Introduction to oral communication

The word ‘oral’ comes from the Latin word for mouth. So oral communication is communication by speaking rather than in some other way – for example, writing. You will also be looking at ways of listening to others – an important skill in many everyday situations.

What is communication?

Although oral communication usually involves speech the two are not the same thing. In order for effective communication to take place other things must happen.

ACTIVITY 1

Read the following descriptions and decide whether they are examples of effective communication rather than simply speech. Put:

- a C next to those that you think involve effective communication
- an S next to those that involve just speech.

You may feel that some – or all – could be either, depending on the circumstances. We’d still like you to decide one way or the other, depending on what is most likely.

(a) A man standing on a street corner telling everyone they are doomed. No one pauses within earshot of him. □

(b) A baby crying to its parents because of teething pains. The parents are in the room and react immediately. □

(c) A football fan enthusiastically describing a football match, but her listener does not understand the rules of football. □

(d) A ten-year-old talking to himself as he walks to school. □

(e) A close friend telling you about the recent death of his mother. You are both sitting at your kitchen table and you are inviting him to express his feelings. □
If your response was similar to mine you’re likely to have a good idea of what communication involves. If not, you will have identified points of disagreement that you can consider further in what follows. You may still disagree when you have finished the unit. If so, you may like to discuss this with your tutor: the likelihood is that you have viewed the situation differently, rather than made any sort of ‘error’.

What communication involves

For effective oral communication to take place there must be:

- a speaker
- a listener
- a message
- understanding of the message.

A speaker

This goes almost without saying. Communication doesn’t just happen, it has to be started by someone.

A listener

However well-planned or well-meant speech is, unless someone is willing to listen it does not involve communication. Even if what is being said is perfectly simple to understand and there are people present to understand it, communication depends on the willingness of those present to listen. It also depends on the speaker recognising the listener as a willing, active participant, not just a backdrop.

A message

Communication cannot take place unless something is communicated. It’s convenient to call that something a message. Bear in mind, though, that when I speak to someone I don’t simply transfer something to another person, like passing them a hunk of cake or a pot plant. No two people hear the same thing in the same way, and the listener’s view of the message can be very different from that of the speaker.

Understanding

This is where much communication fails. There may be a forceful speaker, an important message, and a willing listener, but if the speaker cannot make him or herself understood then no communication takes place.

Let’s review the examples in Activity 1 in the light of these points.

Because of the importance of a willing listener I ruled out:

(a) speakers on street corners rarely meet with a willing audience
(b) talking to oneself is not really effective communication. It’s simply a form of thinking aloud.

My suggestions are: