Active Listening and Assertive Communication Style in LSP Teaching

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Abstract—As teachers of LSP and Business Communication our main mission is to teach students to communicate effectively in local and global business environment. But the question is how to achieve this mission in the Hi-Tech era abounding in highly aggressive advertising and political campaigns, social networking and an overdose of information accessibility and multi-tasking. Words, a lot of written and spoken words and messages, but the Word and “Take My Word for It” have lost their true power. The paradox is the louder the environmental, semantic, cultural and psychological noise in communication channels, the louder the “sound of silence”. In addition to teaching language competence, the key role of today’s teacher is to break the silence of noisy surroundings by teaching students to become active listeners that will pave the path for their assertive communication. To put theory into practice, a hundred of students of the Faculty of Economics Rijeka were involved in the active listening skills test. Based on theories and best practices of active listening and assertive communication style, the paper deals with the analysis of the obtained results and proposes further steps in achieving the set goal of eliminating the noisy communication channels.

Index Terms—multi-tasking, noisy communication channels, active listening skills test, assertive communication style.

I. INTRODUCTION

The starting point of our research is the analysis of the impact of multi-tasking on listening skills, communication effectiveness and learning in general. What are the pros and cons of multitasking? This study addresses the crucial need for understanding multitasking in today’s learning environment. It deals with four communication styles and noisy communication channels. Thus it raises the question of whether training in active listening could contribute to eliminating noisy communication channels and lead to the set goal of assertive communication style.

The goal of this study is to look into various issues around multitasking, in particular, how new media and technologies have affected the ways today’s students multitask, and consequently learn. Therefore, with respect to technology-enhanced learning environments, among a number of modern scholars and researchers who claim that brains can be trained to multitask, in this paper we have singled out just a few of the most prominent ones: Monica Luciana, associate professor of psychology at the University of Minnesota [1], [2]; Henry Jenkins, a media studies professor at MIT [3], [4]; Mark Prensky, an American writer and speaker on digital learning and education [5], [6], [7]; Linda Stone, an advisor for the Pew Internet and American Life Project who did a pioneering work in multimedia at Apple, led research at Microsoft on Virtual Worlds, being co-founder of the Virtual Worlds Group/Social Computing Group, and teaching at NYU’s prestigious Interactive Telecommunications Program [8], [9]. Thus, based on theories and best practices of active listening and assertive communication style, to put theory into practice, we conducted a survey, testing our students’ active listening skills. At the end of the paper, we deal with the research methods and the results of the research.

II. PROS AND CONS OF MULTITASKING

In computing, multitasking is a method where multiple tasks are performed during the same period of time. Among a number of complex applications of new media and state-of-the-art technologies in science and engineering, multimedia is a classic example of multitasking that converges images, video, and sound. However, the subject matter of this paper is human multi-tasking that makes people cope with contemporary complex environments by handling several tasks simultaneously.

“The ubiquity, pervasiveness and mobility of new technologies encourage a simultaneity of activities that goes beyond anything our culture has heretofore ever known. Indeed, the ability to engage in multiple tasks concurrently seems to be the very essence or core motivation for the development of such technologies.” [10]. Henry Jenkins, believes that in a world where multitasking is an essential skill,
“if we cannot shift our attention from one piece of information to another, we really will cease to function.” [3].

In the fields of psychology and neuroscience, a lot of research on multitasking fostered by rapidly increasing new media and technologies has been done. Among a number of modern scholars and researchers who claim that brains can be trained to multitask, Monica Luciana and her co-investigators, while observing the processes of the prefrontal cortex’s white matter, discovered that the brain’s capability of categorizing competing information continues to develop until ages sixteen and seventeen [1]. However, in her article “Why Teens are Lousy at Chores,” Luciana discussed her findings: “Of course teens multitask; they can watch TV and talk on their cell phones and do their homework all at the same time. It’s not a question of whether they can or cannot multitask but at what level of proficiency… Many of the tasks teens typically try to accomplish simultaneously do not necessarily require them to be performed in a highly accurate way.” [2]. She points out the difference in achieving results between multi-taskers (teenagers) and master-taskers (adults). The main difference is that master-taskers, owing to their maturity and experience, use new technologies to serve them cope with multiple tasks of the increasing workload wisely, and the teenage multi-taskers who have formed the self-habit of multitasking at early age still have to learn and be taught how to use it wisely.

Marc Prensky (2001) coined the expressions ‘digital natives’ (younger generations grown up surrounded by digital technologies) and ‘digital immigrants’ (adult generations) [5]. ‘Digital natives’ have developed multitasking prowess far beyond of those belonging to ‘digital immigrants’ (their parents, teachers and educators in general). Constantly bombarded by rapidly increasing technology that promotes multiple sources of input at a given time, ‘digital natives’ combine ‘old media’ such as TV, print, and music with ‘new media’ such as computers, smart phones, and continually increase sources of input. For instance, they go online while watching TV, talk on the phone, listen to music, surf the Web, use Facebook/ Twitter while text-messaging and studying. Most of us – teachers – belonging to digital immigrants cannot prevent our students from interacting with more than one medium at a time. What we should do is to investigate how multitasking affects their academic success, their attention spans and their ability to learn and retain what they have learned.

III. NOISY COMMUNICATION CHANNELS AND CONTINUOUS PARTIAL ATTENTION

In any communication model, interferences with the decoding of messages sent over a channel by an encoder can be defined as a noise. The prophecy of the 21st century’s Noisy Communication Channel Disease was diagnosed as early as 1964 in the lyrics “The Sound of Silence” by Simon and Garfunkel:

And in the naked light I saw
Ten thousand people, maybe more.
People talking without speaking,
People hearing without listening,
People writing songs that voices never share
And no one dared
Disturb the sound of silence.

In fact, apart from Environmental Noise (that physically disrupts communication, such as standing next to loud speakers, or the noise from a construction site making it difficult to hear the speaker); Semantic Noise (different interpretations of the meanings of certain words); Syntactical Noise (mistakes in grammar); Organizational Noise (poorly structured messages can prevent the receiver from accurate interpretation); Cultural Noise (stereotypical assumptions that can cause misunderstandings) Psychological Noise (anger or sadness that may cause someone to lose focus on the message itself), nowadays, there is the ‘special noise’ that is omnipresent: Continuous Partial Attention.

According to Linda Stone (1997) who coined the phrase ‘Continuous Partial Attention’ [8], it is essential to make the distinction between what she calls multi-tasking that is a ‘simple’ one (eating a sandwich while answering the mail), and a complex multi-tasking that she diagnoses as Continuous Partial Attention. For instance, while digital immigrants used to multitask working on two monitors – one monitor displayed email, the other displayed a Word document or a spreadsheet, digital natives are hyper alert, ready to respond to any input coming in from any direction. Linda Stone says that digital immigrants at technology companies founded prior to 1990, have embraced personal
computing technologies to enhance productivity and personal creativity, supporting a value on self-expression, output and efficiency. Digital natives belonging to the personal communications technology era are doing something very different from what she calls multi-tasking. Their focus is on the amplified accessibility and responsiveness [9].

She further explained it in her interview made by Henry Jenkins [10]: “My NYU students were hyper-alert. They were asking their brains to attend to four Instant Messenger (I.M.) conversations, a partially completed paper, a news website, a text message coming in on the cell phone and a conversation with the person sitting next to them. This blew me away. I wanted to give it a name that more accurately described it. I called it Continuous Partial Attention (CPA).” [4].

On the one hand, “technology gives us the freedom to do anything, anywhere, anytime, but on the other, it also enslaves us” [4]. We are bombarded by catastrophic news, media lynch of everybody who is somebody to attract attention and cause distraction from deep recession and galloping rate of unemployment. Advertising campaigns, glossy leaflets and magazines offer us a dream-come-true body shape, health, wealth and happiness, while politicians during their political campaigns promise us a rose garden. However, as soon as the game is over we are thrown back to grim reality. The acute problem with the “pace 24/7, anywhere, anytime, anyplace is that people struggling with their workload use CPA as their primary attention strategy” [4]. All these contribute to weaken the power of the Word and Take-My-Word-For-It. If people do not trust each other, if we talk without speaking, if we hear without listening, where in a noisy environment ‘silence like a cancer grows’, and the question “Where Have All the Leaders Gone?” raised by Lee Iacocca [11] is a diagnose of our present life, we are doomed to pave our way to hell of either passivity (Who am I to do anything?) or aggressiveness (Nobody counts but me!). The consequences are apart from stress-related diseases, continuous distractions that can cause anxiety, lack of active listening and non-assertive communication.

IV. ACTIVE LISTENING AS A PREREQUISITE TO ASSERTIVE COMMUNICATION STYLE

Joseph Wolpe claimed that a person could not be both assertive and anxious at the same time, and thus being assertive would inhibit anxiety [12]. Owing to the fact that Continuous Partial Attention is one of today’s prevailing attention strategies, people are more prone to be anxious, to ‘talk without speaking’, ‘to hear without listening’ that leads them to either passive, aggressive or passive-aggressive communication style. It goes without saying that there are many other causes of either aggressiveness or passivity, but this paper is too short to cover them all. To make a long story short, on one hand, passive communicators (whose ‘voices never share’) do not defend their personal boundaries and often employ passive-aggressive communication style, in which “individuals appear passive on the surface but are really acting out anger in a subtle, indirect, or behind-the-scenes way”[15]. On the other hand, aggressive communication style does not respect the personal boundaries of others and thus often harms others while trying to influence them (without listening others’ point of view), often being verbally and/or physically abusive (‘and no one dare disturb the sounds of silence’).

Among many causes analyzed and defined in literature, what we want to point out is that lack of attention, omnipresent anxiety and impatience caused by the work/information overload often lead to presumptions (I know what you want to say), misunderstandings, noisy communication channels all ending up either in aggressive or passive-aggressive communication style. What is missing nowadays among multi-taskers is giving free and undivided attention to the speaker that is a prerequisite to assertive communication style. According to Carl Rogers’ humanistic approach to active listening, it means “giving one’s total and undivided attention to the other person and telling the other that we are interested and concerned. We listen not only with our ears, but with our eyes, mind, heart and imagination, as well. We listen to what is going on within ourselves, as well as to what is taking place in the person we are hearing. We listen to the words of the other, but we also listen to the messages buried in the words. We listen to the voice, the appearance, and the body language of the other... We simply try to absorb everything the speaker is saying verbally and nonverbally without adding, subtracting, or amending.” [16]

Assertive communicators have high self-esteem, value themselves, their time, and their emotional, spiritual, and physical needs and are strong advocates for themselves while being very respectful of the rights of others. “Assertive people ... are willing to compromise with others, rather than always wanting their own way ... and tend to have good self-esteem”[13] At the same time they “enter
friendships from an 'I count my needs. I count your needs' position', and are able to ‘initiate and maintain comfortable relationships with [other] people’ [14].

To empower the words and messages sent over the clear communication channels, where the phrase ‘Take-My Word-for-It’ has a true meaning, we must develop both deep respect for ourselves and deep respect and care for the other. To achieve this, we must teach our students how to clear their minds of hurry and scurry, to practice deep breathing, to think over before formulating and conveying their message, to get rid of fear of speaking, to say what they mean and truly mean what they say. They should practice to pay full attention to their co-speakers, and that is a first step in accomplishing true and successful communication. If we focus on this task in teaching our students, we are on the way to meet our goal and mission.

V. RESEARCH METHODS

To put theory into practice, a hundred of students of the Faculty of Economics Rijeka were involved in the active listening skills test. The students participated in the survey voluntarily and had been previously informed of the purpose and process of the study. Two groups of students, 50 in each group, have participated in the study. One group of students (the third-year students who attended the course in Business Communication Skills) served as an experimental group and another (first-year students) served as a control group. The point is that the former have acquired some background knowledge and practice in active listening and communication styles, while the latter have no background practice.

The test consists of two parts (see Appendix 1). The first part is focused on reflective listening skills while the second comprises questions on multitasking, active listening skills and CPA. The first test comprised 10 questions with two possible alternatives which were aimed to grade them according to their listening skills (see Figure 1).

As can be seen in Figure 1, the bar chart shows the percentage of students according to the total achieved value class, (4 classes: 0-5; 5-10; 10-15; and 15-20 being the highest ranking) The obtained results show that the third year students had somewhat better results than first year students, especially in the first value class.

The second active listening test comprised 28 particles evaluated on the 5- likert scale. The data of the survey was analyzed by means of descriptive statistics, specifically the t-test analysis. The t-tests analyze the degree of respondent’s active listening skills according to individual particles in the questionnaire based on the respondent’s belief (see Tables in Appendix 2)

Even though, while observing the total mean for all particles there is a slight difference in the average mean of the control and experimental group (3.36 and 3.55 respectively), the statistical analysis proves several statistically significant differences between first and third year students regarding their behaviour while listening to the speaker.
The third year students had better results in active listening as, according to their point of view, they more commonly make eye contact ($X = 4.12; \text{SD} = 1.05$), nod their heads in agreement ($X = 4.02; \text{SD} = 1.12$) while listening to the speaker ($t(110) = 2.27, p < 0.05$; $t(110) = 2.83, p < 0.05$ respectively). Furthermore, the analysis shows that third year students more frequently give their full attention to the speaker ($X = 3.84; \text{SD} = 1.04$; $t(110) = 2.61, p < 0.05$) and the speaker’s body language ($X = 3.81; \text{SD} = 1.01$; $t(110) = 3.66, p < 0.05$). Moreover, they also believe they have more patience in waiting for the speaker to finish before making mental judgments ($X = 3.86; \text{SD} = 0.89$; $t(110) = 3.05, p < 0.05$) and are not prone to interrupting a serious discussion in order to make a personal call ($X = 3.93; \text{SD} = 1.03$; $t(110) = 2.01, p < 0.05$). For more detailed statistical analysis data, see tables in Appendix 2.

In addition, we have also conducted the descriptive statistical t-test analysis of the sample to establish whether there are differences in active listening according to gender. Even though we expected to find more statistically or even noticeable significant differences according to gender surprisingly, the analysis showed no statistically significant differences for the first year students and only two significant differences among the third year results. The third year female students more frequently ($X = 3.31; \text{SD} = 0.79$; $t(41) = 3.03, p < 0.05$) find themselves thinking about what they are going to say next while the speaker is talking, whereas the male students pay closer attention to the speaker’s body language when listening to the speaker ($X = 4.23; \text{SD} = 0.97$; $t(41) = -2.34, p < 0.05$).

VI. CONCLUSIONS

Based on our experience, we are aware that multitasking has become part of our daily routine with all its advantages and a number of drawbacks. Multitasking cannot be prevented as proved by the warnings of technology experts and additionally proved by the results of our research. In addition to applying creative methods of teaching LSP and Business Communications Skills, our proposal is that we should particularly focus on helping our students find best solution of mitigating the consequences of Continuous Partial Attention syndrome. Compromised attention ends up in impatience, poor listening skills and ineffective communication. As Linda Stone pointed out “at the heart of compromised attention is compromised breathing (email apnea or screen apnea). Breathing, attention, and emotion are commutative. Optimal breathing contributes to regulating our autonomic nervous system and it’s in this regulated state that our cognition and memory, social and emotional intelligence, and even innovative thinking can be fuelled.”[9]. Therefore, teaching communication techniques and skills and ignoring the presence of compromised breathing and compromised attention are far from achieving optimal results in active listening and assertive communication style.

Owing to the fact that our research is just a tip of an iceberg, we propose that we join our efforts in establishing an in-depth project consisting of research, methods and programs that will help both us and our students apply know-how of digital experts who recommend Conscious Computing and Digital Wisdom. Instead of using technologies as prosthetics for the mind, and human-as-machine style productivity, we should use Conscious Computing, i.e. personal technologies as prosthetics for our beings, to enhance our lives [9]. In other words, as Prensky put it “the digitally wise investigate and evaluate the positives as well as the negatives of new tools and figure out how to strike the balance that turns tools into wisdom enhancers... With our eyes wide open to digital enhancement’s potential harm as well as its benefits, let us bring our colleagues, students, teachers, parents, and peers to the digital wisdom of the twenty-first century” [7]. We find that learning how to be digitally wise is a crucial prerequisite to teach our students how to become active listeners and assertive communicators. Ready to give their total and undivided attention to the other person, they learn how to listen to the words of their co-speaker and the messages between the lines, to the voice, the appearance, and the body language, trying to “absorb everything the speaker is saying verbally and nonverbally without adding, subtracting, or amending.” [16] This paves the way to assertive communication style which implies developing high self-esteem and high respect for the others.

REFERENCES


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