

NON-VERBAL COMMUNICATION IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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Abstract. *The article presents the importance of non-verbal communication in the sphere of education at the level of higher education. In terms of the didactic process, education, two types of communication deserve special attention, i.e. public and interpersonal communication. The author presented the characteristics of the above types of communication situation and differences in the non-verbal feedback that are visible between the lecturer's direct conversation with the student and the lecture given by the academic teacher. The article also indicates the types and functions of non-verbal behaviours, devoting particular attention to uses related to the use of proxemics in education. The significance of proxemics was characterised in the sphere of teaching, paying attention to issues concerning the feeling of congestion or maintaining distance relative to the communicative situation and goals between the academic teacher and a student. The factors determining the issues related to the feeling of congestion are also presented.*

Keywords: *education, higher education, interpersonal communication, public communication, non-verbal communication, proxemics.*

Introduction

Communication is the process underlying the education and upbringing of children and young people. The effectiveness of sharing knowledge, building relationships and a good working atmosphere and discussion depends on the effectiveness of this process. Also in terms of arousing interest in specific problems and topics, and the involvement of pupils and students in school and scientific matters, communication plays a significant role. A special role in this area is played by non-verbal communication, which Szejnberg (2007) pays attention to when he writes “one of the important ways to establish good teacher-student relationships is to use appropriate non-verbal behaviours. They prove the teacher's availability, his closeness, warmth emanating from him and the willingness to communicate with students.” Non-verbal communication is an important tool for the academic teacher's work with students, allowing, among others, for easier and more complete transmission of verbal messages. The aim of the article is to present the meaning of non-verbal behaviour in the field of didactic process and education at the higher education level, with particular emphasis on proxemics. The selection of this type of non-verbal behaviour is not accidental,

and its importance in the sphere of education had been confirmed by numerous studies. The issue emphasised by Jacko (2012) is also significant, saying that “one of the most important achievements of proxemics is to reveal and investigate the relationship between social ties and the interactional distance. The relationship mentioned here is bilateral: on the one hand – interpersonal relationships affect the interactional distance, and on the other – the interaction distance affects these social ties.”

Public and interpersonal communication in education and higher education

In terms of education, one can speak about a special significance of two types of communication, i.e., public and interpersonal communication. Both types of communication are direct, they can be used to convey information (information communication), but also to influence (persuasive communication). The lecturers conducting the lecture participate in the area of public communication, in which “the presence of an individual speaker is assumed who is in contact with a certain audience. It happens when a group becomes too numerous to allow everyone to actively participate in the conversation at the same time. It is characterized by less direct, less personal interactions” (Głodowski, 2006), which are characteristic of interpersonal communication. There is a clear and sharp division of roles in public communication, so there is a speaker who is responsible for preparing and transmitting information, and listeners – an audience whose task is to receive the information presented. (Głodowski, 2006) Feedback remains an important issue, the nature of which is completely different in the case of interpersonal and public communication. Interpersonal communication is a face to face communication between two people or a small group of people (three to four interlocutors). In this type of communication, the sender of the message has the opportunity to draw attention and react to any feedback (both verbal and non-verbal) sent from each participant in this communication situation. Recipient are also active, because each of them can respond to the issues raised by the sender, which in the case of public communication would be extremely difficult and could disturb the course of the meeting and the lecture. It is worth emphasizing that “interpersonal communication is a transaction process, in which characters and symbols are exchanged, acquiring significance in the context of the interaction of several people. Like any type of communication, it is best to consider it as a process in which all aspects of experiencing a communication situation can affect one another and in which communication changes over time and depending on the context. (Morreale et. al., 2007)

However, it should be noted that in the case of interpersonal communication, both verbal and non-verbal feedback takes on a similar meaning, it is equally visible to the speaker. In the case of public communication the situation is

different. (Głodowski, 2006) draws attention not only to the clearly defined division of roles, but also to some kind of imbalance that refers to the time of speaking. One speaker (lecturer) speaks to students (listeners), who form the auditorium. Therefore, verbal feedback is limited. In the case of this type of communication situation, the speaker is based primarily on non-verbal feedback, adapting to the auditorium and paying particular attention to “its collective response rather than the reactions of individual listeners.” (Głodowski, 2006) Of course, during the lecture, questions and comments may arise, which are reported by the listeners, but they do not have such a frequent character as in the case of interpersonal communication, which is based on immediate and direct feedback. (Ostrowska, 2007) draws attention to this fact, claiming that “the interactive and transactional character of the communication process, as well as the unity of space and time generates immediate feedback, expressed both in the form of verbal signs and non-verbal signals.”

Considering the importance of non-verbal feedback, as well as the use and functions of interpersonal communication, which “relates to the relationships and creates interpersonal relationships” (Morreale et. al., 2007), it is worth paying attention to the non-verbal context of communication in education. On the one hand, one can speak about public communication (lectures), during which non-verbal feedback becomes particularly important. On the other hand, one can talk about interpersonal communication based, to the same extent, on non-verbal and verbal exchange of information. This interpersonal communication can take place even in the situation of consultations during which the lecturer meets the student and explains his doubts, answers questions about specific topics and problems. In both of these cases – the non-verbal communication plays an important role in both types of communication situations. The non-verbal behaviours are obviously not visible in the form of feedback, but their significance is not limited only to the information function. In the context of non-verbal behaviours, one can talk about the implementation of such functions as exerting an impression, building relationships, sharing emotions (getting infected with emotions) and completing verbal messages.

Non-verbal communication in the teaching process

Non-verbal communication is not related to words, so it consists in exchanging information without using words, it is a type of communication carried out “through means other than words” (Knapp & Hall, 2000). One can distinguish several basic types of non-verbal communication, which include:

- 1) Apparition – physical appearance, clothing, make-up, jewellery, etc.
- 2) Chronemics – time of speech, waiting time for the interlocutor
- 3) Haptics – touch

- 4) Para-language – non-verbal aspects of speech, e.g., speech rate, volume, tone of voice, timbre. “Vocal signals consist of all sound properties that can transfer meanings and have certain measurable functions in interpersonal communication” (Leathers, 2007)
- 5) Kinesics – body language, i.e. gestures, postures, manner of walking
- 6) Proxemics – the use of space as a communication signal

All non-verbal messages mentioned above are used not only to exchange information, but can also be used by the interlocutors for self-presentation purposes. An example may include ingratiating strategies, which relate to arousing fondness, e.g., with the use of a smile. A student, whose aim is to arouse fondness and draw the attention of the lecturer to his person, during the lecture may use feedback in the form of a smile, nodding, eye contact, in order to show that he agrees with the speaker, accepts his statement or considers it fascinating and interesting. All this to inspire fondness. Non-verbal communication serves in this case the impression, but also takes the form of persuasive communication. The right image of a given person may be a tool used to induce the interlocutor to change behaviours, to adopt a certain attitude or opinion.

In the sphere of self-presentation, or the building of relationships, chronemics also becomes important, the approach of the interlocutors to time and its use. As observed by Głodowski (2006), time can be treated as:

1. The category of non-verbal communication
2. The dimension of the situational context, because all interactions take place and happen in a specific time dimension
3. The main factor of cultural differences in the sphere of non-verbal communication

Considering all non-verbal behaviours used in teaching situation, it is worth emphasizing that they serve not only to complement, accentuate and supplement the verbal message, but also constitute an important factor for building the right atmosphere of work, encouraging the students’ involvement in the work and tasks they carry out, and they can also serve to build proper, correct and good relations with students (pupils). The lecturer, through non-verbal messages, may not only arouse the students’ interest and curiosity, willingness to explore the issues discussed, but also can build relationships with students, point to their commitment, willingness to cooperate and communication openness. This openness can be understood, on the one hand, as a desire to understand the student’s point of view on the issues and problems discussed, and on the other hand, as seeking agreement and willingness to share information – sharing knowledge and experience. Proxemics deserves special attention in this area. The use of space is an important element of educational communication, being a tool that can be used to build a friendly atmosphere of teaching, effective communication and increasing motivation to learn. The décor of the lecture halls,

their size, the locations of the seats – these are the factors determining the effectiveness of the didactic process.

Proxemics in didactic situations

Space is an important factor determining the quality and effectiveness of interpersonal communication, also in relation to the teaching process and the transfer of knowledge. Leathers (2007) states that “the way we use space certainly gives meaning. All over the world, different meanings are communicated through various means. The beliefs, values and significance of a given culture are also communicated by how people use space.” Interior design, size of the room are important messages for interlocutors, able to determine not only the nature of communication, but also influence the self-presentation. “We now know that the decorative elements that we decide to place in our offices can significantly affect the main aspects of our image, and in particular the assessment of our credibility” (Leathers, 2007). Therefore, one can talk about a certain relationship between the question of credibility, building the right impression, and the way of arranging the available space. In the case of professional life, one can talk about the use of space as determining factor and indicating the status and possessed power. The size of the office, the way it is furnished constitute important messages regarding the person’s image being built. On the one hand, the use of space allows us to shape the impression exerted on others, and on the other hand, determines the behaviour of the interlocutors. Therefore, it is worth paying attention to the use of space and its importance in the sphere of teaching.

Proxemics is defined as “a study of how people use space to communicate” (Leathers, 2007) Issues regarding the arrangement of furniture, chairs, tables, proximity or distance, in which the interlocutor remains undoubtedly determine the nature of communication, also affecting its course, length and the way of expression. Too large a distance can cause that the interlocutors will not be able to communicate effectively, or will not be able to provide all information in a way they would be able to at a smaller distance. In the case of school rooms, lecture halls, one can talk about the appropriate arrangement of seats for students and pupils, in a way that increases the teacher’s and lecturer’s control over the process of sharing knowledge and student behaviour. One of the important factors determining communication is the size of the lecture hall, the amount of space available to every listener – the space that they can consider as their own territory. “It was calculated that the most optimal space for the average student, expressed in square meters, is in the lecture hall – 5,8 to 8,2 m², in the room for studying - 6,1 to 8,8 m², in a library 7,3 to 9,4 m² and in a discussion group – 9,4 to 13,1 m², (Acc. to Leathers, 2007).

The terms, such as territory, congestion, density, privacy or the proxemic environment are associated with proxemics. The sense of congestion remains an important issue, which can lead to discomfort and negatively affect issues related even to focusing attention. It is worth adding that congestion does not mean the same as density. As D. G. Leathers (2007) remarks, “congestion should be clearly distinguished from density. Density is a concept that is defined in strictly physical categories. Density refers to the number of people on a given space unit. Congestion – on the contrary – is a psychological concept”. Although objective measurements may indicate that a specific number of people (e.g. five friends) in a small room should feel crowded, it does not necessarily mean that each of them feels similarly crowded. Therefore, congestion is a psychological concept, in addition, “the sense of congestion is subjective as much as it depends on who else is involved, when and where it happens, and why and how it happens”. This feeling of congestion can therefore have an impact on the effectiveness and efficiency of the interpersonal communication process, especially in the context of satisfaction that should be provided by the sender and recipient of the conversation. (Leathers, 2007) Thus, density is a concept that is easy to measure, and it is different in the case of congestion, which refers to the emotional state “that can develop in both high and low density conditions.” (Knapp & Hall, 2000)

This feeling of congestion felt by the students and pupils can bring negative effects, which D. G. Leathers (2007) writes about, among others, which includes reduced quality of tasks, difficulties with attention or aggression. In a situation, in which the student feels that his/her personal space has been disturbed by other students, he or she experiences a feeling of congestion which may even result in aggressive behaviour. Therefore, an important issue is to draw attention to the preferences of students regarding personal space. Of course, the subjective feeling of congestion is determined by many factors, such as (Knapp & Hall, 2000):

- 1) Environmental factors, which include, among others, limited space, irritable or unnecessary sounds, or the lack of necessary resources
- 2) Personal factors, which may include, for example, gender, personality traits, indicating low self-esteem, individual experiences related to finding themselves in situations of congestion
- 3) Social factors, which include, among others, unpleasant interactions, e.g., in hostile conditions or a significant number of social contacts that take place at a close distance
- 4) Factors related to the implementation of goals, which include the lack of the ability to implement their own expectations and desires.

Summary

The importance of using space in the sphere of interpersonal and public communication and education is unquestionable. The interior design, the distance between the lecturer and the student, the sense of congestion are just some of the factors determining the quality of educational communication. Non-verbal communication, including proxemics, is an important factor determining the quality and effectiveness of knowledge transfer process to students. Although discussing issues related to public speeches and lectures, first of all, attention is paid to the language and clarity of expression, it should be noted that non-verbal communication that complements words is an important factor used not only to build the impression of others, communicate information and emotions, but also to build a lecturer-student relationships.

In the field of proxemics, it is worth paying attention to the distance that academic teachers retain in relation to students during the lecture. "If the teacher wants to draw the attention of the whole class to important elements of the teaching content, then he should increase the distance between students and the public sphere." (Sztejnberg, 2007) In a situation, in which some students lose interest in the problem, the distance should be reduced. Reducing the distance increases the chances that student activity and involvement will increase. (Sztejnberg, 2007)

It is worth emphasizing the fact that in the sphere of communication serving the transfer of knowledge and information, serving the teaching and transfer of experience, either in the form of a lecture or direct conversations with a small group of two or three students, it is important to pay attention to the consistency of verbal and non-verbal messages, and the importance of non-verbal behaviours in the sphere of complementing and supplementing verbal messages.

The strength of verbal messages can be magnified thanks to non-verbal messages if they are used correctly and properly. The conscious use of tools and forms of communication fosters building the right atmosphere of teaching and building a satisfactory teacher-student relationship. It is also worth remembering the importance of non-verbal behaviours in the sphere of intercultural communication, as well as communication barriers resulting from cultural differences. These differences may concern issues related to the approach to time, punctuality, distance that interlocutors maintain among themselves, etc. Of course, it should be remembered that other spatial needs, other privacy needs may apply to students belonging to one group. Just as the lecturers differ in terms of their preferred didactic methods, whether they take a seat at a desk, stand or walk around the classroom during lectures, so students can have different approaches to this type of issue.

Considering the above differences and challenges in the field of educational communication, it should be remembered that the university, the school "must satisfy the students' needs and create an educational space, in which both the student and the teacher will be able to succeed," (Lesz-Krysiak, 2016) and they will feel satisfaction and fulfilment with the quality of public and interpersonal communication processes that form the basis of the learning process.

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