SYNERGY – EXPLORING NEW TERRITORY DURING THE *COMMUNICATION TECHNIQUES* PRACTICAL COURSE

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Rezumat

Lucrarea îşi propune să prezinte unele dintre principiile care pot sta la baza activităţilor propuse în cadrul cursului de *Tehnici de comunicare,* curs vizând, în primul rând, dezvoltarea abilităţii de exprimare orală în limba engleză, iar în al doilea rând, îmbunătăţirea abilităţii de comunicare, în general. Cu acest prilej se face prezentarea unui principiu de mare eficienţă în comunicare - principiul sinergiei, si a câtorva activitaţii în care acesta poate fi aplicat cu succes.

Teaching oral English to first year university students by means of a practical course called *Communication Techniques* represents a certain challenge for two main reasons. On the one hand, one has to take into account that the students are (or at least should be) mastering English at an advanced level, therefore their needs, interests, and expectations are of some highly challenging input, of opportunities to truly activate their knowledge and skills and to produce an appropriate output. On the other hand, one has to be aware of a certain ulterior purpose the course might have: developing the ability to communicate efficiently not only in English, but also in other idioms, in other words, the purpose of nurturing good communicators.

As far as the appropriate methodological approach to such a course is concerned, after so many decades of research and experience in the field of language teaching methodology, there is no doubt that the common sense choice is the communicative approach. This choice is represented by activities that focus on language as means of communication, whereas their main purpose is completing certain tasks. Communicative activities mean getting students to actually do things with language, and it is the doing that forms the main focus of such sessions. But our urge was to go beyond that, beyond setting imaginary communicative task, beyond simulating real life situation in classroom conditions, therefore the result was combining the communicative approach with principles from the humanistic approaches. These view the student as a 'whole person'. In other words, teaching is not just about teaching language, it is also about helping students to develop themselves as people. Such teaching methodologies stress the humanistic aspect of learning. The experience of the students is what counts, and the development of their personality, as well as the encouragement of positive feelings are seen to be as important as their learning of a language.

We are going to concentrate further in this paper on the second part of the challenge mentioned above, and on the approach which helped us meet the humanistic principle of student personality development during the *Communication Techniques* practical course.

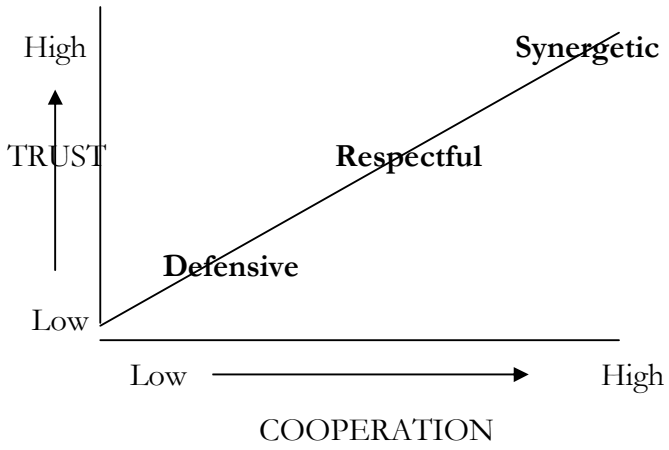
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It is generally acknowledged that communication has never been as highly rated as it is nowadays. The research and the experience of the latest decades have brought unequivocal proofs of the advantages and the eficiency of successful communication. Be it communication at professional, social or political level, or communication between friends, acquintances or family members, it can either consolidate or ruin a relationship.

According to the real importance of comunication and in order to improve its eficiency, the amount of academic debate and research has risen dramatically, communication being approached from a large number of angles. One of the approaches that can have a *considerable impact on developing communication skills and on teaching at academic level* belongs to Stephen Covey (Covey: pp 248-269) and looks at communication from the participants' attitude point of view.

Covey identifies three main attitudes which are directly determined by the level of trust and cooperation among the people involved in communication; accordingly, communication takes place at three different levels (Covey: p.256).

LEVELS OF COMMUNICATION



The first and lowest level (defensive communication) occurs when the participants feel distrust, have a defensive and domineering attitude, and therefore it is the least efficient. The second is the level of polite cautious communication, the participants showing respect and trying to avoid any conflict. The communication takes place at the intellectual level, but does not go further than that; it does not reach the real paradigms underlying the participants' actual positions. The result is basically a compromise.

The third level and the most efficient is that of synergetic communication. This implies reciprocal trust, and usually offers better solutions than those estimated initially. Moreover, this experience is greatly enjoyed by everybody present and the atmosphere created is likely to offer satisfaction in itself.

But what does synergy actually mean? How can this type of communication be achieved? How can teaching languages at academic level benefit from the results of Covey's research? These are just a few of the questions we are going to try to answer further in this paper.

Covey says that synergy represents the principle according to which the whole is greater than the sum of its parts, which implicitly lays down the challenge to see the good and potential

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in the other person's contribution. As far as relationships are concerned, synergy is the habit of creative co-operation. Communicating synergetically means valuing the differences by compensating weaknesses and supporting abilities. Everybody feels encouraged and appreciated, hence their self-esteem is raised, they trust themselves more, and this comes with the realisation that the efficiency will be higher once they start co-operating. It is obvious to everyone that they need the others' intelligence to complete theirs, as well as the others' perceptions and points of view to amplify theirs. People that are able to communicate synergetically have an attitude that says: "I understand that you have a different perception of reality than I do, help me see what you see. I want to communicate with you because I appreciate this difference; as a matter of fact, I don't see any use in communicating with someone that has the same perception and opinion as I have."

Synergy is not an experience that comes easily and therefore many of such attempts may fail. In order to succeed it needs some premises and a certain scenario. Everything has to begin in a general athmosphere of safety and security, which allows everybody to open their mind, to listen attentivelly to the all the ideas expressed, to learn from what is discussed. A brainstorming session follows, in which the spirit of evaluation is subordinated exclusively to imagination and creativity, as well as to an intense intellectual cooperation. That is the moment when somethig most unusual arises. The whole group of participants are overwelmed by a sentiment of vibrant participation, of having reached a superior level of reciprocal trust and some new ideas, as well as a new direction, still indefinite though, which is perceived as unanimous. Synergy makes its appearance once the group reaches a spontaneous and tacit agreement, by abandoning the old scenario in favour of new ones.

The unbelievable success of such sessions (seminars) may be explained by the urge of especially mature students to be involved in somethig out of the ordinary, something new, exciting, that implies creativity and personal contribution. The "recipe" proves to be excellent, as the experience of synergy means considerable more than attending a quality presentation, and that is because creating something new and meaningful represents undoubtely more than learning something old.

The cornerstone of this technique is the courage to be honest and open, especially as far as personal experience is concerned. This leads to an authentic and empathetic atmosphere which results into an active and enthusiastic exchange of opinions, of bright new ideas. The participants begin to pick up pieces of information, though not coherently most of the time. New options and meanings appear. It is possible for many of these not to be put into practice, but most often some practical and useful conclusions occur on such occasions.

Although it might seem paradoxical, the most eficient of all academic courses and seminars are the ones that take place almost on the verge of chaos. The synergetic approach is a test for both the students and the tutor, as it proves how much they are open to the principle of synergy.

Two of the activities which can lead to the experience of synergy during the *Communication Techniques* practical course will be briefly presented further.

1. Learning decisions. The first activity was inspired by both an exercise in Sue O'Connell's *Focus on Advanced English* (O'Connell: pp 39-40) and by a suggestion in Jeremy Harmer's *The Practice of English Language Teaching* (Harmer: p.123) and was actually practised with the first year students. Everything started in the form and with the purpose of a debate. The students received handouts with controversial statements related to a number of learning habits and were asked to discuss in groups at first, then with the whole class, which ones may prove helpful in the long run, and which not. A spontaneous outbreak of conversation took place consequently.

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A student reacted to something that had been said, others joined in, and soon the class was bubbling with life. The result was an agreement over the best strategy for learning languages at university level. It was one of the most successful sessions we have ever had.

2. *Project work*. Another activity, which would offer the opportunity to experience and would greatly benefit from the appearance of synergy, is a long-term project having as aim the production of either a class magazine, or of a students' festival - activity inspired by one of Byrne's suggestions in *Teaching Oral English* (Byrne: pp134-137). Such an activity would involve the following stages: proposal + explanation, discussion, run up activities, discussion, main activities, processing of material, and production, and, on condition the principle of synergy is followed, it would have a better and a totally different result than the one estimated initially.

In conclusion, the activities one decides to propose during a practical course concerned with oral communication in English intrinsically bear a psychological aspect meant to develop the students personality at the same time as their speaking ability. Therefore it is the tutor's duty to provide the students with such input that can positively influence them, such as the opportunity to experience the principle of creative co-operation – the synergy.

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