

Master 1
Civilization and Literature

Communicative Competences

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Introduction

“Emperor Frederick - the 13th century ruler of the Roman Empire - wanted to know what language had been spoken at the birth of mankind in the Garden of Eden. Was it Hebrew, Greek or Latin? He ordered an experiment in which the original circumstances would be recreated as closely as possible. A group of infants were to be isolated from hearing human speech from the moment of birth until they spoke their language. The babies were to be raised by nurses who were strictly charged to maintain complete silence when with the babies. The result? Every one of the babies died. The lack of communication can be lethal.”

Robert Bolton, People Skills

Communication is the imparting or exchanging of information by speaking, writing, or using any other medium. The ability to effectively communicate with other people is an important skill. Through communication, people reach some understanding of each other, learn to like each other, influence one another, build trust, and learn more about themselves and how people perceive them. People who communicate effectively know how to interact with others flexibly, skillfully, and responsibly, but without sacrificing their own needs and integrity. Effective communication demands that the parties involved in communication have a shared and clear appreciation of the various definitions and parameters about which information is being exchanged.

The ability of people to reach their goals in social life depends to a large extent on their communicative competence. The notion of ‘communicative competence was introduced by Dell Hymes in the 1960s (1962, 1964, 1972) to emphasize that the knowledge of grammatical rules is not sufficient for speaking a language and for communicating. There is a shared belief in many societies that good communication has many constraints and that one of the most important constraints is the underlying ability of the interlocutors. As Steven Wilson and Christina Sabea (2003: 3–4) put it:

Why have so many scholars, from so many fields, studied communicative competence within so many relational, institutional, and cultural contexts? Our hunch is that scholars, as well as the contemporary Western societies in which most live and work, widely accept the following tacit beliefs: (a) within any situation, not all things that can be said and done are equally competent; (b) success in personal and professional relationships depends, in no small part, on communicative competence; and (c) most people display incompetence in at least a few situations, and a smaller number are judged incompetent across many situations.