Gender Gap in the Perception of Communication in Virtual Learning Environments

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Abstract:

To support and continue the motivation of participants in virtual learning environments, it is important to achieve a successful learning atmosphere. Therefore it is necessary to reach the participants on a personal level and to perceive their personal needs and emotions when conversing with them. These factors of learning motivation depend on the individual perception of the virtual, text based communication. The coding and encoding of purely, text based language requires an enormous amount of compensation in regard to the absence of all verbal means of communication. Due to this, it is important to notice the existence of any gender differences in the compensation of non verbal communication or in the perception of text based communication. In a study, the gender gap within the perception of text based communication was evaluated. The objective of this survey was to define characteristics of text based communication, which then gives an indication about the condition of male and female participants of virtual learning environments. The results of this study gave instructions in relation to the individual gender interpretation and production of written messages, as well as the implementation of measures which support the motivation to learn.

1. Approach

Many factors which contribute to the motivation to learn in a virtual learning environment are fundamentally conveyed through communication (Kallmeyer, 1996/ Euler 1989). The participants self assessment, which is either confirmed or denied by the respective conversation partner, the individuals well-being or the respective behaviours of the lectures are essential factors to the motivation to learn and are showed through communication. The perception of communication depends on cognitive learned believes and experiences, how men and women have to behave and to communicate. As a result of this, the individual learning motivation depends on the gender based perception of communication in e-learning environments. Successful virtual communication is however, subject to the considerable, varying conditions because of the reduction on purely, text based language. The coding and decoding of text based, written language requires an enormous amount of compensation in regard to the lack of all non-verbal forms of communication. In this study, it is assumed that a closer look at the individual reception of language can give evidence as to how communication within virtual teaching situations is received, and whether or not a gender gap of perception and production of text based communication exists. We can only derive according instructions for written based communication if we have precise information about the individual reception of text based messages (Stokar von Neuforn, 2006).

2. Case Study

To evaluate written characteristics in the reception of speech, a case study was carried out in several universities and universities of applied science, each offering online seminars. During face-to-face lectures, students of this degree were asked in an unaided recall, about the characteristics of text based communication in emails. Without being given examples (Lamnek, 1993), students were questioned about which written characteristics indicated

qualities and the mood of their conversation partner. These characteristics were to be spontaneously recorded and, where possible, applicable examples or ratings were to be added. The goal of this research was to define verbal characteristics, which would then supply information relating to the interpersonal gender aspect of written messages. Examples were given and the students were asked to explain, in bullet points, how these characteristics were interpreted. A different weighing and interpretation method was then assigned to the previously mentioned characteristics, by using the added examples as well as the frequency of certain references.

3. Results

128 female students and 128 male students participated in this case study. In total, there were 1537 different points made by the students, which were sorted into 50 different characteristics and split into 4 clusters (A-D) of text based communication. In addition to the text based characteristics, the participants also recorded examples and interpretations. These could then be evaluated, judging by their qualities.

Cluster A: The Appearance of the Message
The characteristics which relate directly to the appearance of the message, and allow us to receive a first impression of the purely visual observation of the message, were assigned to cluster A. However, this cluster already appears to be relevant to the individuals' behaviour and is therefore expressed, as well as interpreted rather implicitly.
Cluster B: The Syntax
The syntactical cluster consists of the following characteristics: sentence construction, sentence structures and the different types of sentence variations (refer to diagram 3). The lengths, as well as the construction of written sentences, are included in cluster B.
Cluster C: The Vocabulary
This area is comprised of characteristics which refer to the choice of words and the vocabulary. Neologism and abbreviations are especially important in text based communication, not only because they are methods of fast communication, but also as a characteristic of modern expression, or as a factor of allocation to certain groups
Cluster D: The Empathetic Communication
Characteristics, which directly assist in the conscious sending of unspoken extra messages, are assigned to "The Empathic Communication" i.e. those which indicate an active production of speech from the sender. This describes non-verbal communication, which is turned into written form eg. a laughing smiley face, which was sent deliberately and consciously as additional information, instead of real laughter in a non-virtual learning situation. Also assigned to this area is "Compensated Phonology" (Stokar von Neuforn, 2006a), which includes all variables that compensate the acoustic characteristics of ordinary communication.

	Language Areas			
	Appearance	**Syntax**	**Vocabulary**	**Empathy**
Characteristics	Adress	Sentence Structure	Word Choice	Address Formally/Informally
	Length of the Answers	Sentence Length	Formal Language	Omissions
	Discharge	Questions	Writing as speaking	Emoticons
	Capital/Small Writing	Grammar	Codes	Emphasis
	Layout/Paragraphs	Spelling	Adjectives/Adverbs	To comply with
	The position of the answer		Complementary statements	foregoing themes
	Content		Foreign Words	Asking for personal themes
	Colours and Pictures		Fillers	Only factually content
	Subject Title		Modern Language	Excuses
	Type style		Nicknames	Foundation of a mail
	Attachments/links		Bad language	Punctuation Mark
	Signature		Insider Words	Asterisks
	Answer within the mail		Neologism	Jokes
	Unsought mail		Play on Words	Phonology
	Time/hour of the mail		Subjunctive	Irony
			Iterations	
			Metaphors	

Due to the additional, individually different example entries of the sampled person, it was possible to assign the initially, ambiguous written linguistic characteristics to the individual language areas. Apart from the quantitative analysis, a qualitative approach helped to obtain information, about the discrete written linguistic features.

Example 1: The Length of the Message

Students assess the length of emails, as the first, visual, accessible statement (Language Area A) over their medial conversation partner. However, the length and evaluation of the message differ from gender to gender. Men find short messages to be terse, goal orientated, practical and most importantly, typically male. Women acknowledge this impression, by interpreting long messages as a predominantly, feminine style of communication. From a females point of view, short messages give a negative first impression (unfriendly, stressed, uninterested, a sign that the person is short on time). Long answers are assessed by women as a sign that their correspondent shows interest, whereas men consider long answers to be excessive and long winded.

Example 2: The Address

The greeting at the beginning of a message was also valued as an important tool in assessing the virtual conversation partner. A conclusion about the mood of the conversation partner is definitely drawn by the first glimpse of the message. The lack of a greeting was generally viewed as a sign that the reply had been written in a rush, or perhaps that the person was in a negative mood. Women mentioned the address significantly more than men did, indicating a preference to this characteristic as criteria for assessment.

Example 3: The Sentence Length

The characteristic "length of a sentence" was an essential criterion in creating an impression.

In the qualitative evaluation of the added interpretations of the participants, it was shown that there are gender differences in the perception of this characteristic. Women generally perceive short sentences as a sign indicating a lack of interest or showing that the conversation partner is in a rush or a bad mood, exactly as it was interpretated within the length of a message. The male students found short sentences to be precise, goal orientated and accurate when conveying a point; long sentences were described as long winded and typically female. The quantitative survey of these characteristics shows a significant difference between the numbers of entries, in relation to the gender of the participants.

5. Summary
In the context of virtual learning environments, the relevant factor for the success of the participants is what they receive and in which learning atmosphere he or she is currently in.
Therefore, conscious observations of text based communication styles can help to recognise and consider the interpersonal and gender gap aspects of messages. Sensitivity for the presence of personal and emotional information can help to overcome the gendered, interpersonal barrier, which arises from gender differences as well as from reduction of the communicative options, or possibilities in virtual learning environments (and not only there). This research can contribute to the design of communication, which supports the motivation to learn in virtual learning environments, by explicitly formulating text based characteristics which can be considered as essential clues in the interpretation of the interpersonal aspect within written communication.