

Enhancing Effective Communication Skills in Tertiary Institutions

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I. PREAMBLE

The ability to communicate with others (verbal or non-verbal) is an essential attribute of human life and we are all of us grappling with communication tasks most of the time we are awake. Only when we are alone and not reading or writing (or listening to radio or watching television) do we, briefly, stop receiving messages from the world of people outside ourselves, stop trying to send out messages to the fellow human beings around us. Communication, therefore, plays a vital part in our personal daily lives.

II. COMMUNICATION DEFINED

In its simplest form, communication is the transmission of a message from a source to a receiver. For more than 50 years now, this view of communication has been identified with the writing of political scientist Harold Lasswell (1948) in Baran (2002). He said that a convenient way to describe communication is to answer these questions:

- Who
- Says what?
- In which channel?
- To whom?
- With what effect?

In (Oyedijo 1995) communication is “...the process of carrying information to people and creating an understanding among them in order to influence their behaviour”. It is the transfer of information from one person to another to make certain that their thoughts are completely understood.

To communicate is to share thoughts or feelings, to bring people to a common understanding, to share meaning together. It is a two-way process involving the sender and the receiver of a message. It involves imparting information, instructions, or a directive and getting a receipt of understanding from the recipient. Therefore, effective communication means a successful transmission of feelings, ideas, attitudes, wishes, messages, instructions, advice, orders, etc

for the achievement of a desired action, purpose or objective.

III. CHANNELS OF COMMUNICATION

Communication can be internal (i.e. within an organisation) or external (i.e. between an organisation and the outside world).

Internal communication which occurs between super-ordinates and their sub-ordinates as well as between two or more departments has four sub-divisions:

- Vertical:** This sub-division is made up of upward and downward communications. It takes place between superiors and subordinates.
- Horizontal:** This refers to the exchange or flow of information between employees of the same rank in an organisation e.g. between a personnel manager and a production manager. It shows the flow of information and feelings among personnel at the same level of authority within the same department, between different departments, in conferences, committees, etc.
Informal: Informal communication refers to the exchange of information without following the formal channel. It occurs outside official relationships and the chain of command and is by word of mouth.
- Inter-departmental:** In carrying out executive functions of the government, officials must communicate with themselves. For instance, the finance department must know when the works department will complete the repairs of a road or the construction of a culvert. This is known as inter-department or intra-management communication.

IV. IMPORTANCE OF COMMUNICATION

- IT reduces uncertainty by keeping the work force informed about the goings on within the organisation.
- Rumours from some individuals are easily dispelled or quickly neutralized.

- c. It gives the people a sense of belonging since the goings on within the government or its various agencies are not hidden to them.
- d. It enables the employees to participate actively in decision making on the matters that affect them collectively or individually.
- e. It helps an organisation to accomplish tasks that require co- operation and co- ordination.
- f. It helps an organisation to create a good public image and a higher prestige thus enabling it attracts support from the staff and the public at large.
- g. Through communication, superiors receive the feed-back about the performance of the government thus enabling them to make immediate corrections where necessary. In other words, communication helps in decision-making.
- h. Communication facilitates superior-subordinate relationship. Areas of conflict are narrowed down. The network of inter-relationships in an organisation is kept and dynamic through constant communication thus promoting understanding.

V. BARRIERS TO EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION

The main barriers to effective communication are as follows:

- a. Common grammatical errors: Communication is a function of language and it can only be successful if it is effective. Effectiveness of communication is, therefore, dependent upon the appropriate use of English in getting the message(s) across to people. Thus, the appropriate use of language requires that the rules of grammar must be strictly followed. Most common grammatical errors are caused because of faulty use of the various parts of speech in English Language. Others include inappropriate use of tenses, poor spelling habit, non-compliance with the basic rule of concord and heavy L1 interference in the spoken in English. More on this will be said in the subsequent sections.
- b. Hostility, fear and distrust. If the person had created an unfavourable impression about another person, he will be reluctant to communicate to him, will reduce his acceptance of information from him, and will distort communications he receives from him.
- c. Poor mental set: This includes prejudices and stereotypes with a fixed false notion disturbing the message received.
- d. Noise and distortion: These might pollute a message thereby making its content different

from the original intention of the giver of the information.

- e. Physical separations: This may impede effective communication between organisation members. However, the use of telephone, radio, television, e-mail or telex may alleviate this problem.
- f. Failure to select proper medium: For instance if a superior officer uses the telephone to discuss a technical matter involving figures with his subordinate, the subordinate may get disinterested and unable to follow the details of the matter.
- g. Psychological barrier: Differences in mental ability, experiences, motivations, expectations and needs can cause breakdown in communication. For instance, if the receiver has an idea that a message is not important, he will misinterpret or ignore the message.

VI. CONSEQUENCES OF BAD COMMUNICATION

- (a) Mutual distrust and conflict
- (b) Distortion of messages
- (c) Low productivity
- (d) Low morale
- (e) Bad / poor public image
- (f) Loss of employees
- (g) Loss of students
- (h) Loss of sympathy

VII. SOLUTIONS TO COMMUNICATION BARRIERS

Some of the solutions to communication barriers are as follows:

- a. All employees should be trained to acquire effective communication skills.
- b. The structure of departments and the method of reporting information should be clear and free from defects. The lines of communication should be clearly defined.
- c. There should be regular communication and contacts between management and staff in order to prevent communication gaps and reduce the effect of grapevines. Meetings, suggestion schemes, and joint consultations can be used.
- d. Provision should be made for adequate resources e.g. televisions, mobile phones, intercoms, fax machines, internet facilities so that distances arising from physical and/ or psychological distances can be minimised.
- e. There should be a proper method of feedback.

What is communication skills?

The phrase communication skills (in its written and / or spoken form) encompasses

a wide variety of abilities and these include setting communication goals, finding and assembling relevant information, organizing messages in coherent and powerful ways, illustrating them visually when useful, and delivering them with clarity and punch. Communication skills in the words of (Pryse 1998; Sannie 2000), is a function of the language and it can only be successful if it is effective. Effectiveness of communication skills in English is, therefore, subject to appropriate use of the language in getting the message(s) across to the people. Thus, the appropriate use of language requires a reasonably good command of the rules of English grammar and appropriateness in the articulation of sounds. In this, and the next sections, we will examine the written and the spoken aspects of communication skills respectively.

In many organisations today and Usmanu Danfodiyo University, Sokoto is not an exception, a marked emphasis is being placed on the need for competent communicative skills in the workplace. Many employers seem to complain that a significant number of people whom they recruit for jobs are sadly lacking in these skills. This is true even of people who have just graduated from some of the top universities in the country

In order to write and speak effectively and confidently in English, we must know something about its structure.

a. The Sentence: The most important unit of structure is the sentence. Most of the other grammatical units are parts that go to form the sentence. However that leaves us with the question 'what is a sentence?' Simply put, a sentence is a unit of language that can stand alone and make sense. For example, Musa! Bello smiled. The boy kicked the ball, etc, are all sentences.

b. Tense: One of the most important functions of the verb is to indicate the time at which an action takes place, whether someone or something is doing something, was doing something, or will do something. This is expressed by tense and in many languages this is marked by inflection. There are several tenses in English. The major ones are **present tense, past tense** and **future tense**, but there are other categories related to these.

c. Parts of Speech: The smallest unit of language is the word. In grammar each word is assigned a grammatical category known as a part of speech. The following are the main parts of speech: noun, pronoun, adjective,

verb, adverb, preposition, conjunction and interjection.

- (i) **Noun:** Nouns are the names of people and things. They are either ordinary nouns called common ('thing', 'chair') or special nouns called proper ('Bello', 'Wednesday'). Proper nouns generally take a capital letter. Other types of noun include abstract such as (beauty, honesty, anger, pity, friendship, childhood, etc) and collective nouns such as (the cabinet, the team, the gang, the staff, the herd, etc).
- (ii) **Pronoun:** Pronouns stand for nouns and are often used to avoid repetition. They can be personal (I, you, him), reflexive (myself, herself, themselves, himself), relative (who, whose, whom), indefinite (anybody, none, each).
- (iii) **Verb:** Verbs express action or a state of being. They are called finite because they have a subject (He thinks) or non-finite because they do not ('to think').
- (iv) **Adjective:** An adjective describes a noun or a pronoun. The most common adjectives are the definite article (the) and the indefinite article (a, an). Demonstrative adjectives (this, that, these, those) identify a noun (this car, these participants). When used without a noun they become pronouns (This is my car). Possessive adjectives such as (my, your, our), show ownership as in (my car).
- (v) **Adverb:** An adverb usually describes a verb, adjective or other adverb:
He sees clearly [adverb describes verb].
It was a newly painted car [adverb describes adjective].
He sees very clearly [adverb describes adverb].
- (vi) **Preposition:** A preposition is a word that links its object with a preceding word or phrase. If we mention two objects , such as book and table we need to explain what they have to do with each other and this is where the preposition becomes in need. Look:
The book is on the table.
The book is under the table.
The book is beside the table.
The book is near the table.
- (vii) **Conjunction:** Conjunctions are words that join similar things together, e.g. a noun or pronoun with another noun or pronoun, an adjective with another adjective, a sentence with a sentence, and so on. For example:
You may come. Or you may not come.
You may come or you may not come.
- (viii) **Interjection:** An interjection is a short explanation that is outside the main sentence.

It either stands alone or is linked to the sentence by a comma:
 Oh! I am sorry.
 Hello, how are you?

9. Spelling: Spelling of English words causes plenty of problems for many of us. Nobody expects a writer to know how to spell all the words in the dictionary. For example, the use of double consonants often creates difficulties for us but with mastery of the rules, these can be reduced. It must be pointed out here and now that the key thing is to avoid mistakes: learn to recognise the words you cannot spell and look them up.

10. Punctuation: Punctuation is the use of certain established marks or symbols within a piece of written text. Punctuation prevents a piece of text from being just a string of words by breaking up the string of words into meaningful units and by making the text more fluent. Basically, punctuation marks can be seen as symbols which are used to separate and join units of language into a cohesive text. Good punctuation guides the readers and reveals that the writer is thinking clearly. Poor punctuation, on the other hand, is a sign of confused thinking. Faulty punctuation also slows reading and may lead to misinterpretation of meaning. One modern school of thought says that the less punctuation the better. And it is certainly true to say that in the present day style of writing, there is less punctuation than there used to be.

11. Words: Precision and effectiveness in writing depend on the careful use of language. We must learn to recognise the words and phrases that will convey our meaning exactly and vividly to the reader. According to Hicks (1998), new words can be learnt in several ways and regular use of dictionary will surely help to expand our knowledge of words and our ability to use them correctly. It is advisable that as communicators we make it a point of duty not to overlook a new word without checking its meaning and making a note of it.

12. Spoken Communication Skills: Some of us might think competence in spoken English is a trivial matter. We might think that it is not just that important to our line of work. We might even think that as long as the facts are correct, what does it matter if the pronunciation is bad? However, poor pronunciation reflects badly on us--- we might miss out on a job opportunity, we might not be taken seriously when making a complaint or giving instructions—all because of terrible pronunciation. Any public display of poor language skills can give a very bad impression of even the most intelligent person.

The sounds of English: Every language, according to Adetugbo (1997), has a definite number of sounds that it employs for communication by speech. Some of these sounds are peculiar to it, others it shares with other languages. Below is a sample of some English speech sounds and examples of where they normally occur.

Vowels	Examples
ə	The, letter, thorough, picture, nation, surgeon, hello, hallo, hullo, rumour
ə:	Bird, burden, courtesy, curl, girl, surgeon, occur, were, heard,
i:	Beat, breath, receive, serene, turkey, we, she, sheet
I	hymn, women, pigeon, pretty, mortgage, lettuce, build, waited, beloved
æ	Bat, cat, hat, cap, back, bag, brag
^	But, cup, some, mother, above, flourish, flood, other
a:	Cart, heart, arm, sergeant, garage, aunt, aren't, are
U	Should, good, wood, woman, wolf
u:	Shoe, to, too, two, chew, brew, lieutenant (also pronounced as 'lef') sue, cruise
O	Hot, cot, quality, sausage, swamp, what, watch, want, falter
o:	caught, clause, roar, for, poor, awe, auction
əu	Coat, boat, stole, old, home, roll, toe, no, go, though, although, slow
iə	Fear, hear, superior, sphere, theological, weir, miscellaneous, really
Iu	Fumes, you, huge, therapeutic, Cuba, queue, nuisance
Ei	Face, hate, baby, paper, bouquet, gauge, they, straight
At	Fine, silent, aisle, ally, vitae, paradigm, eye
Au	Foul, about, now, allow, plough, ouch!
Ot	Foil, boil, toil, enjoy, voice, Reuters
uə	Truer, doer, dual, jewel, sewer
iə	Theatrical, meander, piano, Seattle
Aia	Diana, dialysis, Diaspora
aiə	Hire, fire, diagram, diarrhoea, giant, science, iron, admire
Aio	biology, 'I often go', antibiotic
auə	Shower, hour, power, sour, 'How are the boys?'
eiə	Mayor, player, play a song
əuə	Slower, mower, Goa, go a mile, sew a shirt
iəu	Stereo, Romeo, radio, rodeo, Ethiopia
uə	Fewer, manure, cure, lure, I knew a man
uatə	Enquire, choir, wire,
əuei	oasis, Croatia

(a). English is not phonetic. That means there is no one to one correspondence between its pronunciation and its spelling. In other words, the relationship, in English, between spelling and

sounds is not one-to-one. Each spelling system does not necessarily correspond to a single sound. Some words have fewer sounds than letters, for example *fill*, *bitter*, *phone*, and *sing*. In this case there is no sound associated with some of the spelling symbols. Other words have the same, for example *drunk*; while a third set has the same but the relationship is opaque, for example *cube*. *Cube* contains four spelling symbols and four sounds, but there is no spelling symbol associated with the second sound, and *e* does not represent any sound—it is silent. Finally there are cases where a word consists of more sounds than spelling symbols. For example, *Cuba*, which in some versions of English contains five sounds.

(b). Word stress in English. The secret key to understanding of the pronunciation of English is the word stress. Many languages especially the syllable-timed ones do not use the word stress but English does and so must the speaker of the language. It must also be said that using English words with the right stress is as important as using the right consonants and vowels. In the great majority of Nigerian languages, every syllable receives a stress. However, Fulfulde (the language of Fulbe) appears to be the only exception to this category. Thus we say Hausa, Yoruba and Igbo, for example, are syllable-timed. On the other hand, English and Fulfulde are stress-timed languages. This is the one important reason why most speakers of English in Nigeria find it difficult to come to terms with the stress structures of English, and the same reason why Fulbe speakers tend to find English easier to speak particularly at the supra-segmental level (stress, intonation, rhythm) than most other Nigerians do.

To the ears of the native speaker of English, a word said with the wrong stress is as shocking and to some extent embarrassing as pronouncing a Hausa word, for example, with a wrong tone pattern. It must be pointed out here though; in the great majority of cases Nigerian speakers tend to switch the stress from the first to the second syllable. This tendency may not be unconnected with the fact that most Nigerians place equal emphasis or force on all English syllables. Let us quickly revise the pronunciation of the following words.

'madam	'formidable	'calculator
'notif y	'justifiable	'satisfy
'bathroom	'challenge	'hospitable
'telephone	'interesting	'water heater
'herald	'nepotism	'civilize
'footballer	'applicable	'controversy

(c). Sentence stress in English. Like word stress, sentence stress is a fundamental part of English language. Normally, in speaking or reading an ordinary sentence, (i.e. without an attempt to emphasize a particular word) each word would be pronounced with the normal stress. In addition, all unstressed words will remain unstressed. These change when the speaker wants to convey a specific meaning.

Apart from the normal stress, however, it is usual to stress a normally unstressed word and thus convey a specific meaning. For instance, it is not normal to stress the word 'in', in the following expression: The 'bag is in the car. However if the listener were to ask, Do you say the bag is beside the car? The speaker may then say: The bag is in the car, with a stress on the word 'in'.

All these should be taken into consideration by those of us whose responsibility is to operate in the university and if effectively done; our communication skills will definitely improve if we start using sentence stress. It has to be said here that southern Nigerian speakers of English need to watch out against stressing too many words while their northern counterparts should also watch out against not stressing so many words which ought to have been stressed.

(d). **Consonant clusters:** The last aspect of pronunciation that we will very briefly refer to in this discussion is that of consonant clusters. By consonant clusters, we mean those sequences of consonants that occur initially or finally in syllables. For example, both /pl/ and /nt/ are consonant clusters in the word *plant*, because they occur in the same syllable. English permits initial clusters of either two or three consonants, as in such words as *pray*, *sky spray*, *scrap*, and either two, three, or four final consonants , as in *ask*, *apt*, *asked*, *elks*, or four as in *glimpsed*, *prompts*. Some of us, second language learners, in fact, simplify some of the longer final consonants realized as: /akst/ (or / ækst /) in place of /askt / (or æskt) for *asked*. As university staff we must check our usage in these and other words and try not to be caught committing these avoidable errors.

13. Conclusion: We have in this write up, explained very briefly what the phrase communication skills is about, shed some light into the nature of channels of communication, the benefits of communication and the barriers to effective communication. Possible solutions on how best to overcome the barriers were examined. A quick examination of the written and the spoken forms of communication skills and how to enhance them brought this paper to its conclusion.

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