10

Communication Competence

The Elusive Construct

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Communication competence is the current "hot topic" in the field of communication. Over the past several years it has been a rare volume of a major journal that has not included at least one article devoted to this topic. National and regional conventions are replete with papers and programs in this area. The present book is the latest example of the attention scholars in communication are giving to this topic.

The origin of the term "communication competence" and the expansion of the field's interest both coincided with the national "back to basics" movement. Contemporary American society has concluded that our schools must prepare our young people in the basic skills for survival. Testing programs in basic skills or competencies are being implemented for students and teachers in state after state. The central place of communication competence in such programs was assured when federal legislation defined the basic skills as reading, writing, speaking, listening, and mathematics. With four of the five basic skills being communication skills, communication competence becomes a focal point in the education of the young. Communication competence is "hot." Even computer literacy must take a back seat.

A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

While all of this attention may justify our believing that our field has "come of age," it is important that we place this current flurry of attention in perspective. The importance of competence in communication is not a

product of creative insight of people in the 1970s. In fact, we are very open to the charge that we are placing new wine in old wineskins.

The history of communication competence, under other labels, is a long and distinguished one. The importance of competence in communication has been recognized for thousands of years. The oldest essay ever discovered, written about 3000 B.C. consists of advice on how to speak effectively. This essay was inscribed on a fragment of parchment addressed to Kagemni, the eldest son of the Pharoah Huni. Similarly, the oldest extant book is a treatise on effective communication. This book, known as the *Precepts*, was composed in Egypt about 2675 B.C. by Ptah-Hotep. It was written for the guidance of the Pharoah's son.

As early as the fifth century B.C. schools were established in Greece with communication holding a central place in the curriculum. In the fourth century B.C. Aristotle wrote the most significant book on communication ever written, the *Rhetoric*. Over two thousand years later, when schools and colleges were established in the American colonies, communication was a central part of the curriculum. One of the early lecturers on communication at Harvard, John Quincy Adams, was later to become President of the United States.

This central focus on communication in the education of the young has continued to the present. Every state in the United States requires instruction in written composition for all students, and many also require instruction in oral communication. Similarly, written composition is a virtually universal requirement in American colleges and universities. Oral communication requirements, although less common, are far from unusual; and even when not required, oral communication classes are popular electives for students.

Our current concern with communication competence, then, does not represent the birth of a new orientation in our field. Rather, it represents a continuation of a centuries-old tradition. What is new is the term, communication competence.

THE PROBLEM OF DEFINITION

In the title of this chapter I have branded communication competence as "the elusive construct." If you have read the preceding chapters in this book, you may be wondering what scholars mean when they use the term "communication competence." What is the scope of this construct? After reading these chapters and reviewing the extant literature under this heading, I must confess I have these same questions. What do competence in understanding commercials and competence in interpersonal interaction have in common, if anything?

While preparing this chapter I participated in a seminar on communication competence held in conjunction with the 1983 convention of the Speech Communication Association. The participants in this seminar were all scholars who had written and/or done research in this area. We all exchanged papers prior to the formal seminar sessions. One of the main concerns of these papers was this problem of definition. Regretfully, no consensus definition emerged from these essays. Clearly, communication competence means different things to different scholars.

My reading of the literature in this area suggests that the term "communication competence" did not emerge full-blown as a new construct with a research foundation. Rather, it appears that this construct evolved from lay consideration of competence in young people. If my reading of the literature is correct, then, we should not be looking to the scholarly literature for our definition. Instead, we should look to common usage of these words by nonspecialists.

Dictionaries are not authoritative sources for what words mean. However, they do attempt to record what people typically mean when they use a given word. Thus, in this case, a dictionary is useful in our attempt to determine what nonspecialists may have in mind with a term like "communication competence."

Let us begin with the term "competence." The two dictionaries on my shelf provide very similar definitions. In one, competence is "adequate ability." For the other, it is "ability, fitness." Similarly, for the related term "competent," the two are in agreement. One suggests that competent means "fit, suitable" while the other indicates it means "able, fit."

While as a field we have had considerable difficulty agreeing on a definition of communication, my dictionaries indicate little confusion in the lay pubic's mind about the term's meaning. One simply says that communication is the "act or means of communicating." The other says it is the "act or fact of passing along; giving of information by talking, writing." For the term communicate, one says we mean to "impart, transmit, make known." The other says communicate means to "pass along, transfer."

Thus, if the dictionaries are taken as good reporters of what the lay public means by the terms communication and competence, when put together, this construct must mean something like "adequate ability to pass along or give information; the ability to make known by talking or writing." Thus, at the most basic level, those people who pay our salaries and ask that we make their children "communicatively competent" want their young people to acquire the modest ability to talk and write so that others can understand them. It is as simple as that.

Of course, whenever we make something simple we run the risk of making it simplistic. We who pretend to be experts in the field of communica-

tion may have difficulty accepting such a straightforward, simple description of what we are about. We will be quick to charge that such an approach is out-dated—it is too "source oriented." Talking and writing are only half of the communication process. Listening and reading are at least as important as talking and writing. And such a simplistic approach to communication competence does not leave room for such important matters as learning to understand commercials and learning to develop good communicative relationships with others.

We are not wrong to stress the complexity of the communication process. We are not wrong to emphasize that there is more to communication than simply talking or writing clearly. However, it may be wrong of us to take the basic construct of "communication competence" and twist it to include our own narrow specializations. When we do that we make the construct itself quite meaningless, and we are likely to fail to accomplish the most basic objectives our society expects from our field.

Without wishing to suggest any qualitative reaction to any other chapter in this book, I suggest that Powers and Lowry most directly speak to the basic issues of communication competence. They are most concerned with the ability of students to talk so that others can understand them. They have clearly operationalized what this means and provided a method of assessing that ability. In the process they have advanced a method which could also be used to asseses receiving skills, but that is beside the point for the moment. The fact that this work first reaches print in this book rather than in our scholarly journals is indicative of how distorted the construct of communication competence has become in our field. In private conversations with Powers, I learned that papers based on this work consistently have been rejected by the professional journals. The essence of the negative reviews has been, What does *this* have to do with communication competence? My answer, as you might surmise, is *everything*. This is the starting point upon which we can build.

I believe that one of the reasons that we, as a field, have generated so much confusion about the meaning of the communication competence construct is that we have tended to confuse competence with excellence—the ability to be unusually good, to be better than others. Excellence certainly must be one of the goals of our field. However, excellence rests on a foundation of competence, it is not the foundation itself. To illustrate, being relationally competent (excellent) rests of the foundation of being able to make one's ideas clear to the other in the relationship. To target excellence in relational competence in the absence of communication competence begs failure in the achievement of that excellence.

A second reason for our conceptual confusion is the extreme diversity of specializations in the field of communication. Whole fields have grown up within the general field: journalism, speech communication, speech pathol-

ogy and audiology, theatre, broadcasting, advertising, and public relations, to name a few. Within these, dozens of subfields have emerged, as suggested by the subgroupings in our professional associations. Consequently, while we all see ourselves as being in "communication," we all see that field through the blinders of our specializations.

For these reasons I do not believe we can generate a single definition of communication competence that will satisfy everyone in this field, any more than we have been able to generate one definition of communication itself that will satisfy all. Probably the best we can do is to make our definition clear, and recognize that competence to one may include aspects of excellence to some others and irrelevancies to still others. For what it is worth, my definition for the remainder of this chapter will be "adequate ability to make ideas known to others by talking or writing."

UNDERSTANDING AND DOING

Communication is a behavior-based discipline. Unlike some of our sister disciplines, knowing the content of our discipline is not enough—our bottom line is doing.

While this is one of the strengths of our discipline, it has also tightened our blinders as we have looked at communication competence. Often, we have assumed that if we know about communication we will be able to do it. Even more often, we have assumed that if we can do it, we understand it. At the risk of being seen as a latent faculty psychologist, I feel we must reject both of those assumptions.

The equating of understanding and doing is not an original problem stemming from the communication competence literature. The areas of language development and reading have already confronted this problem and, after many years of misdirected effort, handled it. Understanding is not equal to doing.

Scholars in the field of language acquisition have long distinguished between understanding and doing and recognized that the two develop in individuals at different rates. Commonly the understanding element has been referred to as competence and the doing as performance.[1] In some cases competence develops before performance, in others the pattern is the reverse. Many studies have illustrated, for example, that children know more than they can say. If asked to point to point to a picture of an elephant, the child may be able to comply; but if one points to the elephant and asks the child what it is, the child may be unable to answer. In contrast, children can be taught to recite the pledge of allegiance or the Lord's Prayer long before they have any understanding of what they are reciting. One may not infer competence from performance or project performance from compe-

Our colleagues in the field of reading also have come belatedly to the realization that competence and performance are not necessarily related. For many years it was believed that oral reading (performance) was an excellent indicator of reading skill. It is now recognized that many children can perform (read aloud) with considerable skill without understanding virtually anything they perform while others can read to themselves with full understanding while being unable to perform (read orally). Once again, the previously assumed relationship between competence and performance was found wanting.

The importance of the understanding/doing distinction can be illustrated from our experiences in teaching basic courses in speech and writing. Some of our students can present good speeches or essays but do poorly on content examinations. Others do very well on the exams but cannot perform adequately. One might say, as I have been known to, if they can do it that is all that counts, who cares about the exams. Such a position, however, is confounded by the faulty assumption that if a student can do it in the classroom, they also can do it out in the "real world." This often is not the case.

Communication competence requires not only the ability to perform adequately certain communication behaviors, it also requires an understanding of those behaviors and the cognitive ability to make choices among behaviors. When examined closely, the behaviors in which one needs to engage to make ideas clear to others, either in speaking or in writing, are rather simple and mundane. The overwhelming majority (although certainly not all) of our students arrive in both high school and college with the ability to perform those behaviors, even if they seldom demonstrate that ability in the classroom.

In general, students do not engage in behaviors that would lead us to label them as communicatively competent because they do not understand the need for them to do so, because they do not care how we evaluate them, or because they are afraid to engage in the behaviors, not because the behaviors are not in their repertoire. Thus, for those students with true skill deficits, we must continue to teach behavioral skills. But our primary focus, particularly in the upper grades and in college, must be on the cognitive abilities and affective orientations of our students which inhibit their demonstration of communicatively competent behavior.

THE PROBLEM OF MEASUREMENT

Once we have conceptually defined communication competence, our most basic problem becomes how to measure it. This, of course, is the tradi-

tional problem of operationalization. In this instance, the problem may be more severe than in some others. We know that behavior is our bottom line, but research in the field may not have reached the level where we can be certain what behaviors we must measure; and we must face the fact that behavior is not always enough, as we noted in the previous section.

In order to determine whether a person is communicatively competent, I suggest that we must measure both their behavior under appropriate circumstances and their cognitive abilities. The former measurement permits a direct assessment of the underlying ability. The latter may enable us to determine how broadly we may generalize from the behavior specimens available, as we can never obtain direct behavior measures for every type of situation possible.

Our field has long known that communication is a transactional process, although that jargon has only crept into our language in the last decade or so. Making ideas and feelings clear *to others* is more than making ideas and feelings clear. Communication does not exist without a receiver, and what is clear to one receiver is not necessarily clear to another receiver. In days gone by we referred to the process of coping with this problem as audience analysis and adaptation. Clearly, then, what we must measure is not what the person does but what impact what the person does has on the receiver. Clarity (or any other outcome variable we might choose) is in the mind of the receiver, not in the mind of an observer or in the behavior of the communicator.

The only promising method of measuring communication competence that I have seen is the one advanced by Powers and Lowry in this book and in their earlier convention papers. This method provides a carefully controlled communication situation with a clearly known (by the researcher and the source) idea to be communicated and a method by which the effectiveness of the source can be quantified. While the method at present is represented by only one type of situation (explaining how to draw a geometric figure), it provides a basic model that can be emulated to provide measures of an unlimited number of situations. The method is not inherently limited to a presentational format, it can be implemented in a dyadic or group context. The geometric shape measure can be replaced, when desired, by other measures such as a cloze test or affective response test. Once we decide what outcomes are going to be operationalized as indicants of communication competence, the Powers and Lowry model can be applied to construct an appropriate measure of each outcome.

Once measures of the type suggested above are available, the door to meaningful research on the nature and components of communication competence will be open. We will be able to distinguish between people who

score high and low on such measure and study differences between the groups in terms of both what they do and what they know. Indeed, we will be able to build a behavioral science of communication competence. Such a research program can be expected to tell us both what behaviors young people must be taught and what cognitive material they must be taught.

In order to clarify that for which I am calling, let me contrast such a program with the current state of affairs. Most of our so-called communication competence measures in use today stem from theoretical speculations of their developers and/or from traditional pedagogical prescriptions with little or no empirical base. They characteristically employ either observers who are not a part of the communication transaction from which they are to provide data or untrained subjects who are asked to provide their estimate of the competence of another person in the transaction. Neither can be expected to generate significant knowledge with a solid scientific foundation.

Another major portion of the research in this area is based on self-reports of competence, a data base with even less scientific validity than the two described previously. Self-reports have an important place in communication research, but this is not one of them. Subjects can be expected to provide valid reports of how they feel, their attitudes, orientations, and predispositons. But abundant research has indicated they are unable to regularly provide valid data on what they do, even who they talk to in a given day. I can tell you how competent I feel I am as a communicator, but my response may have more to do with my self-esteem than it does with my true competence.

This negative reaction of self-report data should not be taken as a blanket indictment of the use of self-reports in communication competence research. Depending on how one chooses to define this construct, such reports may be very valuable. However, I suspect that self-reports will be much more useful for judging the competence of others rather than the person completing the report. For example, if the desired outcome in a test of communication competence is for the "other" person to feel comfortable and at ease while communicating with the "subject," a self-report measure provided by the "other" should be a valuable indicant of whether the "subject" accomplished the established goal.

A THEORETICAL APPROACH

For a person to behave consistently in a manner that can be characterized as communicatively competent, four things must occur. First, the individual must acquire certain, modest behavioral skills that are well within reach of all normal individuals in our society. Most children, although not all, will have acquired these skills by the time they leave elementary school. Second,

the individual must acquire a moderate level of cognitive understanding of the communication process and the situational constraints placed on communication behavior. In the absence of systematic training, few individuals will acquire these cognitive skills. With the help of a well-designed basic course, however, most individuals can acquire these cognitive skills, at either the secondary or college level.

With the acquisition of these behavioral and cognitive skills, most individuals will be able to behave in a communicatively competent manner in most circumstances. However, many will not be able to do so. For these individuals the behavioral and cognitive skills are inhibited from use by negative affective responses. For this very sizable group a third thing must occur: They must develop a positive affective response toward communication. While many children enter elementary school with such positive affect, many others do not develop it in their entire lives.

Finally, competent behavior must become an habituated, selective response of the individual. Skills that are learned but not used tend to be lost. The old phrases "every teacher is an English teacher" and "every teacher is a speech teacher," are very appropriate. If students learn competent communication behaviors but do not have an opportunity to use them or are not reinforced for them, they are likely to lose them.

Theoretically, then, the communicatively competent individual is the product of a learning environment which permits the development of appropriate behavioral and cognitive skills, shapes a positive affect for communication, and provides opportunities for use and reinforcement of those abilities. One of our functions as communication professionals is to foster the creation of such environments.

Beyond this educational function, in which all of us must play some part, many of us need to perform other functions. One of our primary functions is basic research in communication competence. While as a field we are far from ignorant concerning what constitutes the behavioral and cognitive abilities that lead to communicatively competent behavior, it is also true that we have much more to learn. Few of us would confidently accept the charge to specify for our field what the central behavioral and cognitive abilities are for communication competence. And if we accepted the charge, it is probable that few would agree with our product. On most of our campuses we cannot even get our faculty to agree on what should be included in our basic course!

We also must devote considerably more of our field's efforts to the problems associated with communication affect. Only in the past decade has our field begun to recognize that such affective problems as shyness and communication apprehension really exist and that, because of these problems, teaching of cognitive and behavioral skills is unlikely to modify the behaviors of many of our students.

Finally, we must keep in mind that competence and excellence are not the same thing, as we noted previously. While our efforts in the area of communication competence must be directed toward all students, we can not raise all students to a level of excellence. While it may be hard for some of us to accept, and while our field does indeed have something for everyone, our individual specialities must be reserved for the select few.

PUTTING COMMUNICATION COMPETENCE IN PERSPECTIVE

Just as this book is but one of many books published by Sage Publications, communication competence is but one of many foci in the field of communication. With the pressures of the back-to-basics movement and the demands for certifying competencies for students and their teachers, we must take care that our "communication dog" continues to "wag its competence tail" rather than the other way around.

Over the past several years I have seen some academic departments become so concerned with developing competence standards for their basic communication course that everything else was let slide. In most cases, as such efforts were not based on solid research, the results were professionally embarrassing. But even if the products had been of higher quality, such efforts represent the tail taking over. Although in most schools more students take the basic communication course than all other courses combined, this is far from all that we do.

While we have a responsibility to our society to provide the means by which our citizens may become communicatively competent, this is far from our only responsibility. While in most of our institutions only a small percentage of the students will specialize in communication, excellence for these few is every bit as important, if not more important, than competence for the many. In a similar vein, we must never sacrifice our basic research efforts on the altar of service to the competence needs of ever-increasing numbers of students. If we help one student become communicatively competent, that benefit to society will live as long as does that individual. If our research generates one new insight into communication, that insight will live as long as civilized humans inhabit this planet.

NOTE

1. Note that competence is not being used here in the same sense as it is in the term communication competence. With my definition of communication competence advanced above, the performance aspect is actually closer than the competence aspect.