

Developing Learners' Communicative Language Skills in English as Panacea for Unemployment in Nigeria

Alabi Taofeek Olanrewaju
Department Of General Studies
The Federal Polytechnic
Ado-Ekiti, Nigeria

Abstract

This paper considers deficiency in the use of English for communicative purposes by second language learners as responsible for unemployment in Nigeria. It reinforces the fact that English serves as the official language in Nigeria's ESL environment and as such necessary for all formal transactions. Using Dell Hymes theory of Communicative Competence as our theoretical guide, the paper observes that many youths are unemployed today because of their deficiency in the use of English. They lack the pre-requisite English language skills required to succeed in formal contexts such as government or private organization. This deficiency may, however, be traced to the problems of teaching and learning communicative skills of English in Nigerian schools. To overcome this challenge, the paper recommends an integrated teaching of the four skills of English via a task-based instruction (TBI) method in our schools. There is the need for paradigm shift in teaching of English language from emphasis on mastering of only the linguistic rules to improving learner's overall communicative abilities. It is only in doing so that learners of English in Nigeria's L2 environment can acquire and maximally utilize communicative skills of English for employment opportunities both nationally and internationally.

Key words: Second language (L2); language skills; Communicative competence; curriculum; unemployment

Introduction

Nigeria is one of the sub-saharan African nations with a multilingual language status. In the midst of this multiplicity, the English language serves as the official language and proficiency in it is required for all forms of official transactions including employment opportunities. For some time now, the problem of unemployment in Nigeria has generated a lot of interest among scholars in a bid to find a lasting solution to the societal menace (see Alabi, 2009:

Okafor 2011; Subair, 2013 and many others. Language is important on issues relating to the society such as unemployment. This is because language interacts with every aspect of human life in society, and it can be understood only if it is considered in relation to society. As Mey (1993:185-6) states, “Linguistic behaviour is social behaviour. People talk because they want to socialise, in the widest possible sense of the world: either for fun, or to express themselves to other humans, or for some ‘serious’ purposes, such as building a house, closing a deal, solving a problem and *securing employment*” (italics mine)

Thompson (2004:30) defines language as “a means of expressing our experience of the world, including the worlds in our own minds; to describe events and states and the entities involved in them. Language is used to interact with other people, to establish and maintain relations with them, to influence their behavior, to express our own viewpoint on things in the world and to elicit or change theirs”. Apart from giving structure, meaning and orderliness to human society, language also serves as tool for learning and acquisition of knowledge (Ogunsiji, 2004). Language is also a tool of achieving individual and group goals in the society.

The English language is a global language. It has spread beyond the British shore to many other countries, where it has been adopted and adapted to different socio-cultural and linguistic settings. According to Pakir (1999:104):

English is a global vehicle that refuels at every stop, creates economic and other opportunities, and returns to its home bases, each time upping the financial ante for English users. English has become a global commodity that seems to have no sell-by date attached to it.

That is why in Nigeria’s multilingual setting, the English language plays a prominent role. As the official language, it is used for educational, administrative, economic, diplomatic, technological, scientific and international communication. It is the language of business in government and semi-governmental institutions and also in private companies and NGOs. As the language of education, English gives students who are proficient in it an advantage over those who are deficient. The pervasive use of English which now characterizes the Nigerian linguistic environment confirms the realities of the superior functions of English in the most critical aspects of our national and international engagements. Therefore proficiency in the language improves one’s prospects of securing employment in the society.

However, nowadays, more students in our tertiary institutions are finding it difficult to utilize the four communicative skills of English. They are grossly deficient in the art of writing, reading, speaking and listening. This obviously negates the primary objective of English language teaching as contained in *The National Policy on Education* (2004) which is to “give children permanent literacy and the ability to communicate effectively”. Students’ dismal linguistic ability in schools is thus transferred to the larger societal context and the result is high rate of unemployment.

Theoretical Perspective

The linguistic theory of communicative competence by Dell Hymes serves as the theoretical guide for this study. Hymes (1972) introduced a functionalist approach to language use through the concept of “communicative competence”. According to Hymes, communicative competence is the ability to use grammatical competence in a variety of communicative situations, thus bringing the sociolinguistic perspective into Chomsky’s “linguistic competence”. Alo (2003) regards communicative competence as relating to the knowledge and ability which a speaker needs to possess in order to use language appropriately in real life situations. This has a broader perspective than Chomsky’s notion of linguistic competence which emphasizes the ideal native speaker’s/ hearer’s linguistic knowledge

Theoreticians, especially those in the field of applied linguistics, after years of theoretical and empirical research on communicative competence have reached an agreement that a competent language user should possess not only knowledge about language but also the ability and skill to activate that knowledge in a communicative event.

The nature of communicative competence is not static but dynamic; and largely defined by context (Bachman and Palmer, 1996). Scholars have tried to further analyse Hymes’ notion of communicative competence. Malmjiaer (2002) regards it as consisting of grammatical competence which is the speaker’s ability to form and interpret sentences and pragmatic competence, which is the ability to use expressions to achieve a desired communicative effect. Thomas as cited in Holmes and Brown (2007: 524) asserts that the use of English requires pragmatic competence that will lead the student to what has been defined as “metapragmatic ability”- the ability to analyze language in a conscious manner. Pragmatic competence has also been seen as the ability to comprehend, construct utterances which are accurate and appropriate to the social and cultural circumstances where the communication occurs.

In the earlier work of Canale & Swain (1980) as presented in Bogavic and Djigunovic (2007) communicative competence is classified into four components: grammatical competence, socio- linguistic competence, discourse competence and strategic competence. Grammatical competence relates to the mastery of formal rules of language. This includes knowledge of lexical items and rules of morphology, syntax, sentence- grammar semantics and phonology. Sociolinguistic competence is concerned with the understanding of the social and conventional rules of language use such as the knowledge of what to say, how to say it, when and where to say it and to whom it should be uttered. Discourse competence is the ability to combine grammatical forms and meaning to achieve unified spoken or written text in different genres. By genres is meant the types of text be it oral or written. Strategic competence is the ability to overcome specific communicative and situational problems as they arise through the manipulation of linguistic forms and resources as well as extra-linguistic or paralinguistic devices.

The use of English in a second language environment is daily expanding, requiring the need for more people to be proficient in it. According to Crystal's (2008:3):

As the use of English expands in number of speakers, it becomes a common link for second language learners who do not share a language or a culture. This makes English a language that will also be used in a variety of settings where learners will be required to interact not only for basic interpersonal communication, but also in academic and business settings.

Having considered the theory of communicative competence, this paper is of the opinion that the goal of teaching English language in Nigeria as a second language environment should be for learners to achieve communicative competence in all contexts.

Unemployment in Nigeria

Scholars have defined unemployment from various perspectives with a seeming consensus on the meaning and usage of the concept. Udu and Agu (2005) define unemployment as "a situation in which persons capable and willing to work are unable to find suitable paid employment". Hornby (2010) defines it as "the facts of a number of people not having a job; the number of people without a job; the state of not having a job". The International Labour Organization (2007) sees unemployed workers as those who are not currently working but are willing and able to work for pay, currently available to work and

have actively searched for work”. This assumes the fact that those who are able and willing to work have the required qualifications.

Unemployment is one of the fundamental developmental challenges facing Nigeria at the moment. Recent statistics by the World Bank puts the unemployment rate in Nigeria at 22 percent, while the youth unemployment rate is 38 percent. The report shows that the bracket age of 15-35 years olds account for close to 60 percent of the Nigeria’s population and 30 percent of the work force. The report also indicates that approximately 4 million people entered into the labour market every year (Subair, 2013). The situational paradox is the increasing rate of unemployment during the decade of about 7% (GDP) economic growth as claimed by Aganga, (2010) and Ogunmade, (2013).

It is in respect of the above that this paper investigates causes of unemployment from a linguistic perspective. It assumes that the cause of unemployment among so many applicants of today, especially graduates, is traceable to their inability to appropriately master the communicative skills of English language needed. Hence, the focus of the paper is how unemployment can be eradicated or minimised in the country by developing learner’s communicative language skills of English.

Exploration of the Basic Language Skills

When we learn a language, there are four skills that we need for complete communication. When we learn out language, we usually learn to **listen** first, then to **speak**, then to **read**, and finally to **write**. These are called the four "language skills". According to Ogunsiji (2004) listening and speaking are often grouped together as constituting the oral aspect of language, while reading and writing are paired as constituting the written aspect. In another sense, listening and reading are regarded as receptive language skills while speaking and writing are considered as productive language skills. Receptive skills suggest ‘decoding’ language while productive skills suggest ‘encoding’ it. We shall now examine the four skills one after the other.

Listening: This is a complex, problem solving skill because it is more than just perception of sounds. It also means comprehension and understanding. It is hearing with a purpose and the absorption of meanings of words and sentences by the brain. According to Maduekwe (2007), “listening is the process of receiving, processing and assigning meaning to aural stimuli.” *The International Listening Association* regards it as “the process of receiving, constructing meaning from, and responding to spoken and/ or verbal messages.” In other words, listening is an active process in which the listener interacts with the speaker and negotiates the content of the interaction. Listening may be done to understand ideas, to retain

information, or to analyze and evaluate content. Listening differs from hearing; we may hear and not listen (Lubega, 1987). Effective communication consists of the ability to produce well-articulated speech, as well as ability to receive (listen).

Speaking: This is the systematic uttering of sounds conventionally accepted within the speech community in the process of expressing the inner intention of the speaker. Man has always used the power of speech to verbalize his thoughts. Thorton as presented in Ogunsiji (2004) asserts that “Language is primarily a system of sounds used in face-to-face situations with other people, where features, other than language, like facial expression and gesture, can be employed in consort with language in order to tie the language to the context and to make and convey meaning” It is mandatory for a person to be able to speak if he does not suffer any speech defect. Developing your speaking skills will involve gaining fluency in spoken interactions with others, as well as practicing your pronunciation.

Reading: Another skill is reading. It is a complex language skill which reflects the ability to grasp language patterns from their written representation. According to Ayoola (2006) reading is the ability to re-convert written or printed symbols into speech or its mental equivalent. In other words, in any good reading process, the eye decodes the written words while the mind absorbs the various ideas stated or implied in the passage read. Reading involves three processes namely, letter identification, word recognition and meaning deduction. As a visual process, it requires mind and brain coordination, and as a process of communication, it involves the writer and the reader interchanging ideas and views. A reader is expected to concentrate while reading in order to comprehend.

Writing: This is the process of putting down the graphic symbols of a language one understands so that others who share a mutual understanding of the language can read. Writing is also one of the skills required for effective communication. Writing in another language can seem a daunting task, but is a critical skill, especially if you plan to use it in the workplace. Ogunsiji (2004) posits that learning to write involves many stages such as pre-writing, copying, transcription and composition. As in your first language, writing and reading are intertwined; your writing improves as one becomes a critical reader.

The four language skills mutually reinforce one another. Skills acquired in speaking will, if judiciously transferred, enhance efficiency in reading, listening and writing; ability to write effectively will enhance ability to listen, speak, and read efficiently; while ability to read efficiently will, in turn, help to develop efficiency in speaking, listening, and writing (Oyewo, 2008). These four skills are required by L2 learners in their quest to have a grip of English and become excellent communicator.

The Challenges of Teaching and Learning English Communicative Skills in Nigeria

Nigeria is an ESL domain and responsibility of teaching English as a second language rests largely on the teachers who sometimes emphasizes the rules, principles and structures of English to students rather than teach learners how to be an efficient communicator in societal contexts. Hence, there is emphasis on rote learning method whereby most teachers focus on linguistic competence of their learners rather than communicative competence. Students commit these rules to memory for them to pass examination and discard or forget the rules after exams. Teaching of linguistic competence contradicts the goal of communicative competence.

Secondly, ineffective teaching methodology of ESL in Nigeria is another major problem. As rightly noted by Ogunsiji (2003), prose is badly taught in our secondary schools. Teachers only do one or more of the following: story narration, teaching past examination questions or engaging the students in vocal reading of the text. This also applies to the teaching of other genres. According to him, this method of teaching is not productive enough because it cannot develop the desired creative urge in the students and neither can they develop student's communicative ability to the desired level.

Moreover, some reading teachers seem oblivious of the fact that the traditional method of teaching which relies heavily on verbalism is no longer effective in this modern day of series of educational innovations. Teachers of reading do not teach the four levels of reading skills regarded as: the literal, inferential, evaluative and creative (Williams, 1990). Teachers of reading are rigidly slavish to textbooks and hardly supplement textbooks with non-textual and visual materials that could complement texts. Thus, reading is ineffective because of non-utilization of instructional materials that illustrate, elucidate and enhance learning.

There is also the problem of teaching writing. Most times, teachers of English language may find it cumbersome or difficult to give exercises on writing skills i.e. composition, letter writing, report writing, etc. especially in a large class because of the fear of marking and grading the scripts. To mark a writing exercise may take time and some teachers are not willing to spare.

Note-taking during lectures by learners is another important method of developing writing skills. This is lacking in many schools nowadays due to the introduction of technology. Students, nowadays, download materials online without making efforts to write. Even, teachers are not willing to dictate notes in the class again.

Furthermore, many schools lack a functioning language laboratory where students could be exposed to the basic skills of listening and speech. Teaching listening is essential in the sense that it will help students to listen and differentiates sounds which is crucial to understanding meanings; helps students to understand any oral information presented to them; and to develop listening ability needed for other purposes apart from academic. This may be for employment purpose.

There is also the problem of provision of well equipped library where students could go to read. Reading is a vital aspect of developing communicative language skills. Nowadays, the culture of reading among learners is fast fading off. Many of them lack the zeal to read either for academic purposes or pleasure. However, reading will require that learners have enough materials on language and literature to read in the library. Many libraries are not really functioning. They are full of obsolete materials with archaic theories on language teaching and learning.

Lastly, communicative language skills will improve if learners are encouraged to converse in English language even outside the classrooms. Many second language learners believe English language use is limited to classrooms while the mother tongue (MT) is applied in other situations outside the classroom. There is no doubt that few hours are spent in schools while majority of the hours are used outside the school; this leads to more hours of communication in MT and more perfection in its usage. When the need now arises for communication in English, such as employment need, many learners are found wanting.

The above are some of the problems militating against the development of communicative English language skills in our schools that have contributed to the skyrocketing rate of unemployment in the society.

Relevance of Developing Learners' Communicative English Language Skills for Employment Opportunities

The relevance of developing learners' communicative English language skills cannot be overemphasized in the highly competitive labour market where the English language serves as a major prerequisite for employment. Deficiency in it puts the applicant in a precarious position and attempt of securing a job a mirage. Proficiency in it, however, puts the learner in a vantage position of being employed. This is premised on the fact that employment process involves writing of application letter and attending interview. A learner skilled in the art of writing and speaking English stands a good chance of being employed.

Listening also plays an important role in curbing unemployment. Listening involves the process of receiving, processing and assigning meaning to aural stimuli, it is assumed that

a good listener will respond appropriately to questions asked during interview and thus perform well to secure the job. Competence in the use of the skills of English equally makes easy the carrying out of official tasks. This includes attending to correspondence and writing of all forms of official letters.

Furthermore, in an organization, the staff that effectively utilises these four basic skills of English will be an excellent communicator and will be able to persuade and attract customers to the company. The ability to start a private business by any individual no matter how skillful in his/ her profession will also require the ability to communicate effectively in English so as to meet the demands of work.

Employment opportunities are not restricted to Nigeria for someone who could communicate effectively in English. The language is an international one used in so many countries and in international organizations.

Conclusion

This paper has observed some problems confronted by teachers and learners of English in the course of developing the communicative skills of English language in English as second language environment such as Nigeria. The resultant effect of this is lack of proficiency in the use of English which has eventually been seen as a contributing factor to increasing rate of unemployment in the country. The paper advocates the attainment of communicative competence which will make learners perform well in the four basic skills of English language both within and outside the classrooms rather than only linguistic competence. This is necessary for learners to know linguistic rules and their applications in a true life situation or societal contexts. This will serve as catalyst for employment opportunities. The paper makes the following recommendations in order to facilitate effective teaching of English in Nigerian schools:

Recommendations

- The language teacher should employ a predominantly communicative, task-based, learner centred approach in teaching English language whereby different contexts are created in the classroom setting for practical English language use. The task-based instruction (TBI) approach may be relevant here. This method uses tasks or stand-alone activities which require comprehending, producing, manipulating or interacting in the target language. It helps learners explore the multitude of communication opportunities provided in their surroundings.

- There should be an integrated language teaching where the four skills of English language will be adequately taught. In other words, English language teaching should be practically oriented and functionally imparted.
- Teaching of literature should also be encouraged in schools. Literature is regarded as a rich store of language which helps to develop learners' communicative performance. Effective communication entails knowing what to communicate, how to communicate it and having the knowledge of the audience with whom to communicate. These can be enhanced through frequent exercises in literature. Moreover, literature helps learners to develop fluency and the ability to comprehend what is read.
- Adequate and appropriate instructional materials should also be provided in schools for effective teaching of English language skills. Technological developments have resulted to inventions of different teaching aids. To teach these basic communicative skills of English especially listening and speaking will require provision of a well-equipped laboratory. Audio- visual equipment should be provided to facilitate teaching and learning of English in a second language environment.
- Methodology of teaching English should change from memorizing theories and inculcation of formal and structural rules of language to that of performance. Emphasis should be on better performance in English in all contexts rather than limiting it to just a classroom subject.
- For the above to happen, English Language teachers should embark on regular training to update their teaching knowledge and enhance efficiency. A situation where a teacher is stuck to outdated teaching method in teaching of English will not enhance development of communicative language skills in learners

Works cited:

- Aganga, O. 2010. Rising Unemployment Rate is Unacceptable – Goodluck Jonathan.
Business Facts and Figures Magazine September, 2010, p. 15
- Alabi, D.O. 2009. *The Nigerian Political Economy (1983-2003)*. Kaduna: Joyce Graphic Printers and Publishers.
- Alo, M. 2003. Communicative competence and academic discourse in an ESL university setting. In Oyeleye, L. and Olateju, M. (Eds) *Readings in language and literature* (1st edition), Ife: Obafemi Awolowo University Press, 115-126.
- Ayoola, K.A. 2006. *University English for all students*. Lagos: Olas Ventures.
- Bagarić, V. and Djigunović, J.M. 2007. Defining communicative competence. *Metodika*. (8), 1: 94-103.
- Bachman, L.F. and Palmer, A.S. 1996. *Language testing in practice: designing and developing useful language tests*. Oxford: OUP.
- Canale, M., & Swain, M. 1980. Theoretical bases of communicative approaches to second language teaching and testing. *Applied Linguistics*, 1, 1-47.
- Crystal, D. 2008. *Two Thousand Million? English Today, Volume No .24* (Issue 1).
<http://ill.sit.edu/illiad/illiad.dll?SessionID=D141939695E&Action=10&Form=69&Value=9969>; Retrieved May 3, 2016
- Federal Republic of Nigeria 2004. *National Policy on Education (Revised Edition)*. Lagos: Federal Government Press.
- Hornby, A.S. 2010 *The Oxford Advanced Learners Dictionary* (7th Edition) New York: Oxford University Press.
- Hymes, D. 1972. On communicative competence. In Pride, J.B. and Holmes, J, (Eds) *Sociolinguistics*. London: Penguin. 269-293.
- International Labour Organisation. 2012. *Global empowerment trends for youth 2012*.
<http://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/...dgreports/dcomm/documents/publication/wcms-180976.pdf>. Retrieved March 15, 2016.
- Lubega, S. 1987. Cultivating effective listening and speaking skills. In Adegbija, E. (Ed) *Effective study skills and use of English*. Ilorin: The General Studies and General Awareness Division, University of Ilorin. 174-197.
- Maduekwe, A.N. 2007. *Principles and practice of teaching English as a second language*. Lagos: Vitaman Educational Books.

- Malmkjaer, K. (Ed) 2002. *The linguistic encyclopaedia* (2nd Edition), London: Routledge.
- Mey, L. J. 1993. *Pragmatics: An Introduction*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers.
- Nunan, D. 2004 *Task-based Language Teaching* Cambridge University Press.
- Ogunsiji, A. 2003. Developing EL2 learners' communicative competence through literature in English. . In Oyeleye, L. and Olateju, M. (Eds) *Readings in language and literature* (1st edition), Ile-Ife: Obafemi Awolowo University Press, 127-136.
- Ogunsiji, A. 2004. Developing the basic language skills for communicative competence in learners of English as a second language. *IBADAN Journal of English Studies*. (1) 19-34.
- Okafor, E.E. 2011. Youth unemployment and implications for stability of democracy in Nigeria. *Journal of Sustainable Development in Africa*. (13) 1.
- Oyewo, O.O. 2008. Exploring the place of listening in human communication. *IBADAN Journal of English Studies*., (4 & 5) 245 -254.
- Pakir, A. 1999. Connecting With English in the Context of Internalisation. *TESOL QUARTERLY*, 33(1).
- Subair, G. 2013. Nigeria's unemployment rate hits 22%- World Bank. *Nigerian Tribune*: Online.
- Thompson, G. 2004. *Introducing Functional Grammar* (2nd Edition). London: Hodder Education.

Web Reference:

https://www.ncsu.edu/aern/TAS11.1/TAS11.1_Nkosana.pdf

http://www.academia.edu/14737339/The_Effects_of_Unemployment_and_Anti-social_Activities_of_Youth_on_Socioeconomic_Development_of_Benue_State_Nigeria