

## **Empowering Communication Skills**

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### **Reviewed by: Tista Bagchi**

*Empowering Communication Skills* has the potential to entertain as well as educate. It is a book that one can “dip into” at random and find enjoyment in; it is also a book that merits attentive reading from cover to cover. Whichever way one approaches it, after reading this book one is forced to think and re-think not only about how communication works, but also about how a person’s relationships with others in society are based on, and shaped by, the processes and abilities involved in communication. It is simultaneously enriched by a scholarly perspective and down-to-earth, practical advice for a range of people, especially young people who are seeking to improve their communication skills. However, it also has insights to offer to a readership more aware of issues relating to the use of English in communication, and to the use of language as a general matter in communication.

*Empowering Communication Skills* is organized into three major parts comprising twenty-one chapters. These are: “Oral Communication” (Part I), “Written Communication” (Part II), and “The Power of Correct Words and Phrases” (Part III). Part I of the book is especially noteworthy for its attention to the roles of silence and body language and non-verbal cues in oral communication in real-world situations such as

job and grant interviews. However, parts II and III also have practical value for the user/reader.

What is also remarkable about this book is that it addresses fairly serious matters of language and communication in a carefully structured manner, but it does so with a light touch. It enlivens the text with wit and humour through the citation of literary quotes and communicative situations as portrayed in literary and popular texts and television series. For instance, in Chapter 1, entitled “To Speak or Not to Speak”, the matter of silence and its role in existence (at a philosophical level) as well as in communication is introduced to the reader. While it is a matter of some significance, its introduction is accompanied by a quote from Thomas Carlyle: “Language is human; silence is divine, yet brutish and dead. Therefore, we must learn both the acts.” (Carlyle, 1898, cited on p. 2)

In the book, pertinent dialogic exchanges are quoted from the popular British tele-serial and book *Yes, Prime Minister* to illustrate some of the key points that the author makes. For instance, in the context of a discussion on “hedging” in conversation as “verbal duelling” (according to Farb 1975), the following conversation is cited (on p. 11):

In *Yes, Prime Minister*, Hacker [the new Prime Minister] discusses the possible repercussions of cancelling Trident, the Polaris missile carrier [as a deterrent against the Russians]. [Sir] Humphrey [Appleby, the civil servant under him] tries to convince him that it is an effective deterrent.

#### **Example**

“But it is a bluff,” Hacker tells him. “I probably would not use it.”

“They [the Russians] do not know that you probably would not use it,” Humphrey argues.

“They *probably* do,” says Hacker.

Humphrey agrees. “Yes ... they probably know that you *probably* wouldn’t. But they can’t *certainly* know.”

Humphrey is right about that. But they don’t have to *certainly* know.

“They *probably* *certainly* know that I *probably* wouldn’t,” Hacker says.

“Yes,” he [Humphrey] agrees, “they *probably* *certainly* know that you *probably* wouldn’t, but they wouldn’t *certainly* know that although you *probably* wouldn’t, there is [the] probability that you *certainly* would.”

[Cited from Lynn and Jay 1989 – *reviewer*]

A significant principle formulated in the branch of academic inquiry known as the philosophy of language, i.e., the Co-operative Principle as formulated by H. Paul Grice, is brought in by the author to foster greater understanding of communication in conversational settings. This is worked out in terms of four maxims of conversation—of Quantity, Quality, Relation, and Manner. These are carefully illustrated in the book by giving some more examples of dialogues from *Yes, Prime Minister*, but then the author goes on to discuss how these maxims are very often violated:

A speaker, especially a public figure, becomes verbose because he is afraid of being pinned down by his critics if he is precise and clear. A civil servant uses ambiguous language because he wants to remain non-committal. A lawyer violates the principle of quality [“Be truthful” – *reviewer*] if he is pleading the innocence of a criminal. ... [H]edging and digression are the tools of many speakers (p. 18).

Chapter 7, “[The] Role of Politeness in Effective Communication”, and Chapter 8, “Speaking Intelligible Indian English”, are both of direct practical value to those among the readership who are interested in learning to communicate politely and effectively through the spoken medium. Such interested readers are

likely to be students and young professionals, seeking to improve their spoken communicative skills in the job market as well as their professional career path later. This book thus has additional practical value in skill-building in India as well as in most other regions of the world in which skill-building has come to be valued.

Part II of the book, “Written Communication”, is of special value to students and young professionals in India who need help with developing better written communication skills. Of particular interest are Chapter 9 (“How do Sentences Grow?”), which illustrates practical applications of the author’s considerable experience with researching and teaching sentential syntax; Chapter 10 (“How to Develop a Coherent Paragraph”); Chapter 12 (“Comprehension, Summarising and Reporting”), which is of special value to both students and those aspiring to enter executive positions in their careers; Chapter 13 (“Arranging Paragraphs in an Essay”); and Chapter 14 (“Writing a Research Paper/Thesis”), which is of special value to research students and more advanced-level researchers. Chapter 15 (“Communicating through E-Mail”) addresses an important issue especially in today’s digital world, that of sending clear, concise, and coherent e-mail messages, which are increasingly the communicative mode of choice in professional as well as certain kinds of personal communications. This chapter also contains a table of e-mail abbreviations and emoticons which are of practical value to users across all age groups! In my view, these chapters provide much-needed guidance to professionals who may be extremely competent in technical research and its implementation, but who are lacking in the necessary skills in written communication in the professional domain and who would therefore be strongly advised to work on improving on such skills.

Part III of the book comprises chapters that serve as ready references on a variety of language-related topics. These topics range from English morphology (the study of the internal make-up of words) to foreign phrases and slang expressions; from synonym and antonym groups of practical interest in communication to addressing problem areas of morphology and syntax for users of Indian English, in particular, subject-verb agreement, tense-forms and using the correct sequence of tense in a text. The final chapter, “Punctuating for Clarity”, is on a theme rarely found in run-of-the-mill guide books for written communication, namely, the need for correct punctuation in writing. Here too, one finds the occasional witty gem, such as *Spunk and Bite: A writer’s guide to bold, contemporary style*—a spoof on the decades-old, established guide to writing style that is now known simply by the last names of its authors Strunk and White!

The greatest value of this book lies, in my view, in its striking a fine balance between being a scholarly book and yet providing detailed advice on communication skills in a contextually sensitive and practical manner—a balance that not too many authors from an academic background in linguistics and language-related fields are able to achieve. It is also, happily, an affordable volume for both individual users, including students, as well as institutional libraries. As and when the remaining typographical errors get rectified, the book is going to be a must-have for academic readers and the educated lay users alike.

## References

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