

Communication Challenges of Teaching in English Language in Nigerian Primary Education

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Abstract: *Language and communication are essential in the classroom, in children's learning, in teachers' communication with pupils and in pupils' understanding of themselves and their world. Challenges in this area reduces pupils' academic performances. The thrust of this work is to examine communication challenges faced in the primary schools of Nigeria through a review of previous works and the discussion of possible remedial actions and solutions. The challenges identified include; mother tongue interference, poor teacher modelling and influence of social groups. To address these challenges, the four basic language skills should be given full attention in the teaching process, the classroom environment should be conducive for learning, the teacher should be a good role model in communication in English language and should encourage dialogue and conversation among the pupils within and outside the classroom.*

Key words: *Communication, language skills primary education.*

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I. Introduction

Experience has shown that many language teachers are faced with problems of communication in the primary school. There are occasions where a teacher has to teach learners whose academic levels are not the same¹. Communication is the transmission of information and meaning from one individual group to another. It requires a sender, a message and an intended receiver or listener who may not be present or aware of the sender's intention to communicate at the time of communicating². The four basic language communication skills that constitute problems are listening, speaking, reading and writing. It is believed that, spoken language skills, which include understanding, are related to; academic success and attainment, literacy outcomes, numeracy outcomes, positive social relationships, friendships, behaviour, emotional development, employability and later life chances³. Hence, communication skills can be said to be of pivotal essence to learning in the formal education process for which the primary school is the starting pedestal.

Primary Education

The foundation of formal schooling is primary education and the primary school should be attended as a prerequisite for further education at higher levels. The primary school where the fundamentals of reading, writing, skill acquisition, information and attitudes necessary for proper adjustment into the society are taught, serves as the platform for the preparation of the minds and training of children for higher and more challenging pursuits in education⁴. Many great philosophers and thinkers have contributed immensely to the development of education at the childhood education level, with such contributions being mainly in terms of curriculum and methods, as well as the roles of the state, and parents to the child education⁵.

The Universal Basic Education (UBEC) is an initiative of the federal government of Nigeria which is aimed at achieving full access to and retention and completion of the basic education cycle for all Nigerian children⁶. It is a nine year educational programme designed to eradicate illiteracy, ignorance and poverty with the general goal of stimulating and accelerating national development, political consciousness and national integration. It is also targeted at ensuring the acquisition of numeracy, manipulation, communicative and life skills as well as the ethnical, moral and civic values needed for laying a solid foundation for life-long learning⁷.

To achieve qualitative primary education, there is need to ensure that teachers at the primary level receive good training that will impact positively on the pupils. According to the National Commission for Colleges of Education Primary Education (PED) aims at training students to become teachers with sufficient knowledge of primary school curriculum, skills, attitude and methods to enable them teach the subjects of primary 1 to 6 as contained in the National Curriculum⁸.

Communication in the Classroom

Passing and receiving information in the classroom is achieved through the basic communicative skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing. In order to express their feelings, children communicate in different ways and communication can be captured within the three categories of; verbal, nonverbal and written communication⁹. While the transference of information and codes (linguistic and others) may not be a subject of study, its adoption for use and communication is characterised as a process of social interaction. This process of social interaction facilitates the construction of subjects and the society through the negotiation of meaning between individuals¹⁰. When being taught in Grammar Translation Method (GTM) most pupils may not be able to understand the lesson and what they perceive to be lacking in context and boring, Activity Based learning (ABL) is very helpful in raising the interest of the students and making them learn in friendly environment¹¹.

It is pertinent to note that, teachers and students interact with one another in many different contexts, which are expressed in the following types of communication; teacher/class communication, teacher/student communication and student/teacher communication, student/student communication and student/class communication⁹. Some of the ways through which communication can be enhanced in the classroom are; having a comfortable space in the classroom or around school for quiet times to talk, labelling areas in the classroom or whole school with photographs, pictures or symbols, developing interactive displays to support communication and providing opportunities for pupils to have structured conversations with the teacher or other adults. They also include; introducing activities through which pupils are exposed to structured opportunities to talk with their peers, making posters using visual support for classroom routines trying out different room arrangements for discussions and group exercises and modelling and teaching pupils how to use their language for thinking and learning¹².

Listening in Children

Hearing and listening are not necessarily the same. Hearing involves the process by which sound waves enter the ear. Listening is more than just hearing; it is the comprehension of what is being heard¹³.

Language is primarily speech and communication hinges on listening and speaking skills; and knowing a language is often defined as the ability to understand and speak the language. The development of other skills, namely reading and writing would be comparatively easy if they are based on oral foundation¹⁴. The speaking skill entails the ability to produce correct sounds in English. It involves three aspects; pronunciation, stress and intonation¹³.

Pronunciation deals with the ability to articulate or produce individual phones that make up words in a sentence correctly. It includes the ability to produce pure vowels, diphthongs and consonant sounds correctly. Stress is the emphasis placed on a particular syllable or a word to accentuate it. Stress also goes beyond the word level to the sentence level, ability to stress both syllable and words correctly is part of speech skills. Intonation is the rise and fall of the pitch when a person is speaking. There are different types of sentences in English and each has a particular tune used in saying it. Knowing which tune to apply to any sentence type is of speech skill.

Communication in children is not done only by oral speech. Human beings also communicate by gestures, screaming, crying, laughing, facial expressions, body positions and voice tones. Other advanced form of communication in children are reading (silent) and writing¹⁵.

Medium of Instruction in Nigerian Primary Schools

The Nigerian Language Policy declared English language as the language of instruction in schools. The Federal Ministry of Education provides for the use of English or any of the three major languages (Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba) in conducting the affairs of the National Assembly. The child should be taught his mother tongue or the language of his immediate community in the first three years of the primary school (Primary 1 – 3). However, from primary 4 – 6, the child should be taught in English language¹⁶.

To make teaching and learning effective, those saddled with the responsibility must have a good understanding of the concept of English as a second language and its classroom implications. The teacher must prepare to face the task of imparting English language communicative skills on the school children, namely listening, speaking, reading and writing¹⁷.

The National Policy on Education recommends that the language of the immediate environment should be used as a medium of instruction². This brings to mind the importance of mother tongue or language. As the first, the child is aware of his environment and is equipped with the necessary tools for the future. In order not to alienate the child from his environment and culture, the mother tongue should be used as language of instruction in the lower primary while English should be used as a medium of instruction at the senior primary level.

Communication in the primary school is mainly focused on language as a means of passing information or ideas needed in teaching and learning process. The essence of language is for communication. Through

language, teachers and learners communicate their ideas, thoughts, feelings, emotions, needs, desires, etc. pupils and teachers relate with themselves and with their world as well through language¹³.

Apart from oral communicating with oral words in the classroom, written communication is also employed in teaching and learning process at the primary school level. Written communication takes about communication with respect to the written symbols with few punctuation marks to indicate pauses, questions, periods, etc. the reader is free to interpret those symbols the way he likes, sometimes contrary to what the writer intends¹⁸.

Communication Problems in the Primary School

Communication problems are among the factors affecting pupils' performances in the primary schools. The skills of oracy (listening and speaking) are primary in any study because human beings listen to understand and speak language ever before learning to read and write them at all¹⁹. Children who have acquired good listening comprehension are also very likely to have good reading comprehension skill. Those who are very good at speaking are also likely to write well. To achieve efficient education, communication should not only be limited to the school managers, teachers, and pupils, it should also be extended to parents, especially teacher – parent communication with regard to pupils' performance in the class. This is very crucial for better understanding of pupils' problems as increasing parents' support in education furthers effective performance, effective counselling and guidance, and ultimately increases pupils' motivation and success²⁰.

Barriers and inadequacies of communication are issues which make it difficult for pupils to understand what they are being taught in the classroom. These issues which can be school related, parent related or pupil related include; teacher's inability to develop engaging lessons which leads to the struggle to connect to their pupils on interpersonal basis, speech and language difficulties, boring classroom lessons, bullying, personality differences language and expression difficulties, listening and perception in efficiencies, lack of knowledge, sexual and cultural differences, misconception, psychological barriers and peer pressure^{9,20}.

Since English language, the medium of instruction in most primary schools in Nigeria is a second language, this tend to create gap in communication. English language has been playing an important role in the Nigerian educational system as well as in the national life. But many pupils of school age have mastered the rudiments of their first language (mother tongue) before starting primary school. This fact creates many problems in the learning and teaching of the second language as a subject and on the other hand, as a medium of instruction. These problems include the following; mother tongue interference, the different nature of English language, the battle for dominance by British and American English, teachers as poor models, the influence of social groups, etc¹⁴.

Mother Tongue Interference

The parent or native language of the learner is known as the mother tongue while the language while the language the learner is trying to learn is referred to as the second or target language. Mother tongue interference is the transfer of the elements of the learner's language into the learning of the second language²¹. The learner is going to face language problems because of the existence the first language. Therefore, a child who is bilingual may have two mother tongues. The mother tongue always interferes when learning a second language later in life². The influence of mother tongue on second language reflects in many ways, from pronunciation through grammar to vocabulary of the language. It is more convenient for many learners to use their mother tongue more often than the English language even in the school environment, resulting in deficiency in oral communication when it comes to the issue of speech work in English Language²².

The study of a pair of languages with the purpose of identifying the similarities and differences in their structures is known as contrastive analysis, it has been widely used to discover the reason some features of a target language were more difficult to learn than others²³. Contrastive analysis is predicated on the idea that the wider the differences between the structures of the mother tongue and the second language, the more difficult it is for the learner to learn the second language²⁴. Mother tongue interference results from the fact that the learner draws from his pool of knowledge in his mother tongue, to which he is already accustomed for the purpose of organizing the second language²⁵.

The Different Nature of English Language

English language is quite complex in terms of structure. This complexity is noticed at two distinct levels; linear and grammatical. In most Nigerian native languages, (Yoruba, Igbo and Hausa) letters and sounds are similar but English language differs, letters and sounds are not always the same. On the other hand, the use of plural as a form of respect is not in the English language. For example;

Yoruba: won pe yin

Meaning in English: they are calling you

They (won) is a sign of respect for an elderly person.

In English language, the statement will be rendered as;
“He/she is calling you” in spite of the age.

Poor Modelling by Teacher

English is not indigenous to Nigeria, so it is referred to as a second language, L2. Most pupils in Nigerian primary schools first begin to communicate in English language through the classroom experience. The classroom teacher serves as model to the second language. The teacher introduces various methods to teach English language skills to make learning interesting to the pupils. These methods should embody basic elements needed in teaching and learning environment like; techniques, exercises, activities and learning plans.

All these methods still center on the teacher as being the role model in English language communication within and outside of the class environment². A teacher that could not communicate well in English language may turn out to be a poor model for his or her pupils. The classroom practices of the teacher, his professional development and out of class characteristics all contribute to the quality of the teacher’s delivery in class and the students’ academic performances²⁶. There are six components of great teaching, namely; content knowledge, quality of instruction, classroom climate, classroom management, teacher beliefs and professional behavior²⁷.

British and American English

The world of English is dominated two titans; the British and the American. Their battle for the top position has been going on almost since the United States of America (USA) was established²⁸. The influx of British and English speaking missionaries in large numbers to the southern parts of Nigeria as from 1842 brought up the question of the language to be adopted for communication between the indigenous population and the visitors. Nigeria is one of the commonwealth nations and it has adopted British English as the official language of the nation during the colonial and post-colonial era. However, if there is a trend between British and American English, experts say it is probably in favour of the American style. American usage dominates on the internet and other online networks and multinational corporations tend to use American spellings²⁸. Examples are;

Favor – favour
Honor – honour
Labor – labour
Color – colour

Apart from in spellings like the examples given above, British and American English also differ in vocabulary, collective nouns, auxiliary verbs, past tense verbs and questions tags. These differences may create confusion in the classroom when communication is taking place in English language.

The Influence of Social Group

Nobody speaks perfect English. Most people, regardless of knowledge level use certain interjections, rejoinders, pause words, etc. These come very naturally to people and add colour to any speech²⁸. Also, primary school pupils at different classes tend to communicate in English language that is acceptable to their group. At the family level, parenting style which can be; authoritarian, authoritative, indifferent or indulgent can influence the pupils’ attitude to learning and interaction with other people. Furthermore, children who are well accepted by their peers tend to be cooperative, helpful and possess highly developed skills²⁹. Other factors that affect children’s communication are; cognitive skills, non-cognitive skills, sociocultural resources and peer pressure³⁰. In Nigeria, children that are from educated homes tend to speak good English, while those from illiterate homes tend speak pidgin English, which is common in their environment. However, when pupils from these different background mix up in school they tend to create a common ground to communicate in English, even slangs may be introduced in their communication styles.

Fostering Communication Through English Language

Since English language has been adopted by the Nigerian Language Policy as a medium of instruction from primary school to any level of education in the country, most of the students will ultimately be required to gather knowledge from books, journals and other materials written in English. All the four basic language skills namely; listening, speaking, reading and writing reinforce one another, so all of them must be developed¹⁴.

The use of dialogue is the oldest method of teaching communication skills (listening and speaking) all over the world²⁸. Dialogue has been defined as conversation between two people presented as language models. The teacher should help the pupils to overcome mother tongue interference. This can be handled by concentrating effort on sounds and structures in which the difference between the mother tongue and English is the greatest.

Communication skills can be fostered through frequent practice. Conducive atmosphere for practice should be provided at home, at the playground, at school and everywhere else¹⁴. The child should also have many teachers to interact with in the parents, siblings, uncles, aunties, friends and other relatives. When the child dialogues and converse with different people, without being aware of the fact that he is already learning to communicate in English language.

Language props like using the microphone to sing or make short speeches can improve communication in school children². Also, telephone conversations, singing with tape recorder and television can help to foster communication skills. Instructional materials like false market stalls, class library, or bookshelf, pseudo currency can be used by the teacher in classroom for dialogue and conversation, pupils should also be given assignments to work in groups in order to create rapport and communication among class children. Since English language in the medium of instruction for most subjects taught in the primary school, teachers should speak clearly when giving instructions in the process of teaching all other subjects.

II. Recommendations

For effective communication to take place in the teaching of English in Nigerian primary school, the four basic language skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing must be explored. This is because these skills are interwoven, in the sense that when one is being used, another is needed for response or feedback. For example, listening is done in order respond by speaking, so all the skills should be given full attention in the teaching process. Furthermore, all the factors affecting the effective teaching of these skills should be considered and worked on. The environment should be made conducive for teaching and learning, so also, the physiological factors of speech defects should be taken care of. Pupils should also be made to feel comfortable in the classroom so that they will be in a good state of mind that will be receptive to for effective communication to take place.

The teacher has a great task of modelling the pupils. He should decide on what type of English to speak, be consistent and must communicate with the pupils in simple and correct English at all times. He should also encourage dialogue and conversation within and outside the classroom and give assignments that will enable friends and family members of the pupils to practice communication with the pupil.

III. Conclusion

This paper emphasized the importance of communication in primary education while discussing communication challenges and how to address them. The mother tongue was identified as one of the major challenges that hinders effective communication. Other challenges include; poor teacher modelling and influence of social groups. For effective communication to be achieved, the four basic language skills must be given adequate attention and conducive teaching and learning environment must be provided, speech defects must be addressed and good teacher pupil relationship must exist.

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