DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 285 208 CS 505 377

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TITLE The Comprehension of Poor Communication in the Business Setting: A Neglected Pedagogical Focus.
PUB DATE 7 May 82
NOTE 28p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Eastern Communication Association (73rd, Hartford, CT, May 1982). Notes section may be marginally legible. Document contains small light type.
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Viewpoints (120)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Business Communication; *Business Education; Business Skills; Communication Skills; Educational Research; Higher Education; Interpersonal Communication; *Listening Comprehension; *Listening Skills; School Business Relationship; Speech Communication; Teaching Methods

ABSTRACT

To meet the needs of industry a variety of communications courses have been designed to improve the speaking and writing skills of pre-professional students. Unfortunately, such courses stress the quality of message production in the business setting while neglecting to emphasize properly the equivalent need for strong reception and comprehension skills. The result of this pedagogical deficiency is manifested in the complaints of employers concerning the inability of entry-level personnel to interpret downward communications and can be measured by the time and effort exerted by new employees in attempting to clarify inadequate communications. Consequently, the document analyzes the current state of comprehension training in business courses. Also presented are theoretical perspectives by which the basis of noncomprehension can be understood, such as message reception constrained by ambiguity, by egocentrism, and by relational considerations. The paper then determines that the best theoretical underpinning to comprehension of problematic messages is the information-processing approach to human interaction, which makes use of schemata. A discussion of methods for incorporating comprehension training into the classroom concludes that teachers should make the underlying theories of comprehension skills clear to students and should provide them with opportunities to practice using the knowledge gleaned at the conceptual level. (Sixty-nine footnotes are appended.) (SKC)

THE COMPREHENSION OF POOR COMMUNICATION IN THE BUSINESS SETTING:
A NEGLECTED PEDAGOGICAL FOCUS

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Paper presented to the Eastern Communication Association, Hartford, Connecticut, May 7, 1982

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ABSTRACT

To meet the needs of industry, a variety of communications courses have been designed to improve the speaking and writing skills of the pre-professional student. Unfortunately, as courses stress the quality of message production in the business setting, we, as teachers, may easily neglect to properly emphasize the equivalent need for sound reception and comprehension skills. The result of this pedagogical deficiency can be seen in the lamentations of employers concerning the ability of entry-level personnel to interpret downward communications and can be measured by the time and effort exerted by new employees in attempting to clarify inadequate communications. Consequently, this paper analyses the current state of comprehension training in business communications courses, provides a variety of theoretical perspectives by which the basis of noncomprehension can be understood, and suggests methods for the incorporation of comprehension training into the classroom.

In the last two decades, increasing attention has been paid to the role of communication in the business setting. It is generally accepted that improving communication within an organization will concomitantly improve productivity and increase profit margins. Consequently, many businesses have instituted programs designed to provide training in a variety of communication skills. Meister and Reinsch report that thirty-four percent of the firms they surveyed provided seminars in remedial speech and writing.[1] And to meet the future demands of business and industry, most colleges and universities now offer courses in business and technical writing, business and professional speaking, and a host of other courses related to organizational communication.

The business communication courses offered in higher education tend to focus on skill development. A survey of the textbooks applicable to the training of pre-professional students indicates that course content generally stresses performance in the areas of report writing, public speaking, résumé construction, listening, and interpersonal communication.[2] Overall, the intent of such courses is geared toward producing competent speakers who know "when and how to use language in the social context."[3]

Important to recognize, however, is the fact that courses which stress a performance-based conception of communicative competence are prone to neglect, or, at best, to shallowly examine a crucial aspect of the communication process. Though our courses function to improve communication and lessen the negative effects and the amount of poor message production in the business setting, the courses pay little notice to the reception and comprehension of the spoken or written word. In short, as we seek to cure the communicative ailments of business by training future business people, we forget that symptoms of poor communication go untreated and are likely to continue until our students, with their skills and training, permeate the business world.

In recognizing that business communication courses often slight the reception-comprehension side of communication pedagogy, we propose a cursory examination of this neglected area. In the following monograph, we will isolate inadequate comprehension as one particular facet of the problem of communication in human interaction, provide a theoretical underpinning to how the problem is manifested in the business setting, and conclude by suggesting ways in which our framework can be applied in the classroom for the benefit of our students.

BACKGROUND

Comprehension of the spoken and written word obviously plays a crucial role in business communication since situations which entail the use of comprehension skills are numerous. Listening is consistently rated a top priority by the business community. DiSalvo, et al. report that college graduates in entry-level positions place great value on listening skills and Hueghi and Tschirgi note that both supervisors and new employees believe that sound attention to supervisors' suggestions and advice represents a significant portion of entry-level job behavior.[4] Additionally, the data presented by Wasylik, et al. indicates that listening rates highest in importance in the decisions made by trainers in firms which offer in-house training.[5] The emphasis placed upon listening skills is understandable when one considers that most of management's time--sixty to seventy percent by some estimates--is spent on face-to-face verbal interaction with clients and employees.[6] On the other hand, the ability to comprehend written material is also important. As listening ability differs between individuals and situations, so too is readability constrained by contextual factors. As Kintsch and Vipond observe: "Readability is not somehow an inherent property of texts (with its text characteristics) and particular readers (with their information processing characteristics).... Readability must be defined for specific texts and specific readers."[7]

In light of the role comprehension plays in business, we should carefully consider the way we, as teachers, approach the pre-professional student in this vital area. As noted above, competence--as a "performance based concept"--channels our pedagogy toward stressing the production side of communication. We concentrate on teaching the student to be a more competent speaker and writer. Unfortunately, we neglect the often-cited lament of business personnel regarding the lack of comprehension skills among entry-level employees. For example, after documenting the lack of managerial listening skills in manufacturing firms, Meister and Reinsch argue that "the deficiency in listening probably reflects inability to correctly understand and appreciate without repetition employee complaints and/or superior instructions. Probably most new managers are simply not prepared for the critical role in their new job of talking and listening to people."[8] Although attempts have been made to suggest ways in which the students can improve their comprehension skills (e.g., paraphrasing, note-taking) the problem still exists in the business world.[9]

The fundamental problem of coordinating meaning between sender and receiver is exacerbated by organizational growth in any given business. In general, the ability to make well-informed business decisions and meet the needs of both supervisory and front-line personnel is constrained by the size and complexity of the business setting.[10] Although larger organizations are more likely to provide training in comprehension skills, such training rarely occupies more than twenty-five percent of the overall training time.[11] Consequently, managers and subordinates must rely primarily upon their operant levels of comprehension abilities in interpreting the messages they receive. In organizations (i.e., the large company) where the receiver is insulated from the situations which give rise to task-oriented communications, the comprehension of messages is often based on incomplete or distorted information.[12] Thus, the ability to infer the optimal meaning of business communication is a necessary component

of sound business practice, and today's college instructors are called upon to prepare their students to face and effectively deal with the comprehension-side as well as the production-side of communication in the business setting.

We suggest there are two main reasons why our teaching methods, by and large, fail to cope adequately with the comprehension problems inherent in the business. First, comprehension receives little notice in our classroom activities. Habitually, the time devoted to developing listening and reading skills is minimal and rarely extends beyond one or two hours. Hence, because students spend more time on producing messages in the business communication course, they may tend to underrate the need for developing comprehension skills. And, as we shall document below, this denigration may result in those same students having an overly optimistic perception of their operant abilities. In any event, the pre-professional students are ill-prepared for the amount of time they will spend trying to comprehend business communications they encounter beyond the walls of academia.

A second criticism of our current pedagogical emphasis is that when we do train comprehension skills, such instruction is often based on the presupposition that messages uniformly originate with competent communicators. This assumption is integral to the two perspectives habitually employed in the training of listening skills. Most instruction in this area relies upon the early work of Ralph Nichols or a reformulation of his original framework.[13] Nichols' approach concentrates on ways in which receivers can prepare themselves to attend to incoming messages. However, implicit in the techniques is the belief that the message is readily comprehensible if the receiver is in the right frame of mind. Extensions on this line of reasoning (e.g., Bradley and Baird[14]) may, indeed, offer suggestions for dealing with poor communications but fail to indicate specific methods of "seeking intent" or "seeking structure." The traditional alternative to Nichols--the "active listening" approach advocated by Carl Rogers[15]--also tends to be source-oriented due to its genesis in the clinical setting. Rogers advises receivers to "help the speaker work out his problems" and claims that active listening is "simply a way of approaching those problems which arise out of the usual day to day events of any job."[16] Yet, this approach does not appreciate situations in which clarification is inappropriate or deemed, albeit erroneously, unnecessary (see below). Overall, Nichols' and Rogers' presumption of speaker competence is shared by most who investigate the comprehension of communication.[17]

In that the aforementioned perspectives on comprehension neglect important aspects of "real-world" communication, it is necessary to educational viability to reconsider the role of inference in business communication. Obviously, not everyone is an adept communicator; if they were, there would not be a mandate for the classes we teach. Inference is an inescapable part of living in an active world and, as Vroom has indicated, the behavioral choices that must be made in the business setting are often based on uncertainty and are products of one's willingness to take risks and suppress prior expectations of a source's communicative competence.[18] Furthermore, because the business climate often imposes situational constraints on the ability to clarify poor communications (i.e., power/status distinctions or lengthy information flows), receivers may be compelled to act on the basis of incomplete or obviously distorted communication.[19] Unfortunately, our teaching practices offer the pre-professional student a limited opportunity to attend to and comprehend poorly communicated messages. Hence, we often fail to meet the pedagogical charge of DiSalvo, et al. when they state "in order for instruction to be interesting, meaningful, and practical for students, it must be essentially a microcosm of that segment of the 'real world' students will be entering upon graduation."[20]

The fact that often we do not provide the necessary comprehension skill training our students need can result in negative repercussions for both employer and employee--employers need to

devise their own training programs,[21] and our students are not even aware that they need such instruction. Specifically, Huegli and Tschirgi report that new employees vastly overrate their comprehension abilities when compared against the assessments made of them by their employers.[22] And the lack of ability results in a decrease in productivity because time must be spent in trying to indirectly determine the intent of marginally effective messages.[23] Such leads to wasted expenditures--the Dartnell Corporation estimates it costs $6.33 to produce each business letter[24]--and a decrease in overall job satisfaction.[25] Since these and other proble s exist, and can be traced to deficiencies found in the courses we teach, we believe a change in our educational practice is called for as well as an understanding of the theoretical basis for noncomprehension.

THEORY

In this section we shall confine our analysis to current conceptualizations concerning listening comprehension. Heuristically, this is a sound focus for research indicates entry-level personnel are apt to draw more upon oral than writing skills.[26] Nevertheless, we believe that both reading and listening skills can be dealt with under a unitary analysis that considers the role of comprehension in general. A source orientation would indicate that the kinds of errors that frequently occur in speech (e.g., strained grammar, malapropisms, etc.) rarely occur in a written context, yet the reception of both kinds of messages is essentially the same.[27] Hence, the research in the area of listening can tentatively be extrapolated to an understanding of the written word.

In reviewing the existing research on listening, we find that Mehrabian and Reed's 1968 indictment of communication accuracy studies still holds: What studies there are "emerge from diverse areas and are interpreted within unrelated frameworks."[28] Though essential to a full understanding of speech competence, listening research is limited by the sample populations employed in the studies and the types of research questions examined.[29] Most work has dealt with the changes that occur with cognitive development and has focused on the interpretations children have of oral instructions and/or descriptions.[30] Yet, the various lines of empirical study converge and allow us to formulate a framework for understanding the basis for noncomprehension.

For the sake of brevity and simplicity, we believe it useful to examine the phenomenon of noncomprehension within three broad frameworks--message reception constrained by ambiguity, by egocentrism, and by relational considerations. Certainly, in each of these areas it is the interaction between a specific source and a specific receiver that promulgates a lack of comprehension and there is some conceptual overlap between the three contexts. However, we argue that it must be a receiver's responsibility to maximize his or her ability to comprehend the communications s/he receives. Indeed, in the business setting, there often is no other viable choice.

Messages Constrained by Ambiguity

The occurrence of ambiguous words or phrases is commonplace in ordinary language usage. Everyday, we encounter numerous examples of equivocal utterances which, ostensibly, are rather meaningless. For example, a typical response to the question, "You gonna be around tomorrow?" is "Oh, off and on." The important point to remember about such utterances is that the ambiguity contained therein is the product of two active minds. On the one hand, if both source and receiver share (via culture, group norms, etc.) essentially the same linguistic referential structure, a relatively accurate interpretation of speaker intent is easily accomplished. On the other hand, if an a priori structure is not shared between transactors, the receiver of ambiguous communication must initiate a series of cognitive operations to choose between alternate interpretations of the utterance. As we will show, the cognitive appraisal of such ambiguity is no easy task.

First, the recipient of the ambiguous communication must recognize that an active cognitive search is mandated by the utterance. Since communication is a creation of shared meanings,

the receiver must determine that the information contained in the utterance is vague and must seek nonlinguistic cues to establish its meaning.[31] If the receiver remains passive in the transaction (i.e., does not recognize the need for or initiate a cognitive search) misperceptions are bound to occur. On the basis of their research, Bransford and McCarrell conclude that "if subjects are unable to make the cognitive contributions necessary for adequate comprehension, they should also be expected to make meaning distorting errors."[32] Thus, recognition of ambiguity is a prerequisite to potential understanding.

If ambiguity is recognized, then the receiver must do more than search long-term memory for information relevant to the utterance. Though the featuring of such information plays a role in deciphering meaning, it is not sufficient in many cases. In addition to the use of prior knowledge, the activation of comprehension processes requires an assessment of both contextual factors as well as subject matter cues imbedded in the utterance.[33] Hence, if a receiver is oblivious to the particular antecedents of the ambiguous communication or the specific setting in which it occurs (as might well be the case with, say, written correspondence) many vital cues to comprehension will be lost.

As a receiver cannot rely on prior knowledge alone, so too is it impractical to rely on patterns of formal deduction. As Grice has aptly noted, the rules of formal and conversational logic do not compare well and often directly conflict with each other.[34] A receiver must determine the underlying characteristics that are guiding the specific transaction. For example, receivers can assess whether a "cooperative principle" is in effect--that the conversation is a cooperative effort with participants recognizing a common purpose that is either fixed prior to the interaction or emergent as the conversation evolves[35]--or, following Searle, what appropriate response is mandated by the "fellicity conditions" inherent in the speech act.[36] In any event, receivers are obliged to sort through a variety of personally meaningful, psychological rules in determining the meaning of equivocal communications.

To understand the meaning and intent of linguistic ambiguity requires a chain of reasoning on the part of the receiver. Grice summarizes this process as follows:

> To work out that a particular conversational implicature is present, the hearer will reply [sic] on the following data: (1) the conventional meaning of the words used, together with the identity of any references that may be involved; (2) the Cooperative Principle and its maxims; (3) the context, linguistic or otherwise, of the utterance; (4) other items of background knowledge; and (5) the fact (or supposed fact) that all relevant items falling under the previous headings are available to both participants and both participants know or assume this to be the case.[37]

Of course, this is often a subconscious process, but in the case of radical ambiguity, extra cognitive effort is required. As Jackson has documented, whereas children have an innate ability to bridge the gap between ambiguity and understanding, adults are required to consciously move through the reasoning process.[38] Hence, comprehension in the face of ambiguity can be exceedingly complex.

Yet, commonsensically, people rarely exert the needed effort. In reading, we often assume vagueness is countered by the context in which it occurs or is simply irrelevant to meaning. When we listen, we also assume irrelevance and tend to rely on prior knowledge.[39] And, in the business setting, intrinsic and/or extrinsic constraints on the receiver's ability to clarify those ambiguous utterances, that are recognized as such, often preclude a direct request for further information. Overall, then, linguistic ambiguity can be viewed as contributing to the noncomprehension of communication.

Messages Constrained by Egocentricism

It is generally accepted that a fundamental determinant of communication competence is the ability to attend to a variety of attributes associated with the target of any given

message.[40] A concern over the attentivenesss, or perspective taking capabilities, of a communicator permeates the literature in our field and has been applied in a variety of areas.[41] To date, most empirical work in perspective taking has been concerned with the ways in which children develop from a stage of egocentric perception in communication (i.e., the tendency to view the communicative transaction from only their point of view) to one that encompasses a variety of perspectives. Represented primarily by the work of Piaget and the Constructivist line of research,[42] studies in perspective taking have stressed childrens' management of communication strategies in the messages they produce. And, while only limited research has been conducted on adult subjects, it is safe to assume that, in a business setting, one's ability to adapt to the perspective of another will effect his/her production of task-oriented communication.

Following this line of reasoning, we would argue that egocentricism also constrains the comprehension of messages in two important ways. First, an egocentric view tends to distort the perception of communication because incoming messages are anchored against an ideosyncratic task-orientation. That is, an individual who does not understand how a source views the subject and context of a communication will generally frame that message in terms of his or her own world-view and tacit knowledge.[43] While the literature in organizational communication makes several references to this kind of situation,[44] Mehrabian and Reed report that attitudes toward a source of communication, anchored against the self-interest of the receiver, produce assimilation and contrast effects. Specifically, "the strength of this attitude toward the communicator, irrespective of quality, was correlated with the degree of misperception of the communicator's message."[45] The implications of this general finding for the comprehension of poor communication should be clear; as egocentricity increases, so too does distortion of the intent and specific meaning of a message.

A second way in which egocentricism constrains message comprehension deals with the receiver's ability to personally organize a poorly communicated message. In this case, the egocentric receiver is more likely to assume that the source shares his or her framework for structuring messages, and, thus, is prone either to make salient message features s/he considers relevant or concludes that the communication is not and cannot be made to be comprehensible.[46] That the receiver has the major responsibility in organizing an incoming message is summarized by Abrams when he writes:

> Comprehension of a communication depends, not upon the organization of the communication itself, but upon the ability of the listener to structure the communication for himself... the addressee's level of cognitive development... is a more important determiner of communication accuracy than the degree of organization of the communication.[47]

"Cognitive development" qua egocentricity is both a product of a receiver's level of cognitive complexity in the domain being discussed as well as his/her awareness of his/her responsibility to organize the message. Hence, the ability to organize and the propensity to organize poor communication are problematic for the egocentric individual.

Though most individuals develop an adequate sense of perspective taking capabilities, we would argue that egocentricism especially affects the entry-level employee. Unlike the generalized domain of interpersonal perception, the business setting introduces atypical, formalized constraints on the new employee. Power and status distinctions, novel task-oriented situations, and changes in lifestyle combine to produce a very salient and often threatening reality for the individual just entering the work force. Thus, while they may be fully capable of understanding poor communication in the "outside world," entry-level employees are faced with an unfamiliar perceptual domain and may have to rely upon their own idiosyncratic perceptions until a new set of more appropriate behavioral responses to poor communication are mastered. This process may take a long time since, as noted above,

contextual factors may prevent the new employees from directly clarifying the poor communications they attend to.

Messages Constrained by Relational Considerations

The last framework we isolate for understanding the basis of noncomprehension is probably the most difficult problem facing the new employee. As Argyris examined the conflict between the worker and the organization,[48] we now have an abundance of evidence to support the effect of role-conflict on communication between members of an organization.[49] In the current perspective, we believe that role-conflict is often actualized in the workplace as a major constraint on the comprehension of messages in general and, specifically, on the comprehension of poor communication.

The noncomprehension of marginal or inadequate communication can be viewed as a result of the status distinctions that exist in the world of business. The entry-level employee may have unrealistic perceptions of what is "proper" in manager-subordinate interactions (e.g., not volunteering information, conveying the impression of comprehension with an actual lack thereof, etc.) and, due to the status distinctions that give rise to such misperceptions, may use coding rules that violate the intent and meaning of any given message.[50] Specifically, a disparity on the interpretations given to poor communications may often depend upon where individuals find themselves in the organization. Haire indicates that, when interacting with superiors, subordinates place too much emphasis on everything that is being said and tend to overinterpret the intent of the communications they receive.[51] When viewed as a case of perceived "overinformativeness," it is understandable why noncomprehension can occur since the new employee confronts a myriad of possible reasons for the quantity of information.[52] And if the superior's message is not clear to begin with, the problem is magnified.

The problem of misinterpretation and noncomprehension of messages does not only pertain to subordinates; managers are constrained by their position as well. In their study of managerial reactions to business interactions, Lawler, et al. found that:

> [The] least valued interactions are those where a superior evaluates an episode in which his subordinate comes to him for a discussion. If, as seems likely, the superior communicates any of these reactions to his subordinates, then it will not be long before the subordinate will "learn" to reduce his initiation of these interactions. In effect, the subordinate is not likely to be reinforced (sufficiently) for initiating communications and may very well decide that it is not worth coming to his boss with information, since his boss is not really interested.[53]

Furthermore, aside from dampening the upward-flow of communication in an organization, such role-related communication practices can give rise to dissonance in the mind of a receiver. Thus, the subordinate is more prone to make erroneous inferences if and when the superior initiates marginal, or even accurate, communications.[54] Finally, if a manager's or subordinate's understanding of a message is determined by existing attitudes toward the contents of the message or the source, rather than by the context-bound communication itself, such interpretations can certainly skew the accuracy of message comprehension.[55]

Thus, formal lines of status and developments in the interpersonal relations between interactants provide an anchor for interpreting messages and can produce situation-specific noncomprehension. Receivers, faced with poorly constructed or inadequate messages either ignore the communication, try to read too much into it, and/or act upon the message by placing it in the context of the most recent, and perhaps falsely attributed, references stored in long-term memory.[56] In any event, a less than optimal interpretation is bound to occur.

We believe the best articulated and most encompassing theoretical underpinning to a relational framework is found in the information-processing approach to human interaction. While a variety of conceptualizations are available, we will rely primarily on Wyer's application of the information-processing

perspective to social attribution research.[57] As with other approaches to information processing, the heart of Wyer's position is concerned with how information is retrieved, combined, and used in making sense of the phenomenal world. Unlike many other directions in attribution research, however, Wyer assumes "that information is encoded and organized with reference to configurations of features associated with people and events that one has acquired through real world experience."[58] As applied to the reception of poor communication, the configurations, or schemata, that individuals typically rely upon are associated with traits of the source incorporated through past experience or, in the absence of prior interactions, prototypic impressions of the event surrounding the present interaction (e.g., receiving instructions from a superior).[59] Most importantly, once a specific type of interaction or source-trait is encoded in terms of a schema, and this schema, because of its recent lodging in long-term memory, is subsequently and habitually applied to a stimulus event or person a receiver will use this organizing concept to interpret new information regardless, for the most part, of mitigating contextual factors.[60]

Wyer's position seems readily applicable to the superior-subordinate relationship. Among other applications, we believe two uses of schemata bear notice in the present analysis. First, preconceptions of self- and other-role identities direct a person's use of particular schemata in interpreting marginal communication. In this case, the individual will base his/her behavioral response to poor communication on schemata that happen to be most easily accessible at the time of interaction.[61] Moreover, if the source has exhibited a history of (ostensibly) noncomprehensible communication, the receiver's search of contextual cues and long-term memory will be channelized toward responding to the communication as he or she has in the past precisely because the most easily accessible schemata is that which was most recently encoded or drawn upon in interpreting a prior message. And it is important to note that the available research indicates people will not attempt to restructure their cognitive appraisals of sources "if other, less cognitively taxing explanations are available."[62] Hence, the individual who has come to view a source as an incompetent communicator (or, conversely, him/herself as inherently unable to decipher a source's meaning) will frame subsequent communications with the source in terms of this role identification despite the apparent adequacy of any particular message.

A second type of schemata, and one more likely to be used by the new employee, is drawn upon in the absence of prototypic event or trait schemata. Since entry-level employees lack repetoires of schemata specifically associated with the business setting, they will organize their impressions of poor communication in terms of self-schemata.[63] In that such schemata have been more frequently used in the past, the receiver is likely to find self-schemata most accessible on long-term memory. Hence, a variety of relational constraints to comprehension evolve ranging from misperceiving the intent of marginal communication because one has a favorable (or negative) self-image, to denying the poor quality of the message since "managers, qua myself, are fine communicators." Either way, misperception ensues.

Overall, then, the particular relationship that exists between source and receiver in a business setting can make it difficult for individuals to determine the appropriate meaning of poor communication. While role-conflict is a general malaise in the workplace and significantly affects communication, it is the new employees that are most susceptible to its distorting influence. And it is only when the new employees learn the "correct" behavioral response to the messages they receive (i.e., are acculturated into the workplace and develop new interpretations of stimulus events and persons) that they can begin to decipher the meaning of marginal communication.

Given t e above analysis, three broad generalizations arise from the frameworks we have isolated that have direct implications on the pedagogy of business communications. First, our students

are likely to lack an adequate perspective concerning their susceptibility to the noncomprehension of marginal communication. In need of stronger comprehension skills, the new employees will tend to distort or ignore messages that are less than obvious in their intent. Second, the pre-professional students may not be aware that they and prospective employers may not share the same task-orientation that accompanies poor communication. Thus anticipated interpretational differences in message contents will hamper an ability to correctly choose among competing meanings given to messages. Finally, our students may be prone to habituating faulty, egocentric interpretations of poorly constructed task-relevant communications that do not adequately assess contextual cues vital to the situation-specific meanings that accompany messages in the workplace. Because we question the incorporation of these generalizations into the scope of current business communication courses, we suggest there exists a mandate for a modification in present teaching practices.

APPLICATION

In preparing the pre-professional students for a business career, we, as teachers, should be primarily concerned with providing them with comprehension skills that are applicable to a variety of diverse environments. As such, the content of our courses should reflect a concern with enabling the student to effectively interact with superiors and subordinates that exhibit different levels of communication competence. Thus, the pedagogy of our field should begin to place more emphasis on overall listening and reading skills.

As the above analysis implies, an important aspect of comprehension training involves the reception of poor communication. Certainly, there are competent communicators in the business community and many workplace environments allow for and encourage the easy repair of faulty communication. We do not suggest, therefore, that the pedagogy of comprehension skills focus only on dealing with the problem of the marginal communicator. Yet, whatever instruction we do initiate, it should promote an ability to handle such problems when they arise. In addition to providing the students with an understanding of why noncomprehension takes place, we should also instill in them an appreciation of when it is necessary to initiate direct repair operations as well as how to do so effectively. As Jackson notes:

> The possibility of repair of inadequate messages is an essential feature of the communication system. A competent listener must know how to convey his/her need for additional information. But the use of repair is constrained by its relevance to the interactional purpose and its interpretive ramifications. A competent listener must therefore know when a message is good enough for the purpose at hand, so that repair and its inherent risks will not be taken needlessly. The listener's cognitive comprehension strategies should cooperate with the repair strategies to limit repair initiations to cases where the intended meaning cannot be computed without clarification.[64]

We believe that providing students with the theoretical underpinning to comprehension isolated above will increase their abilities to interact with both competent and marginally competent communicators. Furthermore the incorporation of theory into the classroom should also demonstrate to students of business communication the perceptual limitations they will have upon entering the workforce. Finally, a sound base of theory will be applicable to the generation of audience-adapted communications as well as the reception of various qualities of messages.

Of course, the pedagogical application of communication theory in the area of comprehension to the business communication course requires an adaptation to the psyche of the pre-professional student. In general, a fundamental problem exists in the development of communicative competence: How to use our knowledge and understanding of communication and incorporate

that knowledge into existing cognitive frameworks so that appropriate behavioral responses can be initiated. In short, our instructional practices should be geared toward explaining how we act (or, more crucially, should act) based upon the representations we form of real world events (e.g., oral directions). The student majoring in communications develops an appreciation for these intricate processes and may be able to easily incorporate the knowledge into his or her behavioral repetoire of communication strategies. But the "business student" with a bloated self-concept of comprehension abilities and with little recognized, albeit vested, interest in such mechanisms may lack the capacity and drive to understand what we tend to take for granted. Hence, our job is to take existing conceptualizations of communication theory and present them in a manner that becomes clearly relev to the pre-professional student.

To accomodate the students in our courses, we suggest a two-pronged approach for all training in comprehension skills. First, we should teach the underlying theories. As with children, "an understanding of what produces effective or ineffective communications presumably leads to flexible or adaptive communicative performance" in adults.[65] And as Brown has demonstrated the teaching of theory is an ideal vehicle for enticing the student to develop this understanding.[66] Against a backdrop of the business setting, we believe course instruction should concentrate on showing how communication theory pertains to both the production and comprehension of messages. Specifically, each unit in a business communications course--as well as the section devoted to comprehension skill development--should make salient to the student the role of cognition in communication. By targeting such theoretical areas as, say, perspective taking or informational processing, students will inculcate in themselves a richer sense of what goes into making sense from and of the communicative environment.[67]

Once a theoretical basis has been established, a course should secondly provide opportunities to practice using the knowledge gleaned at the conceptual level. As noted earlier, we rarely allow students the chance to deal with poor communication. Practice can be incorporated into the classroom in a number of ways. The instructor can elect to use a "case-study" approach confident that this method has been proven effective with business students in the past.[68] By constructing case examples of various instances of inadequate communication, the instructor can target specific comprehension skills s/he wishes to teach and can support the analysis with skill-specific theory and/or research. Role-playing activities can also be employed. Such situations provide the student with a "hands-on-experience" and can impress upon him/her the difficulty and necessity of theory-based skill usage in the workplace. Lastly, students can practice comprehension skills throughout a term by critically analyzing the decision-rules they employ in assessing each other's presentations or written work. By making these rules explicit, the student can learn what facets of any particular communication are salient to him/her and can work to improve upon those areas s/he currently neglects.[69] Overall, in using a broad-based approach to comprehension pedagogy, we believe the instructor stands a better chance of preparing the student for situations s/he is likely to encounter upon entering the workforce.

In conclusion, we would again assert the great need for our courses to pay more attention to the reception and comprehension of business communications. All too often, with a strong desire to mold our students into production-oriented, adept communicators, we forget that the business setting is full of well-entrenched personnel that lack the benefit of our educational experience. To produce competent communicators, we must instill in our students an appreciation for the complexity of human interaction and warn them of the cognitive pitfalls they may encounter after they leave the college setting. By

improving upon existing practices, our instruction can better prepare them for the business world of communication we hope they, in turn, will eventually improve upon.

NOTES

[1]Janis Meister and N. Reinsch, Jr., "Communication Training in Manufacturing Firms," Communication Education, 27 (September, 1978), p. 237.

[2]For example, see: Patricia Hayes Bradley and John Baird, Jr., Communication for Business and the Professions (Dubuque, Iowa: Brown, 1980); Allan Frank, Communicating on the Job (Glenview, Illinois: Scott-Foresman, 1981); George Morrisey, Effective Business and Technical Presentations, second edition (Reading, Massachusetts: Addison-Wesley, 1968).

[3]Donald Cegala, "Interaction Involvement: A Cognitive Dimension of Communicative Competence," Communication Education, 30 (April, 1981), pp. 109-10.

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[5]James Wasylik, Lyle Sussman, and Robert Leri, "Communication Training as Perceived by Training Personnel," Communication Quarterly, 24 (Winter, 1976), p. 34.

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[7]Walter Kintsch and Douglas Vipond, "Reading Comprehension and Readability in Educational Practice and Psychological Theory," in L. Nilsson (ed.), Perspectives in Memory Research (Hillsdale, New Jersey: Erlbaum, 1979), p. 362.

[8]Meister and Reinsch, p. 243. See also: Walter Wikstrom, "Lessons in Listening," The Conference Board Record, 10 (April, 1965), p. 17.

[9]See: Bradley and Baird, pp. 57-60.

asylik, et al., p. 32.

[11]Meister and Reinsch, p. 238.

[12]Dale Level and Lynn Johnson, "Accuracy of Information Flows Within the Superior/Subordinate Relationship," Journal of Business Communication, 15 (Winter, 1978), p. 14. See also: Robert McMurry, "Clear Communications for Chief Executives," Harvard Business Review, 43 (1965).

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[14]Bradley and Baird, pp. 58-9.

[15]Carl Rogers and Richard Farson, "Active Listening" in William Haney, Communication and Organizational Behavior (Homewood, Illinois: Irwin, 1973).

[16]Ibid., p. 86.

[17]e.g., Leonard Hawes, "How Writing is Used in Talk: A Study of Communicative Logic-in-Use," Quarterly Journal of Speech, 62 (April, 1976).

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[19]John French, Jr. and Bertram Raven, "The Bases of Social Power," in Dorwin Cartwright and Alvin Zander, (eds.), Group Dynamics (New York: Harper and Row, 1968).

[20]DiSalvo, et al., p. 270.

[21]Albert Joseph, "The Communications Paradox," Personnel Journal, 58 (1979), p. 442. See also: Meister and Reinsch, p. 241.

[22]Huegli and Tschirgi, p. 29. See also: Rensis Likert, New Patterns of Management (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1961).

[23]Mary Ellen Campbell, "Consulting and Readability: The Key to Motivating Clients," Journal of Business Communication, 18 (Fall, 1981), p. 36.

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[34] H.P. Grice, "Logic and Conversation," in Peter Cole and Jerry Morgan (eds.), Syntax and Semantics, Vol. 3 (New York: Academic, 1975), p. 43. See also: Robert Wyer, "A Quantitative Comparison of Three Models of Impression Formation, "Journal of Experimental Research in Personality, 4(March, 1969), p. 40.

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