Vizental (2008: 154-161) distinguishes between the following reading techniques: global reading – fast silent reading, and sentence-level reading; reading for specific

information, reading for the main idea, and reading for inferences.

In the class of English as a foreign language, the teacher is the person who chooses the texts to be studied. He/She can help and encourage students to use their reading skills, applying them to some of the most various materials. Sandra Silberstein (1994: 16-17) refers to the factors that need to be taken into consideration by the teacher: types of texts that students would like to read in English, but also in their mother tongue, encouraging activities during classes, which help young people make decisions and take responsibility, guidance of individual study. Texts selection (C. Nuttall, 1982: 30-31) can be done depending on: the intended purpose, the novelty of information and ideas that will be transmitted, the desire to understand how some people from different nations think. The teacher must take into account the level of English knowledge of his students, the difficulties involved in reading the text, selection of appropriate exercises, i.e. preparation of maps, charts, graphs, based on the information from the text, writing summaries, dramatizing debates, discussions, etc. Emphasis must be placed both on learning English, and on the content.

### **3.2. Case Study. Research carried out with the aim of improving the understanding of the written text**

The large amount of information due to the state-of-the-art technology used in the Navy and on merchant vessels, and the national and international regulations undergoing frequent changes require their learning quickly and efficiently.

The hypothesis of the research was as follows: knowing the reading preferences of the maritime officers can help the teacher select both motivating texts for reading and discussing activities during the English class and the most appropriate techniques (reading the text intensively or extensively, reading the titles of chapters and paragraphs, subtitles, the first and last sentences, the figures and pictures, reading for the gist - "skimming", looking for a certain piece of information - "scanning", etc.; attention paid to the type of font, i.e. italic, bold, standard; punctuation, especially, comma, quotes; table of contents and abstracts, preface, foreword and introduction, etc. When the emphasis is on understanding the text and less on reading speed, it is advisable to answer the following questions:

### **Conclusions**

Spoken messages are most often used in everyday as well as in specific work activities, visual and audio channels being used for their transmission. Verbal messages are transmitted orally or in writing. Writing, unlike speaking, is a demanding form of verbal communication. When writing, the message must be correctly and concisely transmitted from the very first time so written communication requires more time to be drafted,

who (whom), what, when, where, why, how. All these elements can contribute to a better and faster understanding of the written text (see a similar experiment conducted by L. Nădrag in the 90's: Nădrag, 1998).

The research method used was the questionnaire. The purpose was to find out the reading preferences of the seafarers (deck officers, engine officers and ratings): Do they like reading?; Do they read for pleasure or to get information? Do they read the same kind of texts in English and in Romanian?; Have they noticed any particular factors that might influence the reading speed and understanding of the English texts included in the curriculum of their courses and the degree of understanding of the read texts?

The seafarers admitted to reading literature in general, (on-line) newspapers and magazines in Romanian and English, classical literature, books of adventure and love, history books, science fiction, scientific books on automobiles, psychology, personal development. They also read about accidents at sea, navigation, radars, equipment and instruments for navigation, maneuvering techniques, maritime transport, telecommunications.

The factors mentioned by the learners as triggering reading and understanding what they are reading are: reading practice combined with listening, reading passages from books and newspapers, titles (especially those written in bold).

The respondents enjoyed reading and discussing the texts linked to their profession, especially those relating to the following topics: incidents and marine accident reporting ("Communication problems lead to lifeboat accident", "The Incident", "Self-help – A Vital Element in Any Marine Casualty", "Timber – A Dangerous Cargo", "Very human error", "Tanker and bulker accidents", "Fighting fire with technology and rules"), training ("Training with virtual reality"), manning ("How low can manning go?"), multicultural crews and safety, compliance with STCW 95 – Standards of Training Certification and Watchkeeping, International Safety Management Code, shipboard management, communication at sea ("Future of marine safety communications", "A mariner's view of GMDSS" – the Global Maritime Distress and Safety System), environment and oil pollution, elements of an employment file.

does not confer the same degree of freedom, representing however a significant source of documentation. If individuals were based only on oral communication, it would be difficult to remember what they said in one situation or another.

Individuals live their experiences differently depending on the language habits of the community to which they belong. The communication process, especially the code used generates a specific way of classifying the experiences.

The context in which the communication process is carried out is very important because the same words will sound in an office otherwise than on the street. Any communication has its context. The same message can be interpreted distinctly by different people, or even by the same person in different situations. To effectively manage communication, it is essential to take into account that people are different and also that they behave differently depending on the context.

Considering our own life experience, we learn to recognize certain similarities of situations. This thing that we do most times instinctively is something positive and part of our own learning process of managerial communication. We might, however, fail by exaggerating this pattern-making of communication.

Seafarers' interests are very diverse, as revealed in the survey. However, it is the teacher who can help and encourage them to study and improve their reading skills. Formation of reading skills techniques involves flexibility: variations in speed reading, "skimming" (browsing for finding out the main idea), "scanning" (reading fast for a specific piece of information), etc. They must be able to use references, illustrations, diagrams, deduce the meaning of new words in context, to know when to turn to a dictionary, improve their knowledge of morphology and syntax, to interpret the text as a whole using the facilities provided by it, including cohesion and the structure of rhetoric.

The results of the survey and the discussions with each learner have led to the following conclusions: seafarers enjoy reading and acquiring various reading techniques ("skimming", "scanning") according to the intended purpose; they are aware of the volume of information that can be received, through the English language, in exceptional cases (hazard emergency situations) for the ship and crew safety (this depends on the speed of deciphering messages and taking appropriate measures); and that guessing the meaning of words in context is less time-consuming and even enjoyable.

To improve learners' reading skills the teacher must check: their oral reading accuracy skills (in terms of pronunciation, grammar and intonation), if there are spelling problems linked to certain sounds or intonation); vocabulary richness and variety of grammatical forms, reading speed that can help them adapt to situations and take part in discussions in order to achieve effective communication; reading a great amount of texts can help ensure independence - in discussions or conversations learners have to find the appropriate words or phrases to make themselves understood, to avoid long pauses; encouraging learners who avoid reading aloud in the presence of their colleagues (activities at sea are carried out collectively, e.g. mooring, departure, passing through channels, hazards) to encourage initiatives in conducting a conversation by studying texts commonly found in marine communication; to select texts and documents belonging to both the formal and informal register, etc.

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