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Improving Age-Friendly Environment through Pragmatic Language

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Abstract

Declining vocabulary and poor comprehension of complex sentences are some depleting language skills faced by the elderly. As such, this study explored the cues that construct young people's understanding of effective communication within the older and young adult dyad. Qualitative data retrieved from open-ended questions were thematically analysed, and specific facets that contribute to understanding age-related differences were developed. The results catalysed the development of the Integrative Language-based Communication Diagram that could reduce the prevalence of communication breakdown. This environmental approach can also help elders adapt communication to be a necessary tool for living safely and independently.

Keywords: Age-friendly Environment; Pragmatic Language; Communication Skills.

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1.0 Introduction

Age-friendly environments promote people's health and well-being, as well as their participation as they age. It becomes a major concern since the growing ageing population is affected not only financially but socially as well (Othman & Fadzil, 2018). As proposed in the Global Age-friendly Cities Guide, there are eight interconnected domains that can assist in identifying and addressing barriers to older people's well-being and quality of life (World Health Organization, 2018). Social participation is one of the important features in an age-friendly environment. Participating in recreational, social, cultural, and religious activities in the community enhance seniors' quality of life. It keeps them engaged with people of different ages and cultures and also helps to prevent social isolation.

In line with this approach, many factors can impact the quality of life of older adults, including changes in physical or psychological health, cognitive ageing and the decline of pragmatic language. The pragmatic language emphasises verbal and nonverbal aspects that govern communication skills and have been shown to deteriorate with age (Daniluk & Borkowska, 2020). Declining vocabulary and poor comprehension of complex sentences are some depleting language skills faced by the elderly due to the ageing process. Ageing is accountable for physiologic changes in hearing, voice, and speech processes (Jayakody, Friedland, Martins, & Sohrabi, 2018). The National Institute on Ageing (2018) reported that one in three individuals aged 65 to 74 years suffers from hearing loss, while about half of those above 75 years face hearing difficulty. As a result of deteriorating abilities, older adults face restricted participation and activities as they can neither comprehend nor produce spoken and written languages (Jaeger & Esteban, 2017). Cognition, hearing, and speech deficits

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among the elderly can negatively affect their caregivers and family members (Fontan, Cretin-Maitenaz, & Füllgrabe, 2020). It is also due to generational differences and resulted in different needs and preferences between them (Ismail, Muhamad Halil, Zainan Abidin, & Hasim, 2020).

Hence, it is vital to overcome these communication issues before the communication dynamic further deteriorates and affects older adults' quality of life. Prompted by these concerns, this study is driven to explore the features in pragmatic language and to incorporate them into the communication process. The research objectives underlying this study are:

1. To identify features in pragmatic language that construct the comprehension among young people towards effective communication between them and the elderly.
2. To integrate those features in pragmatic language within the communication process.

2.0 Literature Review

Several sources of information were gathered to enable deeper and wider knowledge of communication among older people.

2.1 Communication Barriers

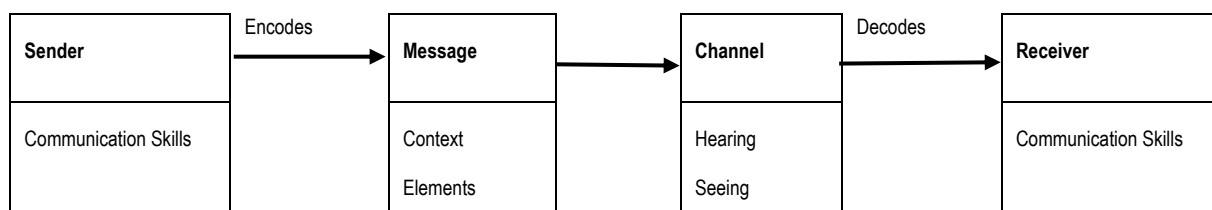
Communication barriers faced by older people are environmental aspects, ageing-related changes, disabilities, and diseases. Among all the five senses (hearing, seeing, touching, tasting, & feeling), declining vision and hearing mostly affect one's communication, particularly between young adults and the elderly (Cavazzana, Röhrborn, Garthus-Niegel, Larsson, & Croy, 2018). Typically, losing the ability to hear sounds at high frequency and some syllabic sounds (e.g., 'ch', 's', & 'sh') is common among older people, along with blurred vision, as well as reduced peripheral vision (sides), some colours, distant objects, and close objects (e.g., faces). The older adults also experience reduced ability to smell and taste, as well as reduced ability to feel pain, hot, and cold. Due to slow reaction time, the elderly requires more time to process information and respond aptly (Jack, Ridley, & Turner, 2019). Side effects due to medication can also deteriorate one's communicative abilities. Some diseases that can affect one's language due to reduced expressive and receptive abilities using speech (Kurumada & Jaeger, 2015) are *Dysarthria*, *Aphasia*, and *Dementia*. Social and physical settings where communication takes place have an impact on the elderly. Thus, understanding environmental barriers and becoming more conscious in terms of measures that may overcome these hindrances are beneficial for both the young and older adults (Fontan, Tardieu, Galard, Woisard, & Ruiz, 2015).

Lunenburg (2010) described four categories of impediments that hinder effective communication as follows: 1) process barriers, 2) physical barriers, 3) semantic barriers, and 4) psychosocial barriers. Process barriers occur due to disintegration between steps in the communication process that disrupts comprehension. Next, physical barriers denote distractions that affect communication efficacy, such as distance between the two parties, telephone calls, and drop-in visitors. Meanwhile, semantic barriers are related to the meaning of the words one uses. As one word can portray different meanings, different people decipher words differently. The last barrier, psychosocial barriers, is linked with social and psychological aspects, including psychological distance, varying fields of experience, and filters. These four barriers must be addressed to enable effective communication.

2.2 Communication Models

Several models have been developed to explain the communication process. One of them is the transmission model of communication, introduced by Ellis and McClintock in 1990, to elaborate communication as a one-way, linear process with the sender intentionally transmitting message to the receiver. The role of the receiver in the model signifies an end-point or target instead of being part of the ongoing communication process. On the contrary, the interaction model of communication developed by Shannon and Weaver in 1949 portrays the sender-receiver interchanging roles in exchanging messages throughout the communication process. The model describes communication as an interactive, two-way process, where the participants interchange positions as sender and receiver to yield meaning by sending messages and receiving feedback within psychological and physical contexts. Next, in the transaction model of communication (Barlund's Transactional Model of Communication), the sender and receiver are called communicators who generate social realities within cultural, social, and relational contexts. Proposed by Dean Barnlund in 1970, the model depicts that a communicator is the sender and receiver concurrently.

Meanwhile, Berlo's SMCR model, introduced by David Berlo in 1960, describes the communication process in its simplest form (Janse, 2018). The acronym SMCR denotes *Sender*, *Message*, *Channel*, and *Receiver* – the fundamental communication components that can be affected by multiple factors. In this model, both sender and receiver share several similar grounds to ascertain effective message transmission. The model is viable to generate effective communication because it emphasises coding and decoding of the messages. This model serves as the platform in this present study to build an integrative diagram for an effective communication process between the older and young dyad.



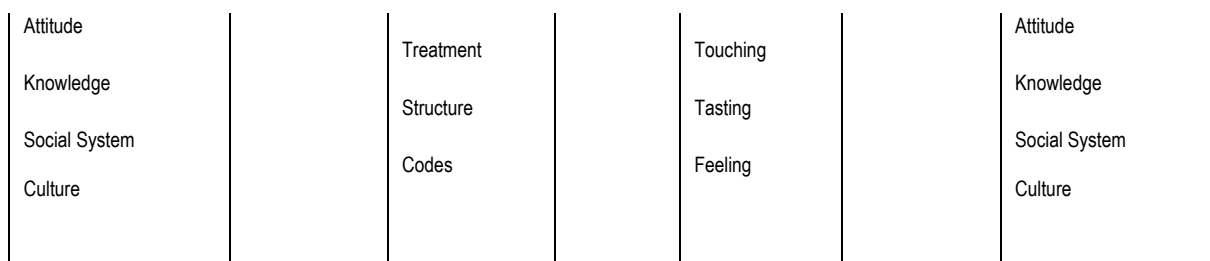


Figure 1. Berlo's SMCR Model of Communication
(Source:) Janse (2018)

Figure 1 illustrates Berlo's SMCR Model of Communication, along with the integral elements and factors. The first element, *Sender*, is the message initiator and has five factors: communication skills, attitude, knowledge, social system, and culture. The second element is *Message*, with five different factors (context, elements, treatment, structure, & codes). The encoding process occurs when the sender encodes the message, whereby clear code is imminent before moving on to the next channel to avoid misinterpretation. Next, *Channel* is the third element that denotes the five senses (taste, auditory, olfactory, vision, & tactile). A communication process may involve more than a single channel. *Receiver* - the last element – indicates the decoding process when one receives and decodes the message. In order to effectively respond to/communicate with the sender, the receiver should weigh in all the elements and contents of the source.

3.0 Methodology

3.1 Procedure

Individually, the students were required to provide responses to a question posted in their Google Classroom. Their responses can be either in brief or in detailed answers. The question is as follows: "What are the strategies used when interacting with older adults?" Given that the question was designed to highlight the components of effective communication, the written responses presented an opportunity to explore the features that construct the comprehension of young adults towards effective communication with the elderly.

3.2 Study Participants

In total, 62 first-semester students of Diploma in English for Professional from University of MARA Technology Melaka Branch, Malaysia, participated in this study. The participants are those with high pragmatic ability and are able to use language appropriately according to the communicative situation. Among them, 84% (n = 52) were female students, while 16% (n = 10) were male students, and their mean age was 18.5 years.

3.3 Data Processing and Analysis

A total of 62 submitted written responses were qualitatively analysed in this study by deploying the thematic analysis, whereby word lists and keywords were examined in context. Next, through selective coding of the 62 written responses, several techniques (repetitions, transitions, similarities & differences, and linguistic connectors) prescribed by Ryan and Bernard (2003) were performed. As even a single response arrived at multiple theses, the analytical process was performed repetitively until reaching a consensus. After that, an integrative diagram was developed based on the four components portrayed in Berlo's SMCR model.

4.0 Findings

The following three features were identified after thematically analysing the written responses: 1) speak loudly, slowly, and clearly; 2) use simple, short words and sentences; as well as 3) avoid distractions. Table 1 describes in detail the three features identified in this study.

Table 1. Features, Descriptions and Incidences

Features	Descriptions	Incidences
Speak loudly, slowly, and clearly	The channel or medium must be able to be picked up by the sensory system of the receiver, which could involve vision, sound, smell, taste, and touch	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <u>Do not shout but speak loud enough</u> so they can hear you clearly. • I usually <u>smile first</u> before approaching or interacting with older adults. • <u>Never raise your voice</u>; it will upset them because older adults can get sensitive easily. • Practice yourself to <u>speak slowly, clearly, and respectfully</u> when talking to them. • <u>Speaking slowly, clearly and loudly</u> could be one of the strategies that may help us when interacting with them. • <u>Keeping a slow and steady talking pace.</u> • <u>Developing the ability to understand and use non-verbal communication</u> will help you to convey what you truly mean. • <u>Describe clearly</u> of every detail you are going to tell. • <u>Nodding and showing facial expressions</u>; shocked, happy, and sad would make them feel appreciated. • <u>Do not avoid eye contact</u> with them as this may seem rude.

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Listening well involves not only knowing the words or the data being expressed but also <u>understanding the thoughts that the speaker is attempting to express</u>.
Use simple, short words and sentences	The receiver should understand the message with reasonable accuracy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> I always use <u>words or phrases that are simple and easy</u>. We must ensure we are <u>not using any inappropriate terms</u> such as a curse or vulgar words. We should <u>think before saying anything</u> because some words used might offend them. Try to <u>use formal language</u> that is simple, clear, and non-threatening. It can be helpful for them if we <u>use simple and short words</u> that they are already familiar. <u>Use an appropriate choice of words</u>. Do <u>not use difficult words</u> for them.
Avoid distractions	Distractions can be a form of loss or distortion (visual & auditory, and noise (background))	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> We must <u>avoid interrupting the conversation</u> when the older adults are speaking. When the older adults are talking, <u>wait until your turn to talk and do not interrupt them</u> before they have done talking. <u>Do not interrupt them or feel the urge to fill periods of silence</u> that often occur during conversations. <u>Pay attention</u> to what they are saying. We should <u>give extra time</u> for the older adults to talk because some of them may have problems delivering the words normally. When you are interacting with them, <u>put your gadgets away</u>. I would <u>listen without interrupting</u> to show that we do engage. We should <u>never interrupt them</u> while they are speaking. It is best to <u>reduce visual and auditory distractions</u> such as other people or background noise.

4.1 Speak Loudly, Slowly, and Clearly

Effective communication between the older and young adult dyad may be impeded by the ageing process, which causes sensory loss, slower processing of information, and memory decline. Consequently, the rate at which an older adult can comprehend is often slower than that of a young adult. By speaking loudly, slowly, and clearly, the older adults may be able to grasp better the spoken details. For those with a hearing problem, reading the speaker's lips can help them acquire the information precisely. A simple act by sitting in front of them minimises hindrances of constructive conversation, maintains eye contact, and constructs a more positive and comfortable circumstance. These are illustrated in the following responses provided by the participants:

- Do not shout but speak loud enough so they can hear you clearly.
- I usually smile first before approaching or interacting with older adults.
- Never raise your voice; it will upset them because the older adults can get offended easily.
- Practice yourself to speak slowly, clearly, and respectfully when talking to them.
- Speaking slowly, clearly and loudly can be one of the strategies that help us when interacting with them.
- Keeping a slow and steady talking pace.
- Developing the ability to understand and use non-verbal communication will help you to convey what you truly mean.
- Describe clearly every detail you are going to tell.
- Nodding and showing facial expressions; shocked, happy, and sad would make them feel appreciated.
- Do not avoid eye contact with them as this may seem rude.
- Listening well involves not only knowing the words being expressed but also understanding the thoughts that the speaker is attempting to express.

4.2 Use Simple, Short Words and Sentences

Some of the best approaches for effective communication are speaking in a manner that can be easily understood and simplifying the information. Jargon or slang must be eluded because it would be difficult for older adults to understand new terms. Information overload, such as long and detailed explanations, can hinder effective communication with an older person. Therefore, young adults should use simple sentences with one independent clause for the elderly to grasp the message clearly. The following lists responses given by the participants in light of this feature:

- I always use words or phrases that are simple and easy.
- We must ensure we are not using any inappropriate terms such as curses or vulgar words.
- We should think before saying anything because some words used might offend them.
- Try to use formal language that is simple, clear, and non-threatening.
- It can be helpful for them if we use simple and short words that they are already familiar with.
- Use the appropriate choice of words.
- Do not use difficult words for them.

4.3 Avoid Distractions

An effective communication process involves both sending and receiving messages. Many issues related to incompetent communication may be addressed simply by listening carefully to accurately decode the conveyed message. Older adults require undivided attention and without any distraction to create a meaningful conversation with young adults. In particular, auditory and visual disruptions (e.g., loud background noise & interruption from others) must be hindered. These distractions may cause a communication breakdown. These are illustrated in the responses given by the participants:

1. We must avoid interrupting the conversation when the older adults are speaking.
2. When the older adults are talking, wait until your turn to talk and do not interrupt them before they have done talking.
3. Do not interrupt them or feel the urge to fill periods of silence that often occur during conversations.
4. Pay attention to what they are saying.
5. We should give extra time for the older adults to talk because some of them may have problems delivering the words normally.
6. When you are interacting with them, put your gadgets away.
7. I would listen without interrupting to show that we do engage.
8. We should never interrupt them while they are speaking.
9. It is best to reduce visual and auditory distractions, including background noise and interruptions.

5.0 Discussion

Based on the three features; 1) speak loudly, slowly, and clearly; 2) use simple, short words and sentences; and 3) avoid distractions, an integrative language-based communication diagram was developed to facilitate effective communication between young and older adults (see Figure 1). The integrative diagram is based on Berlo's SMCR Communication Model as the platform, guided by this present analysis, and organised in a manner where all themes are conceptually coherent.

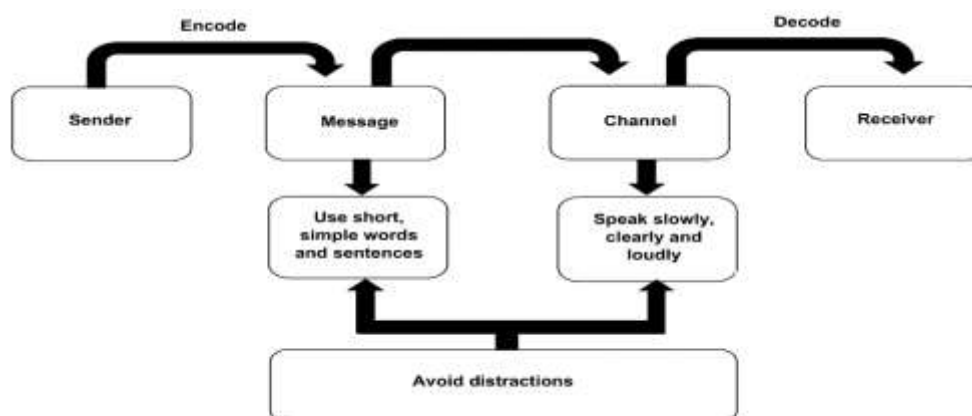


Figure 1. Integrative Language-based Communication Diagram

The proposed integrative language-based communication diagram denotes a process that facilitates effective communication between young adults and the elderly. The four components embedded into the diagram are 1) sender, 2) message, 3) channel and 4) receiver. Communication process starts when the sender (young adult) develops and sends information through a process of encoding. The information must be encoded into the message intended by the sender. Simple words and sentences ease message (verbal/nonverbal/written language) interpretation. Next, as the message moves to the channel, it must be picked up by the sensory system of the receiver (older adult). Selection of the medium to transmit the message is vital. The sender should speak loudly, slowly, and clearly so the receiver can decode the message meaningfully. The sender should also consider distractions that may interfere with the message and make adjustments, so the message can be transmitted effectively.

6.0 Conclusion and Recommendations

Conclusively, the three features identified in this study: 1) speak loudly, slowly, and clearly; 2) use simple, short words and sentences; and 3) avoid distractions, led to the development of an integrative language-based communication diagram that facilitates effective communication between young and older adults. This diagram aids the young adults in better understanding the communication barriers faced by the elderly. The strategies used may lower the prevalence of communication breakdown and succeed in message conveyance, thus making communication effective. It is recommended that this diagram be disseminated to caretakers in old-folk homes, medical practitioners, and to the public. The infusion of these features into the existing communication process should also assist in identifying and addressing barriers to older people's well-being and quality of life.

However, some limitations should be noted. Due to the nature of the research purposes, this research was based on the responses from the qualitative research method. Therefore, the findings cannot be generalised to the larger population because the participants are limited to those with high pragmatic ability. Consequently, further studies should be carried out on diverse participants to ensure that results

or findings obtained from the study are applicable to a broader population. Further research is also needed to explore older adults' perspectives toward effective communication.

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Paper Contribution to the Related Field of Study

The integrative language-based communication diagram has contributed additional empirical evidence to the current literature for communication models. The findings of this study also help to improve age-friendly domains related to social communication and participation.

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