

ACQUISITION AND LEARNING OF LANGUAGE SKILLS FOR COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE

C. O. Ajewole-Orimogunje

Abstract

This paper discusses the relevance of the knowledge of the basic language skills- Listening, speaking, Reading and Writing to an individual. Language is an important means of communication in the society as well as a medium through which we acquire knowledge. Listening and Reading are referred to as receptive skills while Speaking and Writing are productive skills. The paper is concerned with how these skills, with reference to English Language can be useful for the development of communicative competence of an individual. The paper concludes that the basic language skills are essential for all round development of an individual. It also recommends that language skills should be emphasised and taught in Nigerian schools for mutual intelligibility.

Introduction

Language is human speech, either spoken or written. It is the most common system of communication which allows people to interact with one another and to write their thought and ideas. Whenever there is human society there is language. Language has made possible the development of advanced, technological civilisation. Without language for communication, there would be little or no science, religion, commerce, government, art, literature and philosophy (The World Book Encyclopaedia, Vol. 12 p. 49).

According to Hargie (1997:56), there are linguistic variations associated with social situations with some requiring a higher degree of language formality than others. He observes further that giving a lecture, being interviewed on television or chairing a committee meeting usually involve a more formal, deliberate, elaborate use of language than for example, having a chat with a friend. It should be noted that changes in tone, pitch and volume of voice occur according to the context and situation of language use. The use of language varies according to the context of situation.

Human beings are naturally endowed with language acquisition device which makes it possible for them to learn a language. All normal humans bring into the world an innate faculty for language acquisition and language use. It has been shown that children learn the language of those who bring them up from infancy; one's first language is acquired from the environment.

Language Skills

There are four language skills- listening, speaking, reading and writing. The knowledge of these basic language skills are essential and relevant to the

development of an individual and to the socio-economic and political stability in Nigeria. Language has a major role to play in development as no meaningful development can take place without language. Also language plays an important role in intellectual development of a person. The table below, developed by Unoh and cited by Jiboku (2002:197) affirms this.

Education stages	Characteristics
Pre-primary Education stage (from birth to six years)	Progressive Acquisition Of Basic Language Skills. Development of Reading / Learning Readiness and Cognitive awareness
Primary education stage (from 6-11 years)	Consolidation of basic language skills: Achievement of greater learning readiness and greater cognitive awareness
Secondary education stage (from 11-17) years	Development of more sophisticated learning skills and strategies. More effective use of language in communication and learning
Tertiary education stage (18/20 till end of higher education)	Mature learning and communication skills and strategies. Superior cognitive awareness
Extended/ life – long education stage (from end of certificate centred education till senility or death)	Consolidation and application of mature learning and communication skills, more superior cognitive styles and abilities

Source: Unoh, cited by Jiboku (2002:187)

As can be clearly seen from the table above, the role of language starts from birth and lasts till death. It is a continuous process that has a lot to do in moulding the life of an individual. Without these skills an individual cannot develop fully intellectually.

The government of Nigeria considers language as important means of promoting social interaction and national cohesion and also for preserving cultures as stated in the National Policy on Education (2004: 5)

Communicative Competence

This term was coined by Campbell and Wales to disambiguate Chomsky's notion of linguistic competence (Adejare 1995: 157). These two authors according to Adejare (1993: 160) define communicative competence as the capability or ability to produce and understand utterances which are not so much grammatical but appropriate in the context in which they are used. In his own views, Alo (2003:116) notes that communicative competence "is concerned with the knowledge and ability which speakers need to possess in order to use language appropriately in communicative situation" He states further that communicative competence in English as a mother tongue is different from

Acquisition and Learning of Language Skills for Communicative Competence

communicative competence in English as a second language (ESL) situation. According to the new Encyclopaedia Britannica (Vol. 22, p. 567)

The learning of a second language is deliberate activity undertaken when one has already nearly or fully acquired the basic structure and vocabulary of one's first language. It is only in encountering a second language that one realises how complex language is and how much effort must be devoted to subsequent acquisition. Whereas every normal person masters his mother tongue with unconscious ease, people vary in their ability to learn additional language just as they vary in other intellectual activities.

Thus it is clear that in learning a second language the learner needs to put in a conscious effort in order to achieve the desired goal as learners of English as a second language often encounter difficulties in learning due to interference from their mother tongue.

Canale (1983) proposes four part communicative competence to account for the underlying systems of knowledge and skill required for communication. These are grammatical competence, sociolinguistic competence, discourse competence and strategic competence. Grammatical competence entails the sense of possessing the knowledge and skill required to understand and express accurately the literal meaning of utterance. It is concerned with the mastery of the rules of language at the phonological, semantic, syntactic and morphological levels. Sociolinguistic competence is the ability to judge the appropriateness of utterances to a context, in terms of such factors as the status of participants, purposes of the interaction and norms and conventions of interaction. Discourse competence is the ability to perceive and produce cohesive and coherent text in different genres and discourses, that is, the ability to manipulate language to achieve a specific purpose. Strategic competence is the ability to repair potential breakdowns in communication and to enhance the effectiveness of communication between the source – text producer and target – text receiver. This, according to Ogunsiji (2004:21) is the ability to overcome specific communicative problems through the manipulation of linguistic forms as well as paralinguistic devices.

The Teaching and Learning of Language Skills

English which is a second language in Nigeria is learned and used together with the various mother tongues. As pointed out earlier the learning of a second language is a deliberate activity undertaken when one has already nearly or fully acquired the basic structure and vocabulary of one's first language. The four basic language skills need to be effectively taught in schools so as to enable the learners to gain competence in the use of English Language Ogunsiji (2004:20) rightly posits.

The fact that English is a second language has many pedagogical implications. One of these is that all the four basic language skills... should be thoroughly taught so that the learners (or speakers) of English as a second language may lay claim to reasonable degree of mastery of the language for intelligible local, national and international communication purposes.

The above point coheres with Alo's (2003:115), assertion that a pre-requisite for academic success is a good mastery of basic communicative skills in the language of education.

Listening

Listening is the acquisition, processing and retention of information in the interpersonal context (Bostrom 1997:247). Listening skill is essential in the learning process as the learner has to listen during a lesson to understand fully what the teacher is teaching. According to Ogunsiji (2004:22), listening is a complex language skill which involves hearing, understanding, evaluating and responding. The teaching of listening helps students to listen and to differentiate different sounds. The ability to differentiate between different sounds is important because if a sound is misunderstood or misinterpreted by the hearer, interference will occur and this can lead to a breakdown in communication. Listening can be taught through the use of tape recorder whereby the students listen to a passage recorded on tape. Thereafter the students are asked questions on the passage to test their understanding. Also the students can be engaged in dictation exercise; they can listen to programmes on radio and television to enhance their listening skill and ability.

Anene-Boyle (2004: 115) observes that the possession of efficient listening skills has a lot of advantages such as development of language facility and vocabulary, expression of knowledge, and evaluation of strong and weak points in arguments. Problems of sound discrimination, interpretation, information and stress, shifts in emphasis etc can be easily overcome through the use of audio- visual aids, listening to programmes like debates, news documentaries on the radio and television and through making conscious effort to listen properly.

Speaking

Speech is human communication through the spoken language; it is the primary form of language. Speech is central to the development of an individual and the way the individual is presented and understood by others. Marion (1990:244) argues that less complex syntactic structures are used in speech than in writing as speakers have to express their thoughts as they produce them and in such a way that will be easier for the addressee to process. We can use speech to persuade and to win the support of people.

Acquisition and Learning of Language Skills for Communicative Competence

The teaching of speech is very important especially in a second language situation. Correct pronunciation of English words should be taught and emphasised by teachers so that learners will be able to communicate intelligibly. The fact that English is taught as a second Language in Nigeria brings about the problem of interference as learners often transfer the linguistic features of the first language into the learning of the second language. For example some Yoruba learners of English find it difficult to pronounce some English sounds like /v/, /s/ and /z/. This leads to interference as words may be misunderstood through wrong pronunciation. Examples include pronouncing:

van /van/	as /fan/
zoo /zu: /	as /su: /
thin /θin/	as /tin/
shoe /ʃu: /	as /su: /

The supra-segmentals i.e. stress and intonation need to be emphasised in teaching. A word wrongly stressed will definitely give a wrong meaning to the hearer. English is described as a stress timed language while most African languages are tonal. Hence efforts should be made by the teacher to teach word and sentence stress to enable the students to distinguish between words having the same spelling but different meaning and pronunciation. Such words include for example:

REfuse (Noun)	reFUSE	(verb)
PROtest	(Noun) proTEST	(verb)
INcrease	(Noun) inCREASE	(verb)
EXport (Noun)	exPORT	(verb)
PROject	(Noun) proJECT	(verb)

The development of good phonological competence in English Language which serves as a major means of communication in Nigeria is essential to the development of effective communication skills.

Reading

Reading is the act of getting meaning from written or printed words. It is basic to learning and it is one of the most important skills in everyday life. It provides the key to all kinds of information. It enables us to learn how to do things, to enjoy stories, to discover what others believe, to exercise our imagination and broaden our knowledge. Reading means recognising letters and groups of letters as symbols that stand for particular sounds. The sounds, in turn, form words that express ideas in written or printed form.

Reading is a complex skill which involves the brain, eyes, ears and the nervous system. It involves the encoder – the author, and the decoder – the

reader, who reads to make a meaning out of the material being read. Lado as quoted by Ogunsiji (2004:27) says to read is to grasp language patterns from their written representation. Ogunsiji (ibid) asserts that reading is taught for three reasons – school or educational purposes, daily information and recreation.

As a language skill, reading is the process of communication through which most formal learning takes place. It is an important tool of learning in the different levels of educational system. Students' success in academics can be attached to mastery in reading skills as most information the students need in school is got through reading. The teaching of reading stresses certain skills such as word recognition, vocabulary development and comprehension. There are some reading techniques that students can adopt for effective reading. One of these is Robinson's SQ3R study skill as cited by Ogunsiji (2004:29). It involves five steps. –

S: Survey:- The reader is advised to look through the whole material before reading. This helps the reader to read with better understanding as it helps the reader to know the level of difficulty of the text and also to establish the purpose.

Q: Question:- The reader formulates some questions in anticipation of the author's answers.

R: Read:- This means reading the material thoroughly. It may involve reading more than once for better comprehension.

R: Recite:- The reader recites mentally the information gathered from the passage.

R: Review:- This involves the evaluation of the material read.

Reading has a lot of advantages apart from using it for the purpose of learning. It is useful in all profession- law, business, engineering etc and most especially in academics. It serves as a means of entertainment or recreation. One can read for leisure especially literary texts which can help to relieve emotional tension. Reading also enables one to acquire information about one's environment and the world at large. Information which can be got through newspaper, and magazines are very essential especially in this technological age.

Writing

Writing has both social and personal functions. It has the social function of being able to communicate across time and space. It has the personal, cognitive and reflective functions of organising and structuring one's ideas; it facilitates certain kinds of thinking and learning (Stubbs 1990: 571). Written language can be re-read at leisure; it also has the advantage of being permanent. However, the arrival of word-processing gives way to a dynamic screen display where written text can be redrafted, edited or deleted with no trace of any change. Stubbs (1990:574) observes that the mere fact that something is written conveys its own message for example, of permanence and authority.

Acquisition and Learning of Language Skills for Communicative Competence

In teaching effective writing, students should be introduced to the use of appropriate punctuation marks, paragraph development, rules of concord, coherence and logicity. Wiredu and Oyeleye (1998:92) assert:

Writing skills are complex and no doubt the most sophisticated of the skills required for language learning. For effective communication, writing skills require the mastery of not only grammatical and rhetorical devices but also for conceptual and judgemental elements. Students need the necessary- writing skills for them to be able to communicate effectively through writing.

Wiredu and Oyeleye (ibid) identify the following as the necessary skills for writing:

Language use: the ability to write correct and appropriate sentences.

Mechanical skills: ability to use correctly those conventions peculiar to written language e.g. spelling and punctuation marks.

Treatment of content: ability to think creatively and develop thoughts, excluding irrelevant information.

Stylistic skills: ability to manipulate sentences and paragraphs and use language effectively.

Judgment skills: ability to write in appropriate manner for particular audience in mind, together with an ability to select, organise and order relevant information.

All these put together will no doubt help a writer to be focused and effective in passing information to the readers. An individual needs to learn the skills of writing in order to meet up the challenges of modern life.

Conclusion

The basic language skills are essential for all round development of an individual – social, economic, cultural, physical etc. Hence the teaching of these skills in our schools should be of utmost importance. There is no doubt that the combination of the knowledge of these skills and their mastery can make an individual to gain high level of competence in the usage of English Language.

Recommendations

1. For mutual intelligibility spoken English should be emphasised and taught properly right from the elementary schools. This is necessary because it becomes almost impossible for children to drop or change pronunciations which they have already mastered. Children always prefer and stick to whatever their teachers say or teach them.
2. The fact that English language performs a variety of functions in Nigeria makes it a necessity that Language skills be taught in our schools.

3. English Language teachers should endeavour to involve the student in different activities that cover the language skills so as to develop the students' communication competence.

References

- Adejare, O. (1995). Communicative competence in English as a second language' In Bamgbose, A., Banjo A. & Thomas, A. (eds) *New Englishes*. Ibadan: Mosuro Publishers.
- Alo, M. A. (2003). Communicative competence and academic discourse in an ESL University setting' In Oyeleye, L. & Olateju, M (eds) *Readings in Language and Literature*. Ibadan: O.A.U press Limited.
- Anene – Boyle, F.A. (2004). Listening'. In Gbenedio, U.B. & Anene- Boyle, F.A. (eds) *Language and Communication Skills*. Ibadan Kraft Books Limited
- Bostrom, R.N (1997). The process of listening in Hargie Owen n D.W. (ed) *The handbook of Communication skills* London: Routledge.
- Canale, M. (1983). From communicative competence to communicative language pedagogy In Richards, I & Schmith, R. (eds) *Language and Communication*. New York. Longman Group Ltd.
- Federal Republic of Nigeria (2004): *National policy on education*. 4th edition, Lagos: Federal Ministry of Education.
- Hargie Owen, D. W. (1997). Interpersonal communication: A theoretical framework in Hargie Owen, D. E. (ed) *The handbook of Communication Skills*. London: Routledge.
- Jiboku, O. (2002). Literacy education and language education: two sides of a coin in National development in Nigeria in Lawal, A., Isiugo-Abanihe, I. & Ohia, I. N (eds) *Perspectives on Applied Linguistics in Language and Literature*. Ibadan: Stirling Horden Publishers.
- Marion, O (1990). Language as a spoken medium, conversation and interaction. In Collinge N.E. (ed) *An Encyclopaedia of Language*. Routledge
- Ogunsiji, A. (2004). Developing basic language skills for communicative competence in learners of English as a second Language in *Nigeria' Ibadan Journal of English studies*. Vol.1. pp 19-34

Acquisition and Learning of Language Skills for Communicative Competence

Stubbs, M. (1990). Language in education. In Collinge, N.E. (ed) An Encyclopaedia of Language. Routledge

The Word Book Encyclopaedia, Vol. 12

Wiredu, J. F. & Oyeleye, A. L. (1998): *Aspects of functional English* Ibadan: Hope Publications.