

STRATEGIES FOR REMEDYING POOR COMMUNICATION SKILLS OF STUDENTS

BY

NNANYELUGO OKORO

INTRODUCTION

In a discourse on the elements of good writing, Ernest Gowers (1980), cites, as a chapter note, the following lines by Defoe:

If any man were to ask me what I would suppose to be a perfect style of language, I would answer, that in which a man speaking to five hundred people, of all common and various capacities, idiots and lunatics excepted, should be understood by them all, and in the same sense which the speaker intended to be understood.

In these lines, Defoe was actually talking about effective communication skills as a means of achieving effective communication. In this context, effective communication is said to have taken place when “ what is said is what is meant and what is meant is what is understood and when what is understood is what is done and what is done is the desired action”(Agba and Okoro : 1995).

It is merely stating the obvious to say that effective communication skills constitute a key factor for success (KFS) in the communication process, by which we mean the process of

moving ideas, information and messages from source to destination. Critical as well as central to this process is the concept of feedback which helps us to measure the fidelity of our communication.

Today, there is no denying the fact that poor communication is wrecking havoc in all aspects of our existence: in governance, in business, in the workplace, on the domestic front, in the health sector, in our educational system, the list goes on and on. As teachers, this ugly development should be a cause for serious concern because our inputs, at the end of the day, largely determine outputs in every other facet of human endeavour. As we all know, every profession, every transaction, every interaction draws its life from effective communication skills.

Unfortunately, most of us communicate in the manner of the Oracle of Delphi and as a result of this we end up confusing, confounding and irritating our target audience. Our focus in this presentation is to draw our attention to the ways and means of improving the communication skills of our students so that they will not only be able to come out in flying colours but also achieve optimal results in their future endeavours. Before dwelling on these ways and means, it is important

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that we understand the enormity of the problem and, by extension, the task before us as knowledge workers, by looking at a couple of study reports and observations on the subject-matter of discourse.

STUDY REPORTS

Current studies on communication skills point to a dearth of these skills among students on a global scale. For instance, in a recent survey, 104 Silicon Valley employers were asked to rate their levels of satisfaction with the communication skills of their recent college graduate new hires. They said that they were less than satisfied with both oral and written communication skills of the new hires. The research report therefore noted *inter alia*:

More employers recommended improving students' oral communication skills, particularly in the use of vocabulary and self-expression. They reported that college graduates' skills are not always adequate to perform the tasks required on the job. Open ended comments from employers reveal a need for stronger writing skills, more training on professional uses of e-mail, and additional teaching on how to express oneself more professionally and avoid the use of slang (Stevens:2006).

Most of the employers were of the view that "students must have the ability to give a presentation which allows the

speaker's personality to come through." One major problem which was reported in the study is that of English as a second language (ESL) for many students. Several employers observed that the use of "too much slang" especially among ESL students was very common. One employer said that during interviews, "most of the candidates with English as a second language did not understand our interview questions and could not effectively respond."

According to the report, advertisements for managers and executives in the San Jose Mercury News and the San Francisco Chronicle "consistently request excellent oral and written communication skills, a phenomenon seen in the employment advertisements across the country"(Guffey: 1994). The study concluded that "An increasingly sophisticated set of communication skills will be needed in the 21st Century workplace."

Other studies dwell on near absence of "relevant key skills" which should form the building blocks of the critical reasoning process in higher education (Brown: 1997; Wolf and Silver: 1995). The argument is that under such a situation, students are grossly incapacitated since they do not possess the necessary key skills to think across contents in the light of different shades of meanings. For us in the least developed countries (LDCs), the foregoing reports and observations are highly instructive in so many ways because the problems so enumerated are even deeper in our own educational

systems. The Nigerian situation is a glaring case in point with virtually all the manifestations of poor communication skills as evidenced in the outputs of students in our university system.

THE NIGERIAN SITUATION

The Nigerian situation is characterized by a high rate of decline in the communication skills of a preponderance of our student population. This worrisome situation led the enlightened Nigerian public, the employers of labour and the international community in recent times to express "grave concern over the depreciating communication skills of undergraduates and graduates of the Nigerian university system" (Okebukola: 2004). The problems centre around very poor knowledge of English language which manifests in poor expressions, grammatical errors and other common mistakes in English language. Painting the picture of the English language incompetencies of our students, Okebukola noted that "If poor English expressions were to be bullets, bullet-proof vests may be needed when holding a conversation with some undergraduates or interacting with their written materials by way of essays, letters and other forms of written communication".

This remark is not only a true reflection of the situation on the ground but also a serious indictment on teachers, who from all indications are not handling their teaching assignments with the seriousness it deserves. This observation finds a buttress in the reasons adduced by Okebukola as

being responsible for the poor communication skills of our students, namely:

- 1 lack of solid grounding in communication skills at the secondary school level,
- 2 admission of students with poor language competence into the university system,
- 3 inundating the university system with pre-degree, diploma, sandwich, outreach and part-time students,
- 4 reduction in ethnic diversity of students in our universities,
- 5 poor teaching of the use of English programme in the universities,
- 6 careless assessment of students' assignments, essays and projects by lecturers with regard to grammar and spelling and general English language competencies.

As we can see from the foregoing, we are all, individually and collectively responsible for the degeneration of the system, in one way or the other. The crucial question now is: what is the way out? The starting point, perhaps, is to go back to the drawing board and do those things, which we ought to have done and undo those things, which we ought not to have done. The idea is to arm our students with the necessary knowledge and skills by exposing them to learning situations that would redirect them on the right path. The best method to adopt in this corrective measure is to introduce them to the essentials of effective communication, with particular reference to the seven Cs of communication.

THE SEVEN Cs OF COMMUNICATION

It is our duty as teachers to make students realize that for any communication to be effective, it must follow the rules of the seven Cs of communication, namely:

- 1 it must be candid
- 2 it must be clear
- 3 it must be complete
- 4 it must be concise
- 5 it must be concrete
- 6 it must be correct and
- 7 it must be courteous (Bergin, 1981)

APPLYING THE SEVEN Cs OF COMMUNICATION

Using these seven Cs of communication as a pathfinder, we can then set up a writing project for them in order to take them through the necessary stages of spoken and written communications. These stages are as follows:

STAGE 1: Before you start writing, ensure that you:

- (a) know your subject i.e. have a clear understanding of the subject,
- (b) know why you are writing i.e. what does your target audience know and why does he want to know it,
- (c) know your target audience i.e. adapt your style and the content of your communication to suit the needs and frame of reference of your target audience.

STAGE 2: When writing, you:

- (a) should be clear i.e. make your meaning clear; arrange your subject in

logical order; be grammatically correct; do not include irrelevant material.

- (b) should be simple and brief to the point i.e. use the simplest direct language ; avoid obscure words and phrases, unnecessary words, long winding sentences; avoid technical or legal jargons and abbreviations unless you are sure that your target audience will understand those jargons or terms; be as brief as possible; avoid padding,
- (c) should be accurate and complete i.e. be as accurate and complete as possible to prevent ambiguity,
- (d) should be polite and human i.e. be sympathetic if your audience is troubled; be polite if he is rude; be lucid and helpful if he is muddled; be polite if he is stubborn; be appreciative if he is helpful,
- (e) should be prompt i.e. respond promptly, delay is dangerous and can harm your reputation.

STAGE 3: Check your writing. Look critically at your work and see whether you can answer “yes” to these questions:

- (a) Is it clear? i.e. can the language be easily understood by the recipient? Is it free from slang? Are the words the simplest that can carry the thought? Is the sentence structure correct and clear?
- (b) Is it simple and brief? i.e. does it give only the essential facts? Does it include only essential words and phrases?

- (c) Is it accurate? Is the information correct? Is the writing free from errors of grammar, spelling and punctuation?
- (d) Is it complete? i.e. does it give all the necessary information? Does it answer all the relevant questions?
- (e) Is it human? i.e. is the writing free from antagonistic words and phrases? Is it, where appropriate, tactful, helpful, courteous, sympathetic, frank, or forceful? Will the tone bring the desired response? (see Gowers: 1980).

After going through the foregoing stages, the final check is then made, using T. S. Elliot's correct sentence formula: i.e.

(one) where every word is at home, Taking its place to support the others, The word neither diffident for ostentations, An easy commerce of the old and the new, The common word exact without vulgarity, The formal word precise but not pedantic, The complete consort dancing together. (See Faber and Faber, 1943)

Having taken the students through the above three stages, the next step is to guide them through the structural formations of sentences with the necessary drills and recaps of parts of speech, with particular reference to the use of punctuation marks like the comma, colon, semi-colon, apostrophe, period (full-stop) hyphen, dash, question mark, quotation mark, slash,

brackets, ellipsis, exclamation mark, parenthesis, etc to make communication more meaningful. These drills should be accompanied with a strong emphasis on basic grammatical principles and rules, e.g. a verb must agree with its subject in number and in person. These exercises have the advantage of inculcating in the students the right knowledge and skills in the use of punctuations and proper word choice. It should be noted that the idea of going back to basics is informed by the need to have a solid base of knowledge that would eventually translate into a wealth of communication skills. Such basic knowledge is crucial in the process of handling comprehension passages or prose and poetry reading or composition.

APPLYING THE MOBILISATION PRINCIPLE

One vital means of improving the students' communication skills is to mobilize them to develop effective habits of reading and writing. Through this strategy, students are encouraged to read omnivorously. Such readings expose them not only to good writing techniques but also a rich harvest of vocabulary for self-expression and graphic communication. One way of securing students' interest in reading and writing is to help them to form or join reading and writing clubs and debating fora, in addition to getting them to make effective use of the library. Today, many students find it difficult to write even a simple letter and "some of our graduates are said to shock or give goose pimples to

members of the interviewing panel by their inability to express themselves in simple correct English" (Okebukola, supra). All these are, no doubt, traceable to poor reading and writing habits formed at the early stages of studentship. To break such habits, efforts must be made to rekindle students' interest in reading and writing.

DEVELOPING STUDENTS' ORAL COMMUNICATION SKILLS

As we have hinted elsewhere in this presentation, communication is not all about writing. Oral presentations are equally of critical importance. For this reason, definite steps must be taken to teach the students the proper ways and means of making oral presentations.

The first thing to note about oral presentation is that the material for presentation should be concise, interesting and brief to the point (see Ming Tham: 1999). Essentially, oral communication centres around the voice i.e. how you say what you say is as important as what you say; appearance i.e. how you appear and this entails dressing appropriately for the occasion. Here, it is important to always remember that first impression has a great influence on our audience's attitudes towards us and more importantly, there is no second chance for first impression. The third key consideration is body language i.e. the signals sent to the audience via body movements.

Students should be taught to plan and prepare their talks logically and

carefully. This involves stating the objective of the presentation and outlining the key points of the talk. They should also be taught how to use cue cards and sketches /visual aids to keep on course during the presentation. More importantly, mock presentation to oneself in a mirror or to some colleagues is necessary to tie up the loose ends of the talk.

In making the actual presentation, students should be taught how to greet the audience, how to present the talk and how to summarise the presentation. The strategy is to keep it simple and short (KISS strategy) within the radius of rapt attention.

Students should be made to understand that the major thrust of oral communication is delivery. The guide during delivery is to speak clearly and naturally; to deliberately pause at key points to drive the point home in the minds of the audience, and to avoid obvious pitfalls like jokes or humours unless the students can make the best use of such features.

DEVELOPING STUDENTS' LISTENING SKILLS

Communication, as we know, is a two-way process and listening is a very vital part of it. In the words of Bergin (1981), "communicating does not merely mean talking or writing to people. It means transmitting a message to evoke a discriminating response. Listening is as much a part of communicating as is talking." Surprisingly, many of us do not regard listening as an indispensable part of communication.

As J. C. Penny aptly put it, “for most of us, listening, whether in a social conversation or around the table at a conference is just a pause we feel obliged to grant a speaker until we again have a chance to air our own opinions. This is not real listening in any sense of the word.” According to Penny, to “actively listen to another requires willpower, concentration and great mental effort ...only then do we really learn something about the other person - his feelings, his ambitions, his hopes, his aspirations, what his complaints are and what his needs.” As we can see from the views of Bergin and Penny, listening as a skill in effective communication enables us to have full knowledge of whatever is being discussed. By listening, we do not just learn about what is being discussed but also the language of discussion. When we equip students with listening skills, we position them for further and expansive knowledge of things in a deeper perspective.

It is a truism that the worst affliction on listening today is what has been called Communication Addiction Disorder (CAD) a condition that makes someone not to stop talking, despite the social rejection that is associated with it. Students should be made to cultivate the listening habit to enable them develop the critical ability required to process what they hear. To get someone to give you some knowledge, you must be prepared to give such a person your attention. This is the heart of listening as a communication action.

FAMILIARIZING STUDENTS WITH NEW INFORMATION AND COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGIES (ICTs)

Rapid developments in the sphere of information and communication technologies are fast redefining access to skills and knowledge on all fronts of human endeavour. The world of today has largely become the world of the Internet as virtually anyone who has anything to say says it in the Internet. The cyberculture is catching up fast with our students as every day finds them in cybercafés, engaging in browsing and other Net activities. Exposure to the new media would enable them to broaden their horizons via the access of vital information around the world. It is vital, however, that students are properly schooled on how to make fruitful use of the new media technologies.

For instance, e-mail (electronic mail) can be used in many language hearing and teaching situations. Electronic mail correspondence helps language learners to:

- 1 Enhance their communication skills
- 2 Gain first hand knowledge of other peoples, other countries and other cultures in the world,
- 3 Develop strategies for autonomous language learning, and
- 4 Familiarize themselves with

new information and communication technologies (Bel and Flynn: 1999).

Through the instrumentality of the e-mail, students can do exercises in English language and have such exercises read, corrected and sent back to them immediately (see Bel and Flynn: 1999). E-mail also affords students the opportunity of learning from each other through the principle of "tandem learning" However, to make effective use of the e-mail strategy in teaching and learning, teachers must be able to gain proficiency in its use so that they would be in a position to guide students attain learner autonomy status in the course of time.

SUMMING UP: COMMUNICATION CHECKLIST

It is now clear, from all we have said so far in this presentation that our communication can only make meaning to the recipient when there is a commonality of experiences through shared meanings. The Latin word *communicare* (meaning to share) and the French word *communis* (meaning common) emphasize these shared experiences.

To improve students' communication skills, it will be helpful in great measure to arm them with a communication checklist, which they can use to test the efficacy of their communications. The following guides, which could be called "The Commandments of Effective Communication," will be useful in this regard:

- 1 Seek to clarify your ideas before communicating.
- 2 Examine the true purpose of each communication.
- 3 Understand the physical and human environment when communicating.
- 4 Consider the total physical and human setting whenever you communicate.
- 5 Consider the content and the overtones of the message. Whenever possible, communicate something that helps or is valued by the receiver.
- 6 Never use a metaphor, simile or other figures of speech, which do not have bearing on the idea, issue or phenomenon you are discussing or explaining.
- 7 Never a long word/sentence where a short one will do.
- 8 If it is possible to cut out a word, always cut it out. Think of a piece of communication as a machine where every part has a definite function to perform.
- 9 Seek not only to be understood but also to understand - be a good listener.
- 10 Never use the passive voice where you can use the active voice.

- 11 Never use a foreign phrase, a scientific word, or a jargon word if you can think of an every day English equivalent (See Bergin: 1981, American Management Association, and Eschholz et al, 1978).

It is important to note that the beauty and power of any communication lies in its clarity, brevity, precision and simplicity. Many of our communications today are marred by bad English language and gobbledygook or what Gowers aptly called pompo-verbosity. These labels refer to a squandering of words and bogus packaging of a message resulting in semantic noise and poor communication. These constitute a "persistent and insidious danger" to both spoken and written communication. It is high time we called a spade a spade rather than "a manually operated excavating instrument" (Webb: 1978). As teachers, it is advised that we endeavour to inculcate relevant communication skills in our students using the strategies so far discussed. It is expected that workshops such as the one we are in now will empower us as teachers in capacity development effective teaching.

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