How to Teach Communication?

Communication is social behaviour. Therefore, communication cannot be taught by merely learning concepts and practicing methods, but always goes hand in hand with personal development (Meyer, 2013, p. 146). Personal development, in turn, requires a supportive learning environment and a particular approach to delivery by the instructor. Several factors influence such learning situations and are worth being considered in advance.

Factors influencing the teaching of communication skills

1. Humanistic image of man

"Unfortunately, teachers very often forget that they are the most important learning condition." (Reich, 2008, p. 232)

This principle relates to teachers' attitudes toward both their content and their learners. Factors such as treating students with appreciation, patience, respect, composure, the ability to deal with conflict, and an open and sincere interest in their development are conducive to the teaching situations discussed here. They also include a belief that every student is capable of learning and developing communication skills.

2. Altruistic Egoism

This principle refers to your well-being as a teacher and the conviction that you can only be available to the learners with all your resources, whether cognitive, emotional or social, if you yourself are doing well. For this, you must also perceive and acknowledge your personal, needs and fears - especially in teaching.

3. Connectivity

We have been communicating since we were little children. When teaching communication, especially for adults, it is always possible to draw on prior knowledge in the group. Therefore, it makes sense, on the one hand, to get as accurate a picture as possible of the needs and previous experiences of the participants. On the other hand, it is advisable to remain in methodical exchange with the group during the process, to ask for their own experiences on the topic, to use these experiences for work and to provide space for discussion.

4. Viability and practical relevance

Sustainable teaching of skills requires that they are seen by participants as viable, relevant and useful in practice. What is not recognised as functional will not be internalised and ultimately not applied. Learning success is more likely if the topics covered are either asked for and desired by the participants themselves or if the instructor starts by demonstrating their relevance for practice and as close to everyday life as possible. When it comes to conflict management, for example, it makes sense to discuss concrete situations from the students' everyday lives. This makes the forms conflicts can take tangible. In addition, concrete approaches to solutions can be directly tested for their feasibility.

5. Crossing perspectives

Meyer (2013, p. 149) vividly highlights how different our views and perspectives on things are: Teachers have different perspectives than students. Scientists have different perspectives than philosophers. Senior people have different perspectives than young people. These differences occur for various reasons, such as biographical, emotional, cognitive, social, or cultural conditions. The basis for teaching in our case is to acknowledge that our perspectives on the world are subjective and different from those of others – while recognising them to be just that. Communicatively approached, commonalities, intersections, and incompatibilities can be found in shared and different perspectives. And all of those, including differences, can be used as resources in communication training.

6. Learning atmosphere and flow

"Cognition is not possible without emotion." (Roth, 1996, p. 211)

The learning setting and atmosphere play a role in every teaching situation. However, when it comes to personal development, self-reflection and interaction in the group, these factors gain an extraordinarily high significance that must not be underestimated.

In order to be prepared to critically question oneself, to present oneself in front of the group, to communicate, to accept feedback and to give it without reservations, to be prepared to allow changes and to want to learn, an inclusive and welcoming atmosphere is needed. This can be created by establishing respectful, appreciative interaction right from the start and giving learners a sense of security. The participants should feel comfortable, be challenged and at the same time not feel overwhelmed. It is worth investing effort and time in the learning atmosphere from the beginning and establishing it directly in the opening situation. An attempt to work with group feedback with students who hardly know each other, for example, will face difficulties. **It is therefore always worthwhile to have a get-to-know-you session at the beginning of a seminar.**

---

7. Using and welcoming perturbations

Disturbances or even interruptions should be seen as something positive in this context. A whiteboard marker that is not writing, a forgotten handout, an unfocused group, an unmotivated participant are all factors that can unsettle you as a teacher. At the same time, these influences can lead us to stray from planned seminar routines, choose other methods or allow for unforeseen topics.

"Whoever, therefore, believes him or herself to be already in possession of the complete and assured truth in an area, will, on the one hand, no longer allow him or herself to be perturbed, but, on the other hand, can thereby learn nothing more." (Meyer, 2013, p. 150)

8. Construction, reconstruction and deconstruction

There are three basic didactic approaches (Reich, 2008, p. 138)

Construction

Learners independently solve questions such as, "How can the problem be solved? How can the question be answered?" This is the principle of learning by doing and thus enables participants to find solutions that are useful to them individually and in their everyday lives.

Reconstruction

Reconstruction draws on existing knowledge and models and aims to actively understand, modify and apply them to one's own concrete scenarios. This should not stop at simple acquisition, e.g. in the form of memorisation. "How can this concept be applied to a concrete situation? What is the relevance of this knowledge to my concrete situation in everyday life?"

Deconstruction

Deconstruction refers to a process, in which already learned knowledge and concepts are doubted and questioned. Through this questioning, new insights and approaches to solutions are promoted and old approaches are questioned. The so-called "blind spot" is addressed and reduced when deconstruction refers to old, proven and internalised approaches: "How have I dealt with such situations in the past? What positive effects can this tried and tested approach or a newly learned one have basically? And what negative ones?" These questions hint at the fact that it can be uncomfortable to deconstruct individually already established knowledge and approaches. At the same time, it prevents us from adopting or continuing to use them uncritically and untested.

9. Methodological competence, diversity and interdependence

Particularly for teaching communicative competence, it is necessary not only to discuss content, but to make knowledge tangible, to try it out, to practice it in role plays or to simulate it (method competence). A feedback method, for example, must be tried out in practice - only then do the challenges become visible. Methods should also be selected and mixed according to the content, the group as a whole and the individual participants (method diversity). Not least, situational factors play a role here: some methods might be more suitable for a morning session than a session right after lunch.

Method interdependence means planning and dramaturgically combining different methods. Here, for example, both a deductive approach (a model is discussed cognitively and tried out practically in exercises) and an inductive approach (functional models are developed from practical experience and examples) are possible.

10. Welcoming errors

Not only allowing mistakes but also welcoming them is especially important in the context of social skills. This attitude enables learners to enter practice situations as uninhibitedly as possible and is essential for a supportive learning atmosphere. Of course, supposedly wrong approaches or actions can also just be considered by participants as viable and suitable for everyday life. Such a situation can, on the one hand, bring us back to point X and, on the other hand, provide perturbations as well as a productive basis for discussion (deconstruction). For example, if a student has difficulty giving non-judgemental feedback, this provides an opportunity to pose a question to the group. It may turn out that several people feel the same way or even that the usefulness of non-judgemental feedback is questioned by several people. Such a situation offers the ideal opportunity to raise this point for discussion, to think up concrete scenarios in the group and to discuss possible impacts.

At the same time, we as teachers would do well to be open and generous towards our own supposed mistakes.

11. Evaluation and supervision

This point causes some teachers a queasy feeling. But, as Siebert (2005, p. 124) rightly puts it, "This is not about self-criticism, which tends to diminish the pleasure of teaching, but about expanding one's repertoire of actions". Regular evaluations should therefore be a standard procedure for teachers in the field of communicative competences. The aim is to remain flexible in the design of processes, methods and approaches, and to provide learners with new viable insights and skills again and again. Evaluations can be carried out in various forms, both quantitative and qualitative.

Purely quantitative evaluations are often not very useful for the teacher and may cause more uncertainty than new insights. It is good to collect feedback anonymously or - if oral - at least semi-anonymously in a small group and then present it in a bundle. Targeted questions, for example, about how knowledge can be applied in everyday life, can focus the group's attention on learning successes in a didactically effective way.

As a teacher, firstly you should always bear in mind that feedback on your content and didactics should not be confused with criticism of you as a person. Second, it is not possible to objectively assess the quality of your teaching (as discussed above: subjectivity of perspectives). And third, as (Siebert, 2005, p. 123) points out, "learners usually cannot, with the best will in the world, judge what they have 'really' learned. Many learning effects often become noticeable only later." The possibility of regular supervision is additionally a great option, not only if you are stuck in didactic: for example, in the form of a colleague who attends your session and gives you feedback afterwards.

12. Continuing Education

Connecting topics that concern communicative competence and its didactics beyond the boundaries of disciplines can be found in plenty in psychology, linguistics, philosophy, neurobiology, sociology and pedagogy. Concepts such as constructivism, critical thinking, theme-centred interaction, the systemic approach, or various approaches to counseling ground and enrich the approaches presented here. Further engagement with them will not only enrich your teaching in terms of content and according to current developments and thus benefit your students. It will also strengthen you in your teaching and give you security.