

# **SECTION TWO**

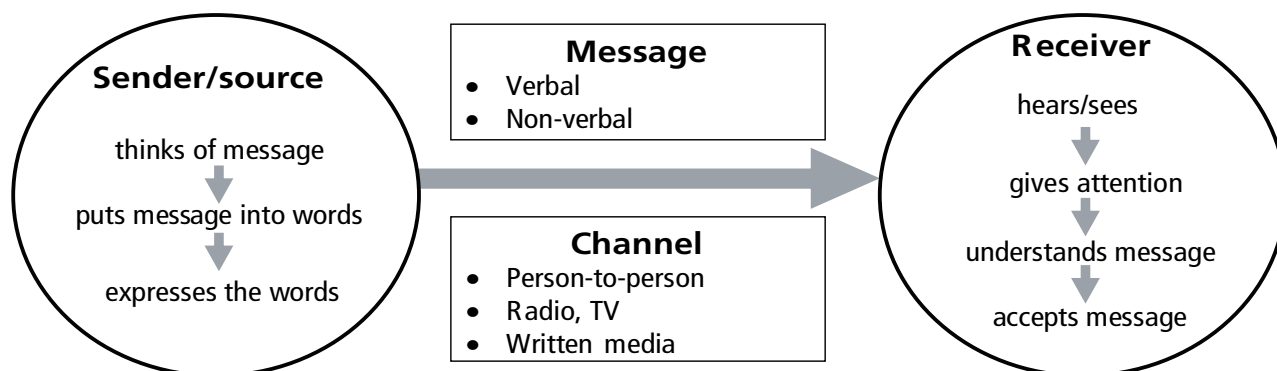
## **Communication**

In this section, we take a short look at the important role of communication in teaching. It also offers some ideas about improving this communication, leading to better teaching practice.

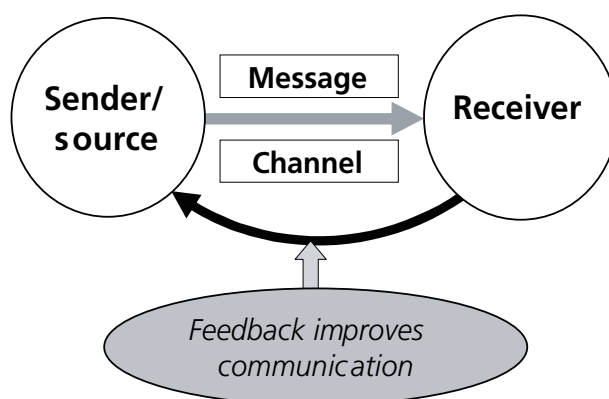
## About ‘communication’

What is ‘communication’? According to the Concise Oxford Dictionary the word means ‘the act of imparting, especially news’, or ‘the science and practice of transmitting information’. These definitions clearly show the link between ‘teaching’ and ‘communication’: teachers are constantly imparting new knowledge, or transmitting information.

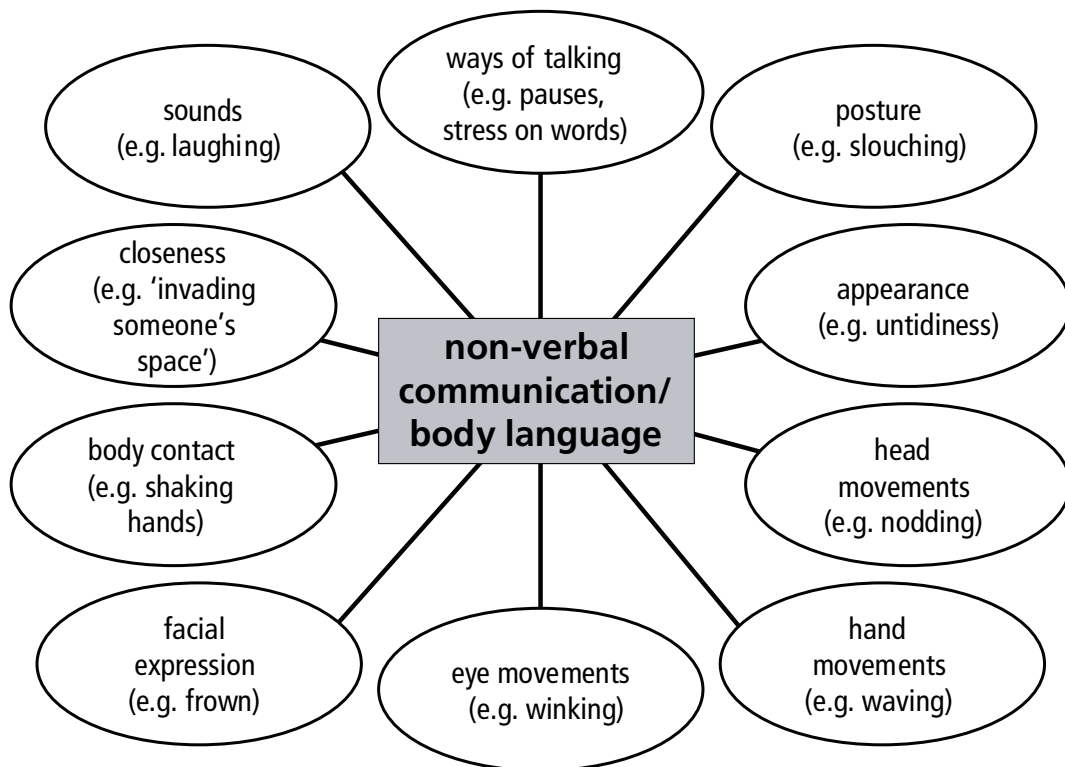
Hubley (1993, pp.47–51) shows us that communication is *a complex process*:



At any stage of this process things may go wrong, making the communication less effective. For instance, the sender may not express what he/she wants to say clearly, or the room may be noisy, or the receiver may not understand the words the sender is using. To be effective, teachers have to try to minimise these *barriers to communication*. We do this in a number of ways – for example, by making sure that the room is quiet and well lit, by speaking slowly and clearly; by only using words which the students should be able to understand. However, the most important way to overcome the barriers is *two-way communication*. This means getting regular feedback from the receivers (the students in this case). Are they really understanding what we are trying to put across?



Communication does not only take place by means of words. *Non-verbal communication* (or *body language*) is equally important. We are all familiar with the different kinds of non-verbal communication: This kind of communication is usually subconscious – we use it without thinking about it. This is why we say that ‘it is difficult to lie in body language’. If teachers really attend to the body language of their students they will know when they are bored or confused. From the body language of their teachers, students pick up whether the teachers are confident and enthusiastic and encouraging.



## Person-to-person communication: presentation skills

In the previous section, we discussed different styles of teaching. Some teachers like to talk, and expect the students to write down what they say and to learn it (this style encourages superficial learning – and rapid forgetting!) Other teachers see their role as one of helping the students to learn at a deeper level – to understand new ideas and concepts so well that they can apply them in a work situation. Either way, these teachers will do a better job if they communicate well with their students.

An important element of communication in teaching is the use of teaching aids. We have all heard the saying: ‘What I hear, I forget; what I see, I remember; what I do, I know.’ Pictures, written posters and practical demonstrations improve communication and we should use them as much as possible. Most of us have access to paper, posters, a chalkboard, or an overhead projector (some also have access to data projectors). We can use these to prepare aids for our lessons: summaries of important facts, pictures and diagrams, even models. The overhead and data projectors are particularly useful, because they allow us to face our students while using them.

How can I know whether I am communicating well as a teacher? Communication is a skill – and we improve our skills by getting feedback on the way we perform them. We can get such feedback by asking an experienced colleague to sit in on our teaching and to give us feedback. We can also ask someone to record us on a videotape as we teach, which we then inspect critically afterwards. In either case, the feedback will be better if we use a checklist to judge our performance. Here is such a checklist:

## Checklist for communication during teaching

### About the style of presentation

- *Does the teacher speak clearly?*  
(loud enough; not too fast; faces the class; avoids mannerisms like 'um')
- *Is the teacher's non-verbal communication suitable?*  
(appropriate gestures and expressions; moves around; eye contact with whole class)
- *Does the teacher speak understandably?*  
(uses words that the students should be able to understand)
- *Is the speed of presentation right?*  
(the students must be able to absorb the material that is presented)
- *Is there two-way communication?*  
(the teacher checks regularly if the students have understood)
- *Does the teacher aim for 'deep learning'?*  
(the teacher gives the students problems to solve; they participate and discuss)
- *Is there evidence of a good relationship between teacher and students?*  
(teacher and students respect each other, listen to each other)

### About the content

- *Does the teacher emphasise important knowledge?*  
(the main messages are clear and emphasised; unnecessary detail is left out)
- *Is information presented in a logical sequence?*  
(bits of information follow logically on each other; easy to understand and to remember)

### About the place where the teaching is happening

- *Is the place suitable for good communication?*  
(enough light; no noise from outside)
- *Are the students comfortable?*  
(adequate seating; students can see the teacher; not too hot nor too cold)

### About the use of teaching aids

- *Are the teaching aids relevant?*  
(the aids only deal with the subject matter of the lesson, and clarify it)
- *Are the teaching aids well prepared?*  
(only contain highlights/main points; neat; different colours are used)
- *Are the teaching aids easy to read and understand?*  
(letters and pictures are large enough; not too much information on one aid)
- *Are the teaching aids skilfully used?*  
(the teacher handles them with confidence; uses a pointer; does not mix them up)

## Written communication: handouts

Teachers communicate by speaking, but also by writing. Students do most of their learning from written material such as books and notes. In many of our countries, student eye health care workers have to learn from documents in a language (often English or French) which is not their first language. We now know from research that almost all such students have problems with reading these 'second languages': they read more slowly, and understand less, than students whose first language is English or French. This is purely a language issue, and has nothing to do with intelligence.

This fact is very important for teachers to remember when they select or prepare written materials for their students. Photocopies of journal articles or pages out of a textbook are often complex and hard to read – be careful of using them. This is one reason why many teachers prepare *handouts* for their students, which they write themselves. It may be a summary of important points to be learnt; or a guide to students on work they have to do, or references they have to look up. Teachers may use handouts for students to refer to during a lesson, and students will definitely use them in their self-study time. Handouts are an important way of communicating with students and they must communicate effectively. Here is a checklist which should help you to write better handouts:

### Checklist for writing good handouts

#### About the content

- *Does it emphasize important knowledge?*  
(makes clear what is important – the students won't know)
- *Does it present information in a logical sequence?*  
(information logically connected, so it is easy to understand and to learn)
- *Is it scientifically accurate and up-to-date?*  
(information is true, comprehensive, in line with current thinking)

#### About the style of writing

- *Are the sentences short?*  
(not more than 20 words; one idea per sentence)
- *Are active verbs used as much as possible? \*\**  
(‘feed children regularly’, not ‘children should be regularly fed’)
- *Are the readers likely to understand the words?*  
(no jargon; using the simplest word that will say what you want to say)

#### About the layout/ presentation

- *Is it legible/easy to read?*  
(handwriting neat; cyclostyled copies or photocopies clear and not blurred)
- *Is it well spaced and not too full?*  
(a page too full with print is discouraging, boring, difficult to read)
- *Is it striking and interesting?*  
(different letter sizes; bold font used for emphasis; pictures or diagrams included)

*\*\* this is true for English – in other languages the passive voice may be clear/ acceptable*

These days many teaching institutions have websites where teachers put their handouts for the students to find. It doesn't matter whether the handout is on paper or on a website – it still needs to be well written. For those who are interested, there are simple 'readability tests' (such as the Cloze and Gobbledygook tests) that you can use to see if your material is written at the right level for your students.

### **The Cloze 'readability test'**

You take a sample of the material that you want to test – usually half a page. You then remove every fifth word, leaving a blank space (you can do this with correction fluid on a paper copy or by substituting a gap for the word on an electronic copy). You then give the sample to a few persons from the target group (the group which is going to use the material). You ask them to try to fill in the gaps. When they have finished you work out what percentage of replacements is correct, in each case. Then you calculate the average percentage of correct replacements, of all who took the test. This is interpreted as follows:

- 60–100% of missing words correctly guessed: the material is suitable.
- 40–59% correctly guessed: the material needs revision so that it is more understandable.
- 0–39% correctly guessed: the material is too complex and must be completely re-written.

The good thing about the Cloze test is that the people who are going to use the material, test that material for you.