

COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE AND THE GOALS OF UBE

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Abstract

Communication is life and if it is life, then there is the need to pay serious attention to it. This is because; any distortion in the line would cause serious harm and damage to those involved. It is in a bid to avoid such that the Federal Government of Nigeria wants every citizen of Nigeria, especially the younger ones to have access to basic education. The belief is that once people can have access to basic education, they are communicatively competent. This paper agrees with such stand, but argues that it must not be education for education sake. It must be education provided by those who are competent to impart such.

Introduction

Human existence is equated with communication. Communication is said to be life. Monaghan (1981) is reported to have said that:

If we had no communication of information to us, our lives would be static; there would be no growth, no transformation. We would not be enlightened; we would live in total ignorance. Life would not be worth living.

Communication is the most important human survival skill because we need it to maintain contact with the world. (Taken from Akpan, 1993)

Confirming the important role communication plays in the human society, Watzlawick et al (1968: 49) say:

No matter how one may try, one cannot not communicate; activity or inactivity, word or silence all have message value; they influence others and these others in turn, cannot not respond to these communications and are thus themselves communicating.

The human society and situation therefore, is that of the impossibility of not communicating. It is basic to all human affairs and situations.

The basic tool for communication is language. It is the primary means of contact in human society. Humans depend on language to organize life and relate with others. Language, therefore, remains the most powerful and versatile medium of communication ever known in human society. Moody (1970:2) sees the primary role of any language in any human society as "to facilitate communication, to promote understanding between language - originator and language recipient, and to enable useful, appropriate, and efficient action to take place". Language is thus tied to 'understanding and appropriate and efficient action' between the sender and the receiver.

Communication and Learning

Communication and learning cannot be separated, for as you communicate, learning takes place. Be it in the classroom environment, by writing news story, or by the use of the radio or television. Communication here facilitates learning. Every communication situation, therefore, helps the receiver to learn something. Read (1978:34) says:

Communication and learning are so intimately related that it is almost impossible to consider one process without considering the other. And the two processes are remarkably similar. Man's special ability to communicate and his unusual capacity to learn are the dominant characteristics of human nature.

To communicate is to learn, and to learn is to communicate.

Tied to learning is teaching. To teach is also to communicate. Teaching and learning are natural phenomena that humans engage in without being entirely conscious of the process. This is to say that, teaching and learning do not only take place in formal institutions and situations alone, but also, as we interact daily, teaching and learning take place. In most cases, whenever teaching and learning is mentioned, our minds go to the school environment. The school is where formal teaching and learning take place. According to Barnes (1974:14) 'a school in its very nature is a place where communication goes on, that is what it is for. Education is a form of communication.'

Schools by their nature are established to provide a major part of the education to the younger ones. The purposes and content of the education may vary from country to country; the process of schooling is, however, very much the same everywhere. Schools are places where teachers and instructional materials

provide instruction to groups of students. To aid such instruction is (the curriculum. In other words, the students are taught the curriculum designed for them per time. Three variables are involved in the communication of curriculum in schools. These are: the teacher, the learner and teaching.

Taking one of the definitions of a teacher as given by the Dictionary of Education, Anderson and Burns (1989:3) say, a teacher is: “ a person employed in an official capacity for the purposes of guiding and directing the learning experiences of pupils or students in an educational institution whether public or private.”

Learners on the other hand are the receivers of the experiences of the teacher. They are expected to learn from the teachings and instructions of the teacher, Teaching is the ‘imparting of knowledge or skill.’ It is an activity or process that involves the teacher and the learner. Teaching can then be effective or ineffective. Bloom (1972) in Anderson and Burns (1989:8) say this of teaching: It is the teaching, not the teacher that is the key to learning of students. That is, it is not what teachers are like but what they do in interacting With their students that determine what students learn and how they feel about the learning and about themselves.

This goes to say a lot about the conditions of service of the teachers and what they impart on their pupils.

The Language of Teaching And Learning

Language remains the most powerful and versatile medium of communication in any human organization. Effective communication is therefore, a pre requisite in any educational process. A person’s ability to learn depends greatly on his degree of comprehension of the language of instruction.

It has been proven that, naturally, children tend to understand more easily when taught in the language into which they were born, compared to any other language they may acquire in the course of socialization (the Ife experiment). It is in the light of this that the use of the mother tongue in instruction was incorporated into the National Policy on Education. It is stated that Government will see to it that the medium of instruction in the Primary School is initially the mother tongue or the language of the immediate community and at a later stage, English. It was expected that at least, children should be instructed in the mother tongue in the first three years. This was meant to serve as a bridge between the language used at home and the new environment. From the fourth year on wards, English becomes not only a school subject, but also the language of instruction. As beautiful as this policy is, it has remained on the paper since it was drawn. No concerted effort has been made towards the implementation of this aspect of the National Policy on Education. So many factors are responsible for this. How many of our local languages have been codified and reduced to writing? How many of our teachers in the primary schools are capable of reading and writing in the language (s) of their immediate community? Also working against the policy is the pluralistic nature of our urban centers. Which language then is the mother tongue to the children in the urban centers?

It must be understood that before the inclusion of this in the National Policy on Education in 1981, English language has always been and still is the language of instruction in our schools. Our colonial history has imposed on us English as not just the language of instruction in our schools, but also the language of contact and interaction among the multi-ethnic and multi-lingual society of ours.

As a language of instruction, it means that Mathematics, Social Studies, Physics, Chemistry, Geography, and so on, are taught and learnt in English. In other words, if any knowledge is to be imparted at all in these Fields, they must be done in English language. It is the official language of Nigeria. It means that all official transactions are carried out in English. It is also the major means of contact with the outside world. This is to show how important English language is to the communicative needs of Nigeria at all levels of the education ladder. English, therefore, is what we need to be communicatively relevant to the wider Nigerian society and the world at large.

Communicative Competence and Performance

How effective has the teaching of English been in our schools over the years? How competent have our teachers been and how have our students performed in English language and by extension in all their other subjects? How well competent a teacher is would lead to effective performance and this, by extension, would produce competent and performing students.

The problem of communicative competence and performance of our teachers most especially in our primary and secondary schools is endemic. It has reached such an alarming rate that most products of our primary and secondary schools have performed woefully in various examinations today. What we experience and see in our tertiary institutions today is a product of lack of communicative competence and performance. Despite the fact that students are

subjected to learning and using English right from day one in their schools, there has not been any commensurate result to show for it. McGregor (1971:4) paints the picture of the situations in most primary schools in Africa thus:

In these schools, children are spending their best language learning years trying to master English. The first thing to note is that the pupils are taught by teachers who were themselves badly taught, have been inadequately trained as teachers and do not know English well. So, the children hear a lot of incorrect English and they learn it thoroughly

This is the situation in most of our schools today. How then can we raise citizens who are conscious of their environment and make themselves better citizens?

The Goals of U. B. E.

The gruesome picture painted above about the communicative competence and performance of the teachers, most especially in the primary school and the students is only applicable to a few. A good percentage of Nigerian population does not have access to formal education at all. In fact, in a special report on "UBE; How far down the road?" In the New Nigerian weekly of 30th June, 2001, Nigeria is said to have 48 per cent illiteracy rate. In that report, Nigeria is said to be among the E-9 countries. Others are said to be Bangladesh, Brazil, China, Egypt, India, Indonesia, Mexico and Pakistan.

The union was form to pursue and reverse the sorry state of education, and to 'sustain, intensify and accelerate efforts and policies in pursuing Education for AIT {EFA}. The E-9 union came into being in 1993 at a meeting held in New Delhi.

The EFA conference of 1990 was said to have revealed that the world has more than 100 million children, including 60 million girls that have no access to primary schooling, and that over 960 million children and two thirds of women and more than 100 million children and countless adults fail to complete basic education programmes. A greater number of these figures are found in the developing countries, which are concentrated in a few large countries, especially those of E9. They have a total population of over 3.2 billion people, more than half the world's population. About one fourth of their population are said to be of 15 years of age and more, with about 100 million people still illiterate. It is in the light of the above that these countries constituted themselves into a union - E.9, to implement decisions aimed at intensifying efforts at reducing illiteracy, and to pursue Education for all. This is to show that there is a corresponding relationship between education and development. In Nigeria, the effort at providing education for all culminated in the launching of the Universal Basic Education (UBE) on September 30th, 1999 at Sokoto. Education is to be made free and compulsory for all children aged 6 - 18 years old. The programme is to cover early childhood care and socialization education for the acquisition of functional literacy, numeric and life - skills, 'out of school and non-formal programmes; special programmes for nomadic population, non formal skills; and apprenticeship training for adolescents and youths who had no benefit of formal education, and the formal school system from the beginning of primary to the end of the junior secondary school. This is a very comprehensive programme that, if fully implemented, majority of Nigerians would become literate within the shortest period of time. According to the President, Olusegun Obansajo, there is the need to give Nigerians the basic education they need to survive the challenges of the future and 'become useful citizens to their community, their country and indeed the whole world'. He went further to say that 'fund will be made available to properly equip the schools while the teachers will teach their wards not only to the standard but traditional components of knowledge', that 'any

amount of money spent on the education of our children is a legitimate investment in our future because without a solid educational foundation nothing could prepare this country adequately to face the challenges of the coming years'. And so the country may remain underdeveloped.

A major challenge to the scheme, however, is the problem of unqualified teachers in some states. Professor Adamu Baikie was reported [in *New Nigerian Weekly* of 2nd October, 1999 by Azare] to have said at a recent General Congress of the Nigerian Academy of Education held in Kano, that about 70 per cent of the total number of teachers in the Northern States are unqualified. Other challenges are teacher motivation, boosting enrolment and adequate and reliable data, provision of adequate infrastructures, facilities and instructional materials, improved funding and problem of management of the entire process.

Despite these challenges, there are assurances from the government and its agents that these challenges are being taken care of. According to the Special Report on UBH in the *New Nigerian Weekly* of 30th June, 2001, (P7) Dr Musa Moda, Director of Social Mobilisation of UBE is reported to have said that:

There is now a large-scale rehabilitation and renovation of school buildings and the input of other socio-economic development sectors. Under the first phase, Federal government and 36 States, including Federal Capital Territory (FCT), have engaged in the construction of 1,548 classrooms for use by 178,569 pupils at a cost of 7.09 billion naira.

States are also said to have embarked on rehabilitation of dilapidated school buildings, provision of desks and chairs as well as learning and writing materials. Recruitment of teachers have also began, backed up by training and retraining under the auspices of the National Teachers Institute (N.T.I), which has been invested with the responsibility to produce quality teachers for quality education, yet maintaining a quantitative target. Available to the scheme is a long - standing World Bank assisted book production programme worth more than 120 million dollars for primary schools. It provides an avenue for the production of core text - books for distribution free to primary schools. If these are put in place, it is expected that the scheme would be a huge success. However, these seem to be only conceptions, which are put on paper. People are yet to feel the impact of these assured programmes in place for the success of the UBE.

The Way Forward

This paper looks at communicative competence and the goals of UBE. The target of communicative competence and the UBE are the pupils. How then can this be achieved?

As earlier pointed out, the language of education in Nigeria is English. It therefore, means that teachers must be communicatively competent in English to be able to impart knowledge on the pupils through the same language. The teacher is the one, who sets the tone for the learning activities. Teaching at the primary and secondary levels involves a higher rate of effective communication, which entails not only sending messages to pupils but also receiving their messages. Pupils at these levels become easily bored with monologues sooner than verbal interchanges. They are more likely to be attentive to a conversation than a speech to which they are expected to listen passively. There is a need to accurately understand pupils' needs, and so decide learning goals, design learning activities and evaluate how well learning goals are achieved. When these are done, they help in deciding what messages to communicate and when and how each message is to be communicated. To be avoided is the situation where the teacher feels he must be doing the talking all the time. Such creates the impression in the minds of the pupils that their role is only to listen, with only every little chance of talking, apart from providing 'echo answers' to their teacher's formal questions. They very soon come to feel that English is a kind of trick to be performed in the classroom at the teacher's request, since there is nothing to be talked about that their local language cannot handle more fluently. Let the classroom be seen as a communication encounter where all participants have equal opportunity.

The teachers and the pupils cannot be communicatively competent if the environment of learning and infrastructures are not made conducive. We hope that the government would be committed to her promises of rehabilitation and renovation of school buildings, provision of desks and chairs, recruitment and training of new teachers and retraining of old ones, provision of text books and written materials, etc. We have to be wary of the difference between policy in space and policy in motion. We also have to be conscious of the fact that the provision of infrastructures and teachers is not only to the urban centers alone, but also to the nooks and crannies of the country. We currently have a situation where our urban center schools are over-staffed while the rural schools are left without teachers.

Also to be noted and taken care of is the situation whereby the junior classes of our schools are staffed with unqualified teachers. This has been the bane of our educational system. The foundation are destroyed, hence the problem at the higher classes and at the tertiary level. We must learn to put the best

of our teachers at the foundation class for a solid foundation to be laid.

Apart from provisions of infrastructures which will make teaching attractive, Teachers must be adequately remunerated. The current situation in which teaching is the last option for any seeker does not augur well for the system. The best brains find their ways into other jobs where remuneration is high or where there are higher hopes of 'making it' on lime, hence people scramble for jobs in the customs, immigration, banks, oil firms, etc. The schools are then left with those who have no alternative but on the look out for the slightest opportunity to go. These do not augur well for our schools and the overall effectiveness and performances in our educational system.

If our pupils have to be communicatively competent, let the current administration be committed to her promises and make the classrooms attractive to our teachers and pupils. The Federal, State and Local Governments must, therefore, 'strategies to optimally achieve the coveted values enunciated in the Universal Basic Education (UBE) Programmed.

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