

THE TEACHER AND STUDENTS IN TERMS OF THE INTERACTION APPROACH

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Abstract. Within the broadly defined field of human communication an important aspect is related to the teacher-students interactions. The character of these interactions may decisively determine students' achievements. The opinion on the transactional nature of the interaction requires the individuals organising the education process to deconstruct the paradigm on the unidirectional process of human communication and to contribute to the creation of conditions promoting reciprocity of interactions. This paper presents the contemporary concept of communication and the term "interaction" was analysed using respective examples given in literature on the subject. Moreover, results of studies describing the nature of teacher-students interactions are presented and key factors determining their course are characterised.

Key words: communication, interaction, group, students, teacher, gesture, ego, addresser, addressee, information

INTRODUCTION

In each educational situation we deal with unique conditions determining the course of the teacher-students relations. Such factors as personality of these subjects of interactions, their experience, knowledge, mutual expectations towards the other side of the interaction process as well as the dynamic character of such a relation make such interactions highly complex and unique. The area of mutual interactions of teachers and students is saturated with a variety of verbal and non-verbal information transferred in different directions from and to the participants of this process, at the same time filling the space between them. Each, even the smallest manifestation of human behaviour may

be understood as a transfer of information. In this process teacher-students relations are found, characterised by permanent transfer and reception of information, in which each participant of the communication process is at the same time both the addresser and the addressee of the message. Each situation, in which people participate together, is connected with the transfer of specific information. Thus in the further discussion we need to adopt one of the basic axioms proposed by Paul Watzlawick, i.e. one cannot not communicate. Each action, but also its absence, is a transfer of information. The unique character of the relationship between the teacher and students, comprising the individual and group aspects in the course of teaching-learning processes suggests that we need to accept the thesis that interpersonal relations to a significant degree determine the individual success of every student. This success to a considerable degree is a function of interactions between the teacher and students.

COMMUNICATION VS. INTERACTION

When analysing the problem of human communication scientists use various terms. In order to avoid confusion of terminology the concepts of key importance to the discussed problem will be explained here. The process of communication is a transaction, i.e. a dynamic process, occurring between its participants through mutual interactions, as a result of which partners in the interaction influence one another. Communication depends on the involvement of the partners in this interaction and it is not an action performed for others, but rather together with other people. It is a complex process, determined by many factors and it has the following properties [Adler et al. 2011, p. 9-15]:

- typically information (message) is sent and received simultaneously – partners in the interaction are at the same time addressers and addressees of the message, thus it is difficult to determine whose message needs to be identified as the response,
- meanings exist in people and between people – each type of message sent to the partner in an interaction is devoid of meaning in itself, it is the individual that provides it with meaning through expression and interpretation; for an appropriate communication process it is necessary to negotiate a common meaning,
- the environment and communication noise influence communication – disturbance in communication may result from a lack of common experiences or culture, in which the communicating individuals were growing up; in turn, communication noise comprises anything that hinders the transfer and receipt of the message,
- the channel influences variation in the message – the channel, through which the message is sent, determines the manner of response.

In the public opinion the term communication and interaction operate as equivalent concepts. However, despite certain similarities they differ significantly. For Retter [2005] the terms communication and interaction are not equivalent and interaction is a broader concept. The author refers an action between people, i.e. interaction, not solely to the currently occurring action, but an interaction also comprises the structure of interpersonal contacts facilitating such an action. This means, in the opinion of Retter, that not every type of interaction is at the same time communication, but communication is always an interaction [Retter 2005, p. 16]. Individuals may live in a continuous interaction with one another, not being in constant communication. Communication is

connected with the will and necessity to understand transferred messages, this agreement – as referred to this rule by Habermas [1999] – stems from a face-to-face situation. Interaction, in contrast to communication, is not always determined by a desire for mutual exchange of information including its understanding; the idea is connected first of all with the existence of a mutual dependence between participants, who may communicate with one another. Literature on the subject defines the interdependence as “a condition, in which two elements are connected with each other and mutually influence each other” [Morreale et al. 2007, p. 385]. In a class of students this interdependence may be manifested in three co-existing aspects:

- the goal of the class: a mutual goal means a mutual interdependence,
- behaviour of classmates: here a certain interdependence exist, consisting in the fact that messages sent by an individual, while influencing the class, are at the same time dependent on messages sent by the other members of the class,
- the situational context: it occurs when the environment, in which the class is functioning, influences its actions, while in turn the actions of the class influence the environment.

Each interaction reveals a fragment of the addresser’s ego; it discovers it and reveals who we are and who we define as human beings. The essence of an interaction in this case consists in the maintenance of a balance between discovery of our various egos in the presence of others. It is in this interaction that Ego is revealed and it constitutes “a purposeful and voluntary process of supplying others with information on oneself in a manner considered to be honest and accurate” [Morreale et al. 2007, p. 120-121]. Interactions supply the participants of the teaching-learning process with information on one another. An excessively revealed ego becomes a threat to the individual revealing it. In the interaction process a gesture of the Other (a student or teacher) may not be evaluated with a specific bias, in the words of Turner [2006] “...we may hardly image a complete lack of any pre-conceived opinions”. In the further stages of the interaction process this interpretation is deepened and a participant of this process not only receives and interprets a gesture of the Other, but recognises it as a gesture, to which he/she has been prepared, or such which falls outside the anticipated scope. This is equivalent to a situation, when e.g. a teacher is expecting an incorrect answer from a student, of whom he/she is convinced that he/she is a poor student, then even a brilliant response when being called on will be treated as an unexplainable coincidence causing confusion. Teachers having a prior knowledge on students may use it when interpreting their gestures (verbal and non-verbal messages)¹ guided by the image of the person making this gesture. Thus we may say that the concept of the student (individual) both determines and creates the teacher-students interaction, while depersonalisation of a gesture is a rare phenomenon [Turner 2006, p. 272]. In this context a justified observation is made by the authors of “Interpersonal communication”, who stated that “meaning is found not in words, but in individuals” [Morreale et al. 2007, p. 304], as a result of which it is much easier to see in a person only somebody who has a single, simple ego, thus simplifying his/her image and interaction with that person.

The belief that the interaction process is complex and multidirectional was shared by Adams and Galanes [2007]. Those authors expressed this belief in the following way “It is naive to treat communication as a simple impulse-response process, in which

¹ Turner [2006] defines a gesture as any behaviour to which we may ascribe a meaning.

nothing can go wrong” [Adams and Galanes 2007, p. 65]. Any participant in an interaction engages his/her feelings and thoughts, and it is practically impossible to determine when their effect on the others ends. In this process the past affects the present and the future. The specific character of an interaction also assumes that its every participant acts in two roles simultaneously – the addresser and the addressee of a message; thus they are not either the addresser or the addressee of the message, since they serve both these roles simultaneously. Such a model shows the interdependence of the teacher and students in the teaching-learning process. Development of studies on human communication has led to a change in the focus from problems concerning the role and sending and reception of messages in the communication process to the creation of meanings in this respect [Interakcje... 2008, p. 8]. As a result of this qualitative change it was assumed that in the appropriate communication signs and their meanings sent to one another by the communicating parties should be as similar as possible. Application of the same system of signs by individuals involved in the interaction facilitates the existence of communication [Nowicka 2000, p. 43-44], thus the semiotic cohesion is a necessary pre-requisite for the occurrence of communication. Creation of symbols makes it possible for human beings to denote with their use objects, phenomena, feelings and ideas. However, the manner in which they are used is determined by their interpretation by this individual. Thus as a result of interpretation of meanings performed by the teacher and students communication may be adequate or disturbed, hindering the learning process. In this process none of its participants is found outside the interaction process, each student is to a certain degree immersed in this process and to a certain degree they are excluded from it. Each communication event contains many messages, which once they are communicated become a part of the student class and may not be withdrawn, the communication of the student class forms greater and more complicated elements of the communication process.

THE AREA AND CONDITIONS OF TEACHER-STUDENTS INTERACTIONS

Contacts of students with teachers assume the character of both formal and informal interactions, they occur incessantly in the functioning of such a group. In the former case they are connected with the realisation of the group objectives, while the latter aspect of the relationships is connected with social contacts. Gerald L. Wilson [Oyster 2002, p. 47] distinguished several types of interactions occurring in small groups. That author defined them as group meetings, which:

- are used to exchange information, which means that they are meetings during which a specific problem is explained; meetings of such a character are held on a regular basis, they follow adopted procedures and a specific order,
- are used to make decisions, e.g. concerning the election of self-government authorities,
- accompany special events, have a specific character.

In their course information may be exchanged and decisions made.

Each of the above mentioned types is realised in the course of studies; however, the first type seems to be the most common, although here we may talk of a certain qualitative leaning towards the scientific and teaching staff.

The function of the commonly realised managerial approach to education, having - as it needs to be stressed - unfortunate and negative consequences to the quality of education (including that of students) is to create excessive large classes of students at universities and colleges. As a result we need to state that the size of the group has an effect on the course of interactions in that group (including also the students' class). An excessively numerous group seriously limits the occurrence of interactions with all its members; as a consequence these interactions are untrue and incomplete. Such a situation implies a reduction of students' involvement in the learning process; instead of the joint effort to solve problems such education consists only in the students and the teacher staying in one classroom and listening with no participation in a discussion.

In their everyday lives people participate in a large number of diverse interactions being members of many social groups, the family, a team of workers, a group of friends and acquaintances or a students' class. The formal character of the students' class and its objectives result in a situation when students and the teacher every day participate in a huge number of mutual interactions of particular importance, since they are pedagogic interactions in character. They influence both a given individual and the group, affecting all its members; thus we need to ensure that their course does not disturb the teaching-learning process. Interaction in education and communication determine the efficiency of the group and the level of satisfaction gained from participation in that group. For this purpose it is the role of the teacher to create conditions conducive to mutual communication and an undisturbed flow of information between its members [Szmatka 2007, p. 206]. Studies show that as many as 100 interactions take place in the course of a 1-hour class and among them these serving teaching functions predominate [Mika 1987, p. 36]. It also results from research on the subject conducted by Philip W. Jackson and Henriette Lahaderne, as well as John H. Duthie that in the course of joint educational activities a very high number of mutual interactions takes place. There may be 300-400 interactions within one hour [Janowski 1995, p. 102]. Thus establishment of proper conditions for appropriate interactions by the teacher will provide students with a sense of security and eliminate among them the use of energy for the protection of one's own ego, replaced by using it to solve scientific problems. The level of interactions may also be influenced by emotions, which appear in the students-teacher relationships. We will experience positive emotions as a result of reaching subjectively important goals or expectations, while they are negative when we are unable to reach or meet these expectations. Both types of emotions, positive and negative, may regulate the behaviour of an individual and may serve the adaptation function. Positive experiences of students will stimulate the learning process, whereas negative ones will hinder the achievement of an adequate level of motivation, creativity or cognitive processes. It results from studies conducted by Rika Hosotani and Kyoko Imai-Matsumara that the most frequent positive emotions among teachers include joy, while anger is the dominant negative emotion [Hosotani and Matsumaa 2011]. The appearance of an emotion is influenced mainly by the learning process of their students and their achievements, as well as problems with discipline. Teachers feel anger when students do not follow instructions, are not diligent, do not care about their colleagues or become engaged in dangerous activities, while they feel sadness when they sense that students do not use their potential to the full of their capacity when studying. According to Sutton [2007], emotions accompanying teachers during classes depend on such factors as the evaluation of the situation in the students' class group, personal goals, their personal resources

and experiences. Evaluation of the above mentioned aspects is also influenced by the belief in the ideal of a teacher, promoted by social expectations, i.e. being prepared and responding effectively to any problems with discipline, motivating students to work, feeling responsible for students' achievements [Prosen et al. 2013, p. 76-77]. It turns out that the same situations may be perceived in diverse ways, thus they may cause different emotions in the teacher. This poses a serious problem in the development of proper teacher-students interactions. Thus it is necessary to develop the ability to regulate both negative and positive emotions, thanks to which the interaction process will have a good effect on the teaching-learning process.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The interactive aspect of the students-teacher relationship indicates that we need to accept a view that mutual interactions are inevitable in the course of studying. In this process each participant accepts at the same time the role of the addresser and the addressee of information, the roles of the teacher and the student overlap, blurring the definite boundaries separating and distinguishing their scope and functions. Such an approach to the communication process makes the teaching-learning process an open, complex and multidirectional one. The space between subjects of this process is filled with meanings. The process of providing meanings to the same messages by the participants of the interactions gains in particular importance. Diversity of their interpretations is a threat to the correct course of the interaction process. The persons have to go out beyond the code of meanings and understand how other people make the meanings in their communications. Reflection on the students-teacher interactions and accepting their key role in students' successes should persuade anybody organising the teaching-learning process to undertake actions aiming at the creation of new conditions for mutual exchange, which actual manifestations may include all efforts to understand expectations of others. In the process of teacher-student communication is also important that the emergence of a variety of emotions – positive and negative. Knowledge of teachers about the factors determining their formation can largely contribute to exercise better control over them and, consequently, create communication that smoothly will be accompanied by a teacher-student interaction, significantly enhancing learning both sides of the education process. Multilateral nature of the communication process in an educational context requires that not only the students acquire knowledge and skills in this area, but the teachers constantly refilling their experience in this regard, participating in lectures, workshops and seminars on these issues.

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NAUCZYCIEL I STUDENCI W UJĘCIU INTERAKCYJNYM

Streszczenie. W szerokiej problematyce komunikowania się między ludźmi ważne miejsce zajmują interakcje nauczyciel-student. Ich charakter w zasadniczy sposób może determinować osiągnięcia uzyskiwane przez studentów. Pogląd o transakcyjnej naturze interakcji wymaga od osób organizujących proces kształcenia dekonstrukcji paradygmatu o jednokierunkowym procesie komunikacji międzyludzkiej i wniesienia wkładu w stworzenie warunków sprzyjających wzajemności oddziaływań. W pracy przedstawiono współczesną koncepcję komunikowania się i poddano analizie pojęcie interakcji z zastosowaniem odpowiednich przykładów z literatury przedmiotu. Zaprezentowano także wyniki badań opisujące naturę interakcji nauczyciel-student oraz scharakteryzowano kluczowe czynniki determinujące ich przebieg.

Słowa kluczowe: komunikacja, interakcja, grupa, student, nauczyciel, gest, Ja, nadawca, odbiorca, informacja

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