



Communication and collaboration: two sides of the same coin

AS THE COVID-19 CRISIS CONTINUES, OUR ABILITY TO COMMUNICATE AND COLLABORATE WITH OTHERS HAS BEEN TESTED. BOTH OF THESE ARE FUNDAMENTAL SKILLS NECESSARY FOR OUR SURVIVAL – WHETHER IN RELATION TO TACKLING A GLOBAL PANDEMIC, OR JUST NAVIGATING THROUGH OUR DAY-TO-DAY LIVES, SAYS **AMY LIGHTFOOT**.

At first glance, the skills of communication and collaboration may seem independent of one another. With more consideration though, it is clear that they are fundamentally linked. In order to communicate, we require the collaboration of others – others need to be ready and willing to listen or to read. If this willingness is not forthcoming, communication will not take place. We've all had arguments with close family or friends who refuse to listen – and no doubt we have been the refuser sometimes too. This shuts down communication and stops the issue from being resolved.

Communication is always two way, whether or not the listener or reader is actively responding to what the speaker or writer is saying. People on the receiving end will be interpreting, analysing, and assessing the information – often unconsciously – and then making decisions about how to store the information, mentally or otherwise, for future use.

Communication depends on language, but this can take different forms. Verbal language is more than the words and grammar we use. We constantly make decisions about which specific words to use, our turns of phrase or intonation having nuances which can change both the explicit and implicit meaning of what is being said. Equally, our non-verbal language – gestures, facial expressions – can dramatically alter the message we convey.

Sometimes there can be a mismatch between our intended message and the one that is received, because our perceptions about language use can differ. These differences might become larger when we communicate across cultures – what is perfectly acceptable and understood in one culture might be taboo in another. Developing an awareness of these differences is critical for our young people growing up in a globalised world.

Equally, the way we collaborate with

others can differ depending on our age, culture and how much experience we have of working with others. It's not always easy. Collaboration often means compromise and wrapped up in the broader skill are also flexibility, empathy, respect for others' opinions, and much more. All of these underlying factors take time to develop. A six-year old's attempts at collaboration look very different to a fifty year old teacher who is collaborating with colleagues to develop a new scheme of work.

So what does all of this mean for us as educators? How can we support our learners to develop strong communication and collaboration skills? Here are some ideas.

Communication

Language skills are extremely important. Bilingualism or multilingualism is already the norm in India – along with many other countries – and it is clear that if this can be properly harnessed and celebrated, there will be many benefits to all. Developing strong communication skills in more than one language has been shown to have multiple cognitive advantages as well as enabling communication with many more people and unlocking the richness of cultural artefacts such as literature that are otherwise inaccessible. Link languages such as English are undoubtedly useful, but not at the expense of other languages. Whatever the medium of instruction is in a school, there should be clear expectations that students will develop strong communication skills in at least one other language and learners should be encouraged to embrace the linguistic diversity that exists around them.

Communication takes many different forms. Communicating in formal contexts is quite different to communicating socially with friends. Writing an essay is very different to writing a social media post – but all are important and need recognition and practise in order to be effective. Students need to practise a wide variety of these

to develop a range of skills in different contexts.

Reading is a form of communication. It's often hard to get our students to read for pleasure but this is so important not only for their language skills to develop but also to open their eyes to new ways of thinking and articulating ideas. Think about setting your class a reading challenge to read at least ten books of their choice during the academic year, keeping a log. Encourage them to share what they have read with others in the class. If your students don't have easy access to books, take a look at the excellent website storyweaver.org.in - can you print out some stories for them to read?

Being a good listener requires practice. Students need to be given opportunities to develop these skills – imagine their ears are muscles that need regular exercise. Active listening, where people show interest, make eye contact, summarise, and respond appropriately, can be practised in every subject, not just language lessons. Model being a good listener yourself – show interest in what your students tell you, and ask questions to find out more.

Collaboration

Students need regular opportunities to work together in the classroom and beyond. Collaboration can really be developed if students have a chance to practise and focusing on individual work only means these opportunities are missed. To encourage students to collaborate more effectively, assign roles during group work and consider doing activities where some students are asked to simply observe levels of collaboration and give feedback on what they see.

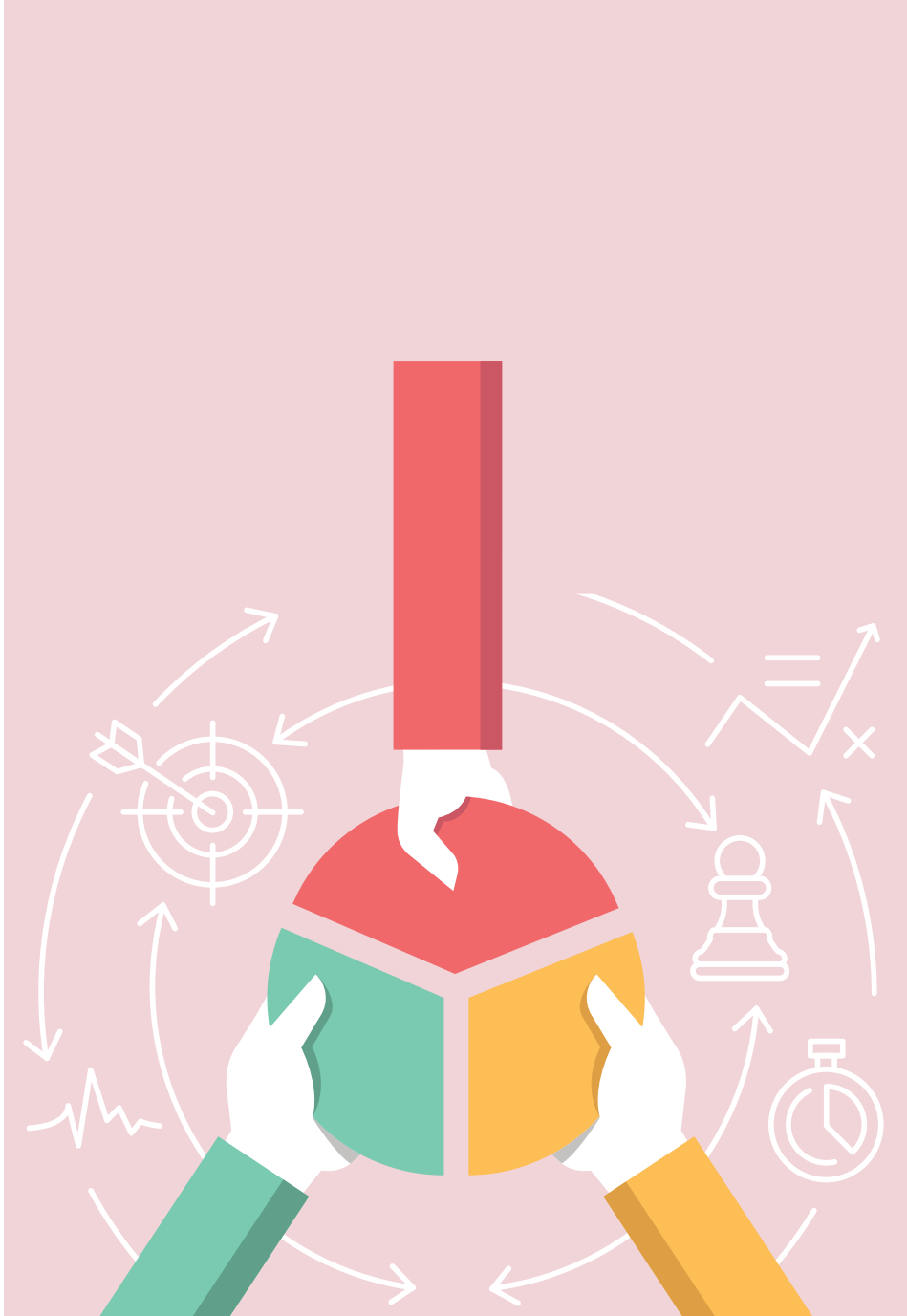
Project work offers a great opportunity for collaboration. This is especially true of projects that require the students to try to solve a problem. This will encourage them to share their ideas, agree which ones to take forward, and decide how to communicate

their conclusions to others.

■ As educators we can set a good example when it comes to collaboration. If students see us working together to achieve our goals or solve problems, they may be more likely to do this themselves. Collaboration with our colleagues is also beneficial for our professional development – a double win. Consider team-teaching, peer observation, or undertaking classroom-based research with a colleague.

■ Give students opportunities to collaborate with new people. If we only ever work with the same people, we can get complacent and fall into roles which mean our flexibility, empathy, and other underlying skills are not tested. Working with new people also helps learners to understand different points of view that they might not have experienced. Consider activities which involve elderly people in the community, for example, or much younger students. Alternatively, set up a pen-pal system with students in a classroom in another part of the world. Agree small projects with their teacher for the students to collaborate on using Skype, email, or letters to communicate.

In this complex world we live in, with all its myriad challenges and problems, communication and collaboration are arguably more important than ever. The next generation will have to deal with unprecedented environmental problems in addition to multiple other issues – many of which we might not be able to imagine. Supporting these young people to be able to articulately express themselves in ways that are non-confrontational and that encourage others to listen, collaborate, and act positively should be a critical area of focus for everyone working in education. **T**



AUTHOR

Amy Lightfoot is the Regional Education and English Academic Lead (South Asia) at the British Council, based in Sri Lanka.

REFERENCES

*The British Council's publication **Unlocking a world of potential: core skills for learning, work and potential** sets out six core skills including communication and collaboration which are fundamental for today's world. <https://bit.ly/TeacherMagCoreSkills>*

This webinar recording describes how teachers can encourage collaboration while teaching online. <https://bit.ly/TeacherMagCollWebinar>

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