

STRATEGIES FOR DEVELOPING THE COMMUNICATION SKILLS OF NIGERIAN SECONDARY SCHOOLS STUDENTS

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Abstract

This paper sought to find out English language teachers opinion on the effective strategies to develop students' communication skills. Guided by five research questions, this study, which was carried out in state owned secondary schools in Anambra State adopted the questionnaire as the data collection instrument. Analysis of data using mean and standard deviation scores revealed that in the teachers opinion, emphasizing communication skills across every subject in the curriculum, using relevant classroom activities and adopting flexible techniques of instruction are among the strategies that will enhance the development of communication skills among students. It was therefore recommended among other things that teachers should always participate in the development of their schemes of work in order to provide for teacher initiated communication activities in the classroom.

Introduction

The increased understanding of the nature of the world and the tremendous technological development it has witnessed in recent decades have forced humanity to become more interested in communication. According to Pariser (1987). Communication does not simply mean the transfer of signals over the many channels at man's disposal. It means the transfer of meaningful messages (Clark, 1991). In this regard Akudolu (1997:247) insisted that a language is useful to the extent it allows its users to negotiate meaning. Reiterating, Stables (1992) and Volt (1997) described communication as the exchange of meaningful information, understanding, knowledge and emotions needed for the ultimate survival of human beings. This exchange of discourse can be achieved through utterances, gestures, print and electronic sources (Heering, 1996).

Reinforcing the role of communication in the world. Marland (1996) asserted that communication is the single most important phenomenon that is necessary for our dreams, and our society. This simply implies that without communication, societies cannot function, members of a population act largely on motives of self interest and seek solely for their own psychological and physical survival and aggrandizement (Pariser, 1987:128). In the same regard, Harris (1995) argued that in the absence of communication, rapid technological advances is not possible.

For communication to be beneficial, it must be effective. Anya (1998) asserts that the ability to communicate effectively between members of a society is a prerequisite for the preservation of the society's freedom, development and survival. In this regard, Williams (1990). Carrol (1983), Morrow (1989) and Brumfit (1984) noted that the ability to communicate effectively in different contexts, is the goal of English language teaching and learning. This ability to communicate effectively is referred to in Linguistic literature as "*communicative competence*" (Larsen-freeman 1986:4) and it involves being able to communicate appropriately in different contexts such as internal/international relations, conferences, education, debates, to mention but a few. In fact, communicative competence is the key to successful communication especially in this Information and Communications Technology (ICT) era. Communicative competence demands a variety of communication skills. These skills according to Clark (1991:167) include: conversation and correspondence skills, multi-skills, tourism - discourse skills, and Information handling skills. Each of these situations-based communication skills can be verbal or non-verbal. While verbal communication skills involve the use of words, the non-verbal skills are manifested through the use of different parts of the body such as face, voice, hands, feet and what have you.

Students who lack communication skills are not able to communicate effectively. Such students do not perform well academically and socially. Stressing the present era, which is dominated by information technology advances. According to the Association of Commonwealth Universities (ACU, 2001:31),

In a global economy the exposure of students to the different cultures and practices of their potential future business competitors/partners is a valuable part of their university education. An opportunity whenever possible to gain ' language skills is a important advantage but ability must not be confined only to language students instead of being encouraged for students of all disciplines.

Though in this quotation is referring to university students, the message is very relevant to secondary school students. There is no doubt that the acquisition of communication skills by secondary schools students will facilitate not only the students' further learning but also their lie activities.

The Problem

Despite the indispensability of communication skills to the educational process, evidences abound that Nigerian students manifest an insignificant depository of communications skills in English language (Eta, 1998; Olibie, 2000). Onuigbo (1997) and Aina (1999) reported that lack of communication skills in English by students is the bane of the Nigerian educational system. Fafunwa (1985) observe this serious deficit in English language and laments that this significantly affects student's 'academic achievement. Consequently, there is a breakdown of communication in classrooms as "most students have become deaf mutes" (Aina, 1999: 12) As academic achievement continues to decline, the rate of school drop out continues to increase. In fact, students are unlearning to express themselves and they fail to learn and to decode learning content without stress (Eta 1998:9). The overall implication of this deficit to national development is also evident. Citizens are becoming more unable to speak their hearts and minds, to listen, to make efforts to understand *the* other person, understand technology (/Krister, 1987:129). Conflicts, violence and the use of abusive words are threatening the secularly of the Nigerian nation, destroying our dreams, our society and our freedom (Gana, 1999). This problem becomes more excruciating when one considers the place of English language both as the official language in Nigeria and as a medium -of-instruction for all subjects in Nigerian secondary schools. Little wonder then that Onuigbo (1990) emphasises that without communication /skills in English language. Nigeria is doomed in technology, education, commerce, science and what have you.

In an attempt to unravel the reasons for students' poor acquisition of communication skills, Macrory (2000) blamed teachers for being responsible for the high value students place on meaningless utterances, (slogans). In addition Olibie (2000) doubts whether the methods and materials in use are brining about communications skills or a sense of achievement among students.

It is necessary to look for effective strategies for developing student's communication skills. There is need to investigate teachers' opinion on how best to develop the communicative skills of students because no educational system can rise above the dictates of its teachers. How can schools enhance the development of communication skills in student? What classroom practices can best bring about the development of communication skills in students? What communication skills should schools emphasise? These questions will guide this paper.

Research Questions:

1. What subject areas emphasize communication skills?
2. What communication skills should schools emphasize?
3. What classroom activities can best help students develop their communication skills?
4. What teaching techniques can best improve student's communication skills?
5. What performance indicators can be employed to evaluate students' communication skills?

Methodology

Design, Area and Population of the Study

This study was a survey covered all the English language teachers in the 257 state owned secondary schools in Anambra State. Using stratified random sampling, two English language teachers (one from Junior Secondary School class and the other from Senior class) were drawn from each school thereby bringing the sample size to 514.

Instrument For Data Collection

The instrument was a researcher-developed questionnaire designed based on a series of important communication areas presented by (Clark 1991). The questionnaire contained five sections of five questions each and was structured on a four point Likerty type scale ranging from strongly agree to disagree.

Validation And Reliability:

Two heads of English Language departments in two secondary schools in Anambra State, and a lecturer in the department of Linguistics and communication Arts, University of Port Harcourt validated the instrument.

Using the split-half method of ascertaining reliability, the questionnaire was administered once on 20 teachers in a secondary school in Onitsha Education Zone of Anambra State. When the Pearson Product-Moment correlation co-efficient was computed between the two sets of scores, a c- efficient of 0.90 was obtained and was considered satisfactory for the study.

Data Analysis:

Data was analysed using mean and standard deviation scores. The acceptable mean score was 2.5.

Results:

Table I below shows that item I had the highest mean score. This was followed swiftly by item 5. While item 2 scored above the average mean of 2.5, items 3 and 4 scored below the acceptable mean. This indicates that in the teacher’s opinion, communication skills should be taught in all subjects but should receive more emphasis in English language.

Table I: Mean Rating of Teachers on the Subjects that will emphasize Communication Skills.

	Subject	x	SD	comments
1	English Language	3.62	0.65	Strongly agreed
2.	All Language only	2.80	0.88	Agreed
3.	Arts subjects only	2.02	0.04	Disagreed
4.	Science subjects only	1.98	0.02 .	Strongly disagreed
5.	Every school subject	3.45	0.48	Strongly agreed

Table 2: Mean Rating of Teachers on the Communication Skills that Schools should emphasize.

	Subject	x	SD	Comments
6	Conversation and correspondence skills	3.61	0.64	Strongly agreed
7	Reading/viewing for information skills	3.52	0.67	Strongly agreed
8	Language resource skills pronunciation, grammar and vocabulary	3.81	0.86	Strongly agreed
9	Listening and writing	3.00	0.07	Strongly agreed
10	Information handling skills	3.22	0.26	Strongly agreed

In Table 2 above, the man ratings for all the items are high. This indicates that the teachers strongly agreed that all the items should be emphasised in schools.

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Table 3: Teachers' Mean Rating of the Influence of Classroom Activities on the Development of Communication Skills

	Activity	x	SD	Comments
7	Role plays, stories and games	3.42	0.59	Strongly agreed
8	Classroom discussions	3.41	0.55	Strongly agreed
9	Listening to or reading creative materials and responding to it	3.21	0.30	Strongly agreed
10	Giving information in spoken or written form	3.42	0.56	Strongly agreed
11	Ban on the use of vernacular	3.77	0.81	Strongly agreed

Analysis in Table 3 above shows that the respondent rated all the items high. This indicates that in the teachers' opinion all the listed classroom activities can enhance the development of communication skills among students.

Table 4 below, also shows a high rating of the techniques which can enhance students' acquisition of communication skills. The highest mean score was adopting flexible approaches and methods.

Table 4: Mean Ratings of Teachers on the Teaching Techniques that can enhance Student's Communication Skills.

	Technique	x	SD	Comments
12	Selecting communicative activities which related to learners need	3.84	0.90	Strongly agreed
13	Using only textbooks and materials that will encourage learners to communicate	3.16	0.21	Strongly agreed
14	Adopting flexible approaches and methods	3.82	0.86	Strongly agreed
15	Devising strategies to cope with classes of mixed ability and mixed achievement students	3.41	0.49	Agreed
16	Using constructive feedback to give a sense of practical relevance to students	3.62	0.71	Agreed

Table 5: Mean Rating of Teachers' Perception of Performance indicators for Communication Skills Acquisition in Students.

	Performance	x	SD	Comments
17	Ability to understand interlocutor, create coherent discourse and take appropriate turns in conversation	3.21	0.33	Strongly agreed
18	Quality of language resource displayed e.g. Accuracy range and appropriacy to context	3.90	.75	Strongly agreed
19	Fluency, (speed and comfort of decoding and encoding)	3.42	0.57	Strongly agreed
20	Ability to go beyond monosyllabic utterances when required	2.93	1.07	Agreed
21	Ability to cope with difficulty and avoid embarrassing silences	2.85	1.15	Agreed

In Table 5 above, all the items scored acceptable mean scores for all the respondents. The teachers thus agreed that performance indicators listed in the table should be the criteria for measuring communication skills.

Discussion:

This study has revealed that English language teachers are of the opinion that strategies abound which can be employed to develop students' communication skills. One of the strategies has to do with the medium through which communications skills will be emphasised in schools. Analysis in Table I shows that communications skills should be emphasised in every school subject but should be given more attention in English language classes. This may be because English language is the overall medium through which very other subject in schools curricular is taught. Communication skills in English language should be encouraged by every subject teacher and during every subject instruction. This finding is in line with Quirk (1983) who explains that every subject is a medium through which communication skills can be emphasised. Also ACU (2001) shared the same view' by suggesting that students of all disciplines should learn language skills.

The study further revealed the various communication skills that schools should emphasise. Contrary to what obtains in conventional classrooms, the teachers opined that listening and writing skills should received less emphasis. However, the teachers still maintained that language resource skills such as pronunciation, grammar and vocabulary should receive the highest emphasis. Though authors such as Brumfit (1984) and Littlewood (1981) disagree with this and argue in favour of conversation and correspondence skills as the basis for communicative competence. Athey & Singer (1985), and Williams (1990) believe that the development of communication skills depends on two over-lapping phases: Familiarity with the language codes (pronunciation, grammar and vocabulary) and manipulation of the language codes. In addition, Macrory (2000:4) asserts that knowledge of language resource skills is essential for future communication to take place. If the pupils can manipulate the language, they will be able to produce authentic communicative language rather than just reproducing set phrases, which s not communicative at all.

The inescapable strategy is therefore to deliberately focus on interaction skills, Information - Processing skills and study skills, as communicative strategies to cope with communication deficiencies (Clark, 1991:168). Developing student's communication skills also demands a variety of classroom activities as revealed in this study. Role plays, stories and games, classroom discussions, creative reading and information exchanges are all communicative activities that the teachers agreed should enhance the communication skills of students. Clark (1991) believes that these range of communicative activities will make it possible for teachers to develop responsibility to pupils in the management of their poor learning and will ensure that much of what is done in the classroom is practical and communicative in nature. The major problem is that in Nigerian schools, most of the classroom activities centre on textbook instruction and workbook exercises and assignments (Loibie, 2000). This makes classrooms boring and frustrating, little wonder than that the major communication enhancing strategy adopted by schools is to ban the use of vernacular in classes. While it is true that this strategy may work, research reports over the past five years indicate that this has only turned students into deaf mutes (Eta 1998, and Aina, 1998); and that although students do develop a communicative competence of some sort in the classrooms, they find it difficult to improvise, cope with the unexpected, and talk about their personal needs and concerns (Mitchelle, 1996). Linder such situation, language learning has proved a less than successful exercise, seldom leading to any worthwhile level of communicative skills. This has lead to a vicious circle of failure feeding negative attitudes, which in turn predispose learners to expect failure. Schools should aim to improve students' motivation and provide them with a more practical ability to communicate, tolerate the vernacular as something that will go with sufficient motivation. (Fafunwa, 1985:14).

These communicative activities require that the teacher employ strategies techniques to develop the students' communication skills. This study revealed that communicative activities, flexible approaches and methods, coping with mixed ability groupings and using constructive feedback will give a sense of practical relevance to students thereby ensuring the development of their communication skills. This argues in favour of Clark (1991) and Stables (1992) who persist that the teacher should be able to call upon a wide range of techniques drawn form various approaches. Some of these techniques will involve communicative activities designed according to learners need; some to assist the learner develop control over mother tongue interference (Fafunwa. 1985). Williams (1990) agreed that teachers should be flexible in adopting methods and approaches stressing that, a blend of various approaches and methods will bring about the most effective results. Dodson (1983) *The Nigerian Academic Forum Vol. 1 No. 1 November, 2001*

observed that constructive feedback provides learners with the desire to communicate. And yet another technique advocated by Canale and Swain (1980) emphasised that teachers must always evaluate their existing textbooks and materials against both communication and instruction at content. All these techniques were labelled the "build up approach" by Paulston (1971) and Mitchell (1996), who see the learner as moving from controlled practice, through guided work, to free communication, with an increasingly feedback and choice of what to say along the way. Ironically, the teachers are not of the opinion that selecting textbooks and materials are necessary. This is rather absurd. But a number of reasons can account for it. One, teachers have no hands in choosing textbooks. Two, in the absence of a variety of materials such as supplementary readers, audio-visuals etc. and the teacher has no choice to use the available one. How then can such a teacher select and from which pool does the teacher select communication materials? Finally, the teachers subscribed to a range of performance indicators along which to evaluate student's communication skills. These performance indicators outlined in table 5 reveals that the teachers desire a change in the status quo where less attention is paid on oral assessment in favour of written assessments.

Implication Of The Study:

The general implication of this study is not in question. There is a problem with the communication skills of students to the extent that English language instruction has proved an unsuccessful exercise, which has rarely led to the student's development of any worthwhile level of communication skills. There is therefore, the need to seek strategies that will facilitate the development of these skills. These strategies according to English language teachers involve emphasising communication skills in all subjects. This implies that language teachers, social studies teachers, science teachers etc should all seek to emphasise this major global skill, that is if Nigeria will not be condemned to the role of a by-stander in a world that is moving at a super sonic speed (Akudolu, 200c).

In addition, the teachers believe that a variety of skill should be emphasised, using various classroom activities and through several teaching techniques. This implies that teachers should always be able to draw on appropriate strategies for particular contexts so as to achieve the sort of balance needed to all groups of learners. As Dodson (1983) suggests, being flexible in the adoption of approaches and method, the teacher can build the learners existing knowledge and structure communicative tasks that are relevant to learners.

Development of communication skills can also be seen in the light of the learners' ability to perform a number of tasks. This implies that assessment need to embrace syllabus achievement, functional achievement, grammatical achievement and proficiency achievement calling on the more global communicability attained (Clark 1991:162).

Conclusion And Recommendations

Developing students' communication skills is a task that is necessary for national as well as global development and survival. This is because communication is the key for participation in global events especially in this Information and Communication Technology (ICT) age. Communication demands a variety of skills, which calls for a judicious mixture of spontaneous and deliberate emphases, of systematic focuses and experienced tasks, of awareness, and commitment, in all subjects in the school curriculum. Ultimately therefore, curriculum concerns should provide a framework and a set of guiding principles to enable teachers create flexible schedules and focus on common communicative goals, as well as activities and tasks that realize them, on skill areas that are implied in them, on the range of techniques that will cope with the inevitable communication breakdowns and to evaluate levels of development against acceptable performance indicators. This will help bring about the effective development of communication skills that is aimed at.

Based on the foregoing, the following discussion are made:

- (i) Teachers should participate actively in the planning of their own scheme of work for communication skills.
- (ii) The English language curriculum should be revised to integrate a variety of communication skills.

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- (iii) School-based teacher networks and resource should be encouraged and funded.
- (iv) Teachers should always uphold effective classroom practices based on classroom reality irrespective of the dictates of the textbooks.
- (v) Textbooks should be reviewed and modified to give spaces for teacher initiated activities.
- (vi) Evaluation strategies should be modified and test-of-orals should more real and creative.
- (vii) In-service education should provide for developing teachers communication skills in order to prepare them adequately for the challenges in the classroom.
- (viii) Communication skill should not be left to English language teachers alone. Every subject teacher must work towards developing students' communication skills.

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