
UNIT 1 SOME CONCEPTS IN COMMUNICATION

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1.0 OBJECTIVES

What should you do with the help of this unit?

You should change your attitude to the task of revising and refining your English. Your attitude should change from that of the traditional 'scholar' to that of a user of the language in the give-and-take of information, ideas, etc.

You should be able to understand the difference between knowledge and skill. You should shift your attention from English as a 'subject' of knowledge to English as a 'skill' that you can train yourself to use.

1.1 INTRODUCTION : MAKING YOUR THOUGHTS CLEAR

You have opted for a course in communication skills in English. Why have you opted for such a course? What other skills are there in English? What are communication skills anyway? What is communication? You may have thought about these things.

Writing is the best way to make your thoughts clear, and that is why writing is so difficult. Our thoughts, you see, are seldom very clear. We may think they are very clear. But the moment we try to express those thoughts, we find they are far from clear. Very often our readers and hearers do not understand us. And what is worse, they misunderstand us. That is why we both—the speaker and the hearer, the reader and the writer—need communication skills. We should be able to say what we mean, clearly (unless we intend to hide it!). And we should be able to understand what others mean when they say something. We should be able to understand what they mean even when they hide it. You will have to read between the lines (or listen between the words), to find hidden meanings. Therefore it was a good idea for you to opt for a course in communication skills.

Check Your Progress 1

How do our thoughts gain from writing?

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1.2 USE OF ENGLISH

English is not just the language of England. It is a world-wide language which more than fourteen hundred million people speak and write in hundreds of different ways. Its pronunciation is confusing. Its spelling is still more confusing. It has too many words that

But all these difficulties do not matter. Fourteen hundred million people use the language in spite of them. So why should you not use it? Learn its twenty-six letters, forty-four sounds (according to British Received Pronunciation), three thousand common words and three hundred or so grammatical structures; and you can go anywhere in the world, and communicate. You will find *someone* there who will understand what you say in English, if you speak the language with some *communication skill*.

What is a Skill?

Skill is the 'ability to do something expertly and well'. So says the O A L D (*Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary of Current English*). And the C O D (*The Concise Oxford Dictionary*) says it is 'expertness, practised ability, facility in doing something, dexterity'.

You may do certain things well because of your natural abilities. But such natural abilities do not make you skilled. A skilled person carries out his task 'expertly', like an expert. Now who is an expert? 'A person with special knowledge, skill or training'—OALD When this word is used as an adjective it means 'trained by practice'.

To learn the skills of communication, then, you will have to engage yourself in two kinds of activities.

- 1 Study, to gain 'special knowledge' about English and communication.
- 2 Practice, because skills are 'practised abilities'.

Of these two, practice is of course the really vital activity. An expert, the dictionary says, is someone with special knowledge, *or* skills; not necessarily both. There are some subjects in which you can claim to be an expert because of your knowledge alone. For instance, an expert on volcanoes needs only to know how volcanoes behave. No one will ask him to make volcanoes, or break them! But if you are an expert at cooking, no one will compel you to talk about cooking. Instead, you will be asked to cook, and to cook delicious dishes! You cannot say you have had no practice in cooking! Communication is much more like cooking than like volcanoes. When you have finished a course in communication skills, you cannot say you have no practice in communication and get away with it. Therefore, begin practising communication at the very beginning, continue practising steadily to the end of the course and continue even after the course, to the very end of your career! Practice makes one perfect : so goes the saying. But we're not asking you to be perfect. We shall allow you some lovable imperfections, some harmless laughable mistakes. But your aim should be to communicate *very well* in English. Your course may not stay with you till you achieve that aim. But it will show you how you can go on learning after it, by yourself, and get to your goal.

Check Your Progress 2

- 1 Why do we say that English is not just the language of England?

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- 2 How can we say that the difficulties of learning English do not seem to matter?

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- 3 What are the different kinds of experts?

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- 4 Name three skill subjects and three knowledge subjects.

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There are various types of noise, or disturbance in communication. For example, when two people say the same word or set of words in a sentence, they may mean two different things. Notice the use of *beat* in the following sentence :

Mr. X beat his disobedient son.

Mrs. X beat the opposing player at tennis.

Words are limited in number. Thoughts are unlimited. Words are old, and more or less permanent, or at least 'semi-permanent'; thoughts are new, and passing. That means, old words will have to express new thoughts. Then, since there are many more thoughts in people's heads than there are words in English (or in any other language), one word often carries several meanings. If the sender encodes a message in one meaning and the receiver decodes it in another meaning (because the words and their arrangement in sentences allow both meanings), what happens is misunderstanding. Here is a well-known example.

Mr. X : Call me a cab, will you? (i.e., Call a cab for me.)

Mr. Y : Yes, I will. You are a cab. (I label you as 'a cab'.)

Skills are made of two kinds of components, as we saw earlier in Section 1.2.

- i) Insights, which give us an intelligent awareness of what is happening in the field.
- ii) Training, or in other words, guided practice. The practice should go on until we are thorough in our skills. The guidance may come from others in the earlier stages. But in the later stages, self-guidance takes over. When we have gained insights, we will be able to guide ourselves, and train ourselves.

In the light of what we have said so far about communication skills, let us take another look at English. We have seen how English can be looked on as a communication code. Senders and receivers use this code to pass messages between them. Before they can use this code, however, they must make sure that they fulfil two conditions.

- i) They should have both mastered the *signals* of the code. They should be sure that they can recognize and produce all its signals and can tell what each signal and each group of signals stand for.
- ii) They should also know all the essential rules for putting the signals together and agree with each other on those rules.

These are the two kinds of items that make a code as we saw earlier in Section 1.4—signals, and the rules for putting those signals together, as well as for giving meanings to the signals. (When a signal or a set of signals has a meaning, that is to say, when it stands for something else, it is called a *sign*.)

Now what kind of a communication code would you say we have in English? We should describe it as a very complicated code indeed. It is a code which has a code within it, which has another code within it, which has yet another code within it, and so on and on. You could peel it off like an onion! How does it work? Let us see.

Suppose our message is about an accident. We have a group of thoughts about the accident. These thoughts come in an order. And together, they take a shape. What would the shape look like on paper? We would call it a paragraph. There are some rules for arranging a paragraph, although these are very loose rules, not at all strict. It may be wiser for us to call them 'agreed practices' rather than rules. Still we have to follow them. If you follow no rules, your paragraph will confuse your receiver. The rules and practices for making paragraphs belong to the art of 'composition'.

A paragraph is made of sentences. Sentences are constructions we use to encode 'complete thoughts'—so some scholars call them, although no one is sure how complete any thought is. But however vague our thoughts may be, the rules for putting them in sentences are mostly very clear, and mostly, very strict.

If we want to encode our thoughts in sentences, we have to use words. To make English sentences, we have to use English words most of the time. And if we want an English word to say the right thing, we have to find the right place for it in our sentence. Put one of them in the wrong place, and disaster may strike. Suppose someone meant to say: 'Set up the equipment'. And suppose his receiver heard, 'Upset the equipment'. And suppose what he says, instead, is, 'The equipment comes crashing

The rules for making sentences out of words are put together in a body of knowledge called 'grammar', and a body of wisdom called 'usage'.

Words stand for pieces of thought, called meanings. Those who wish to find out how words get their meanings study a branch of knowledge called 'semantics'.

Words are made of speech sounds, of which there are hundreds. We cannot use just any of those speech sounds to make English words. We will have to pick them out of a particular set of forty-four sounds (if we follow British Received Pronunciation). If we put in an English word a sound which is outside its particular group, our receivers may sometimes get us quite wrong. If we want our receiver to get our message right, we should put the right sound in the right place, at the right time; that is, use it in the right way.

Words are primarily spoken. That is to say, we first hear them and say them. This is how most people in our country use words (in their own languages). A few of us, however, sometimes encode them in inkmarks, or pencil marks, or chalk marks, called letters. We call this kind of encoding 'writing'. And the written marks in which any particular word is usually encoded is known as its 'spelling'. Spelling was your occupation in your childhood. If you look back on your school days, you will remember that you spent most of your time in class doing nothing else. You spent most of the school hours putting the teacher's spoken words in your written signals. That shows how difficult spelling is.

Now, what have we been telling you in these pages, and what is the point of it all? We have been trying to give you glimpses of some of the tricky features of English as a communication code. We have dealt with these features in a rather light-hearted manner. They will get more serious attention later on. Right now the point of the whole exercise is this. You should understand the *practical* reasons why you should revise and refine your English.

Do we mean then that the reasons why you learned English earlier were not practical? We are afraid we do. If you had learned this language for really practical reasons, you would not need to take this course.

What was your reason for learning English? Some learn it to pass examinations. They leave out everything that may not be 'important' for the examination. Their reason is short-sighted. Their language will not help them when they go out into the world after their examination.

Then there are some who learn English as a social accomplishment. These people practise pronunciation. They can say a few harmless phrases and sentences. They get other people to write their letters and speeches for them.

But worse than these two groups are those who look on English as a branch of knowledge. These clever persons seem to know everything *about* English. They tell you what is *wrong* with your English every time you open your mouth or they open your letter. They will sooner or later abolish the practical reason for learning the language, which is to speak and write it, in order to exchange information and ideas. English is not something we ought to 'know'. It is a *language*, which we can *speak* and write, hear and read.

The reasons why people choose to exchange news and ideas in English are well known. What are your own reasons?

Before we choose English as our code for passing information, we have to make sure that our English can satisfy two conditions.

- i) It should take our full message to our receiver without any loss of quality.
- ii) It should not allow 'noise' to drown our message or draw our receiver's attention away from our message. In other words, as far as possible, it should prevent distortion or distraction created by noise.

Of these conditions, the first sounds clear enough. But the second may sound funny to most people. Is it necessary to state it? And what has it to do with English in particular? Everyone knows what they should do when there is noise—shout out loud and clear above the noise, or shut off the noise if it cannot be stopped. These simple steps would be enough to deal with noise in its ordinary sense. But 'noise' is not such a simple thing in communication.

In communication, we call something noise, not because of what it *is*, but because of what it *does*. Noise is anything which spoils the quality of the message or draws the receiver's attention away from the message. In this sense there are two kinds of noise. When the audience is noisy or the road is noisy, the noise they make is channel noise, which mixes with the speaker's voice and passes through the air (the channel) to fill the hearer's ear. So we shout out loud in a noisy place. But what can you do when your *sentences* are noisy or your *words* are noisy?

A word is noisy when you mean one thing by it and it allows two meanings or more to get into your receiver's head. A word is noisy when you write it with a funny spelling mistake. Your reader remembers the funny spelling more clearly than what the word says. So is a sentence noisy when its hearer's or reader's attention is forced on its grammatical mistakes and peculiarities, so that he misses its message. Mistakes are noises. Correct signs alone can carry our message. So the practical reasons why we should revise and refine our English are not examinations, educational snobbery or 'cultural' passport-getting. They are these.

- i) As far as possible, our receiver should get *all* of what we say.
- ii) His attention should not be forced to turn away from what we are saying to *how* we are saying it. Our *manner* should not force attention away from our matter.

But that is exactly what mistakes and peculiarities do. A mistake is a noise. So when there are too many of them in our English, our English becomes too noisy.

Check Your Progress 4

1 What does a sender do when he encodes a message?

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2 What has a receiver got to do before he can understand a message?

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3 What turns signals into signs?

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4 What are the two kinds of items that go to make up a code?

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5 What makes English spelling as confusing as it is?

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6 What is the risk we take when we allow the same word to mean several things?

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7 What should the sender and the receiver be sure of before they start using a code?

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8 Find three of the reasons why people learn English. Why are they not really 'practical'?

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9 What does noise do when we speak?

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10 There is one thing that our English should do, and another thing that it should not do. What are these two things?

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1.5 LET US SUM UP

- i) Communication skills help us to understand what others mean by what they say, and to say what we mean, clearly, in speech or in writing.
- ii) English is a difficult language to learn, but still it has become a world language. That shows we can learn it in spite of its problems.
- iii) Skills consist of special knowledge (which leads to insights) and/or practised abilities. Skill enables a person to perform like an expert.
- iv) Communication makes ideas, information, etc., *common* between two persons, among a group, and so on. 'Communication' is a necessary term for the numerous things people do to *share* ideas, etc.
- v) *What* people communicate, however, are not ideas, but *messages*.
- vi) The message goes from the *sender* along the *channel* or through the *medium* to the *receiver*.
- vii) Messages are put in a code, to make it possible for them to travel along the channel.
- viii) The *Morse Code* as it is used in telegraphy is a good model of a code, especially a code like English. The sender *encodes* the letters of the alphabet in the signals of Morse, which the receiver *decodes* back into letters of the English alphabet.
- ix) English is similar to Morse because it has to encode larger numbers of items in smaller numbers of signals, but English is many times more complicated than Morse.
- x) At each stage of encoding and decoding English, we have to beware of pitfalls, because *noise* comes in, either to distort our message or to distract the attention of our receiver.
- xi) Noise is a noise because it *does* something 'noisy' and draws the receiver's attention away from the message.
- xii) In the above sense, mistakes and peculiarities in English are noises. They force the receiver to pay attention to them, rather than to our message. This rather than pride, self-respect, or the need to show competence, is what gives us the 'practical reasons' for

1.6 KEY WORDS

channel : The passage through which the message travels from the sender to the receiver. This term is more often used by communication engineers.

code : A system of signals, such as dots, dashes, sounds, letters of the alphabet, figures, words or flashes of light, to which meanings are given. A signal gets a 'meaning' when a sender and a receiver agree about what it stands for. The sender and the receiver should know all the signals of a code, what each signal stands for, and how to put the signals together.

The native speakers of a language learn a code, with its rules. And the native speakers of another language learn the signals and the rules of another code. So when we learn English as a second language, we are learning *what to agree on* with the speakers of English about the signals and the rules of their code. There is no reason in nature why the same animal should be 'a cat' in one country and 'billi' in another. Speakers of English and Hindi happen to have chosen separate signs to stand for that animal in their codes. That is all (the reason) there is for it.

decode : convert a message from its coded form to its original form and thus reveal its meaning.

encode : embody (or we can say 'clothe') a message in a particular set of signals according to the rules of that particular code.

expert : a person with special knowledge of something or a high degree of training in doing something, or both.

insight : the 'power of seeing with the mind'; the ability to form an idea of 'how something works'. Such an ability helps a person to find solutions to problems quickly.

medium : the body through which the message passes from the sender to the receiver. A medium is any instrument for transmitting information. It can be a human sense, several senses combined, or a natural or man-made vehicle of transmission. Every medium selects the material which it transmits. For instance, the ear selects only sounds, and so does the radio. They will not send any message to the receiver's eyes.

message : information that the sender puts in a communication channel in order to pass on to the receiver.

noise : 'any undesired disturbance in a communication system, such as random electrical currents'. In human communication, such things as the emotional disturbance of the receiver is metaphorically treated as noise. Then there is another kind of noise, called code noise, which is created by 'unintended meanings' and 'mistakes'. Unintended meanings, and mistakes, arise at the point of encoding or decoding. For instance, in some places the word 'writer' means a clerk. If you introduce a novelist as 'a writer' to your audience in such a place, and the people understand that your novelist is a clerk, your introduction is distorted by a code noise. A word, which you have used in one meaning, happens to have another meaning as well. And your hearers pay attention to that meaning, not to *your* meaning. Hence that other unwanted meaning is the 'code noise' which has got into your message. Noise, as we all know, disturbs the speaker and distracts the hearer. So, anything that disturbs a sender or distracts a receiver is given the name 'noise'.

practice : experience or facility (ease) in doing something, gained by regular repetition of the task, e.g. 'Raj knows the work, but he hasn't had enough practice'. Regularly repeated performance of a task is itself called practice; e.g., 'Practice makes perfect'. The verb form of the word is 'practise'.

receiver : a person who (or a thing which) takes the message from the communication channel.

sender : a person who (or a thing which) puts out a message in a communication channel.

sign : a mark used to denote something other than itself.

signal : 'a sign or a group of signs transmitted deliberately'; any sensory stimulus with a possibility of becoming a sign. The letters 'M.P.' for instance stand for 'Member'.

ANSWERS

Check Your Progress 1

They gain clarity. We have to make our thoughts clearer when we write.

Check Your Progress 2

- 1 English is now spoken all over the world in various ways. Englishmen make up only a small portion of those who speak English.
- 2 In spite of all the difficulties of English, fourteen hundred million people use it, and they live all over the world. So the difficulties do not seem to matter.
- 3 One kind of expert may have specialised knowledge, another may have special skills. A third kind of expert may have special knowledge as well as skills.
- 4 Archery, tailoring, and painting are skill subjects. History, sociology and philosophy are knowledge subjects. Teaching, engineering, and architecture are knowledge-and-skill subjects. (But any skill subject requires a certain amount of knowledge as well, and any knowledge subject will require a certain degree of skill also.)

Check Your Progress 3

- 1 There are hundreds of ways in which information is passed on. Each one of these ways has or can have a word for itself. Therefore we have to find a common word for all of them. That word is 'communication'.
- 2 There is only one person who is normally aware of a thought. That person is its thinker. Other persons will not become aware of it unless it is encoded in signals which can be seen, heard or otherwise felt. Information so encoded is a message. Therefore we can communicate only messages.

Check Your Progress 4

- 1 When a sender encodes a message, he changes it into a series of meaningful signals, or signs which are meaningful to the receiver.
- 2 Before a receiver can understand a message, he has to decode it, or, in other words, identify its signals and find out what they stand for. He has to trace the signals back to their meanings.
- 3 Signals become signs when they stand for other signals, or things, or ideas.
- 4 Signals, with the rules for putting them together and interpreting them, go to make up a code.
- 5 The twenty-six letters of the English alphabet are insufficient to work for forty-four English speech sounds. This makes English spelling as confusing as it is.
- 6 Suppose we use a word in one sense, but it can be used in many different senses. Then our receiver can decode the word signal in one of its unintended meanings. In other words, the 'noise' of the unintended meanings can distract the receiver's attention from the message, which is the intended meaning, the meaning in which the sender has used it. This is the risk we take when we allow one word to have more than one sense.
- 7 Before they start using a code, the sender and the receiver should be sure of (1) their knowledge of all its signals, and (2) their knowledge of, and agreement about, all the rules for putting the signals together and giving them meanings.
- 8 People learn English (1) as a subject of scholarship, (2) as a 'social accomplishment, and (3) as a means of showing themselves to be superior to others. These are not practical reasons because the practical reason for learning English is to exchange ideas and information.
- 9 When we speak, noise distorts our speech (our message) and distracts our hearer's (receiver's) attention.
- 10 Our English should pass on our 'full message' without loss in its quality. It should not distract the receiver's attention by creating 'noise' caused by mistakes in encoding or decoding.