



IMPROVING TEACHERS' COMMUNICATION SKILLS FOR EFFECTIVE CLASSROOM INTERACTION IN NIGERIAN SECONDARY EDUCATION SYSTEM

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Abstract

Improving teachers' communication skills for effective classroom interaction is the main thrust of this paper. It started with a reflection on communication process and forms of classroom interaction. What constitute communication skill for teachers, such as effective body language, positive motivation and good sense of humour were highlighted before a discussion on developing communication skill in the learner. Improving teachers' communication skills through various information communication technology (ICT) facilities were mentioned along with the various learning styles (auditory learning, visual learning and kinaesthetic learning) usually encountered by the teacher in the teaching and learning processes. Communication barriers to effective classroom interaction, which include poor listening skill, difference in perception and lack of fundamental knowledge, amongst others, were mentioned before the conclusion that overall improvement in a student can be expected when communication skill is given due place of importance. The paper recommends that communication skill should be made an important ingredient of a teacher's professional training and competency.

Key words: Improving teachers' communication skills, and effective classroom interaction in Nigerian secondary education system.

INTRODUCTION

Effective communication is all about being understood. Teaching is about being able to communicate effectively (verbally and non-verbally) to everyone in the classroom. When effective communication is missing the teacher can be easily misunderstood by the

students, making the classroom interaction a mere waste of time. Furthermore, when students do not feel listened to or feel understood through their verbal and non-verbal communication, they may start acting in other ways to get their needs met.

Teaching is generally considered as only 50% knowledge and 50% interpersonal relation or communication skill (Cullen, 1998). For a teacher, it is not just important to give a quality lecture. It is more important for the presentation to be understood. Communication skill for teachers is thus as important as the in-depth knowledge of the particular subject which they teach.

Every teacher has a task of making his/her class a place where meaningful and in-depth understanding of facts, ideas, skills and techniques are achievable. It is for this reason that teachers employ various methods and techniques of teaching, the ultimate goal being to create conditions for true learning. When teachers create environments that culminate into a rapport for meaningful and in-depth understanding of principles and concepts, the result usually is that students achieve optimal learning opportunities. Teachers must therefore, continually develop skills that endorse an environment for effective classroom interaction. One of such important skills is the skill of communication.

Communication serves four major functions for the teacher in a classroom setting. Jones and Fong (2007) listed the four functions as control, motivation, emotional and decision-making. They highlighted that in mathematics and science classrooms control is achieved through clear instructions given by the teacher to students on what is expected of them. At the same time the teacher obtains feedback to enable him/her clarify, put emphasis, or plan for future lesson. Furthermore, communication fosters motivation by relating issues at hand to students' past experiences and knowledge; letting the students appreciate what they know and allowing them to explore. And, for the sake of emotional development of the student the teacher should encourage communication to allow for personal expression and fulfilment for meaningful learning. The teacher's facial expression should reflect what he/she says.

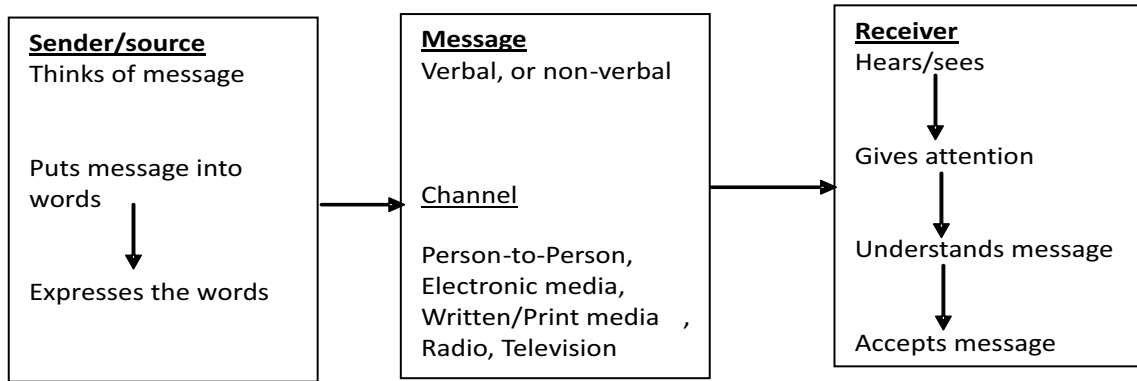
With these major functions which communication serves in teaching and learning situations, the main objective of this paper is to enhance the teachers' awareness and use of communication skills for appropriate classroom interactions that foster effective learning in the Nigerian secondary education system. The paper also identifies barriers that hinder effective classroom communication, from which possible remedies can be deduced.

COMMUNICATION

Communication, according to the Concise Oxford Dictionary is “the act of imparting, especially news,” or “the science and practice of transmitting information.” These definitions show clearly the link between “teaching” and “communication.” Teachers are constantly imparting new knowledge, or transmitting information.

Communication has been shown to be a complex process. Detlef (2000) depicted in figure 1 below the process of communication:

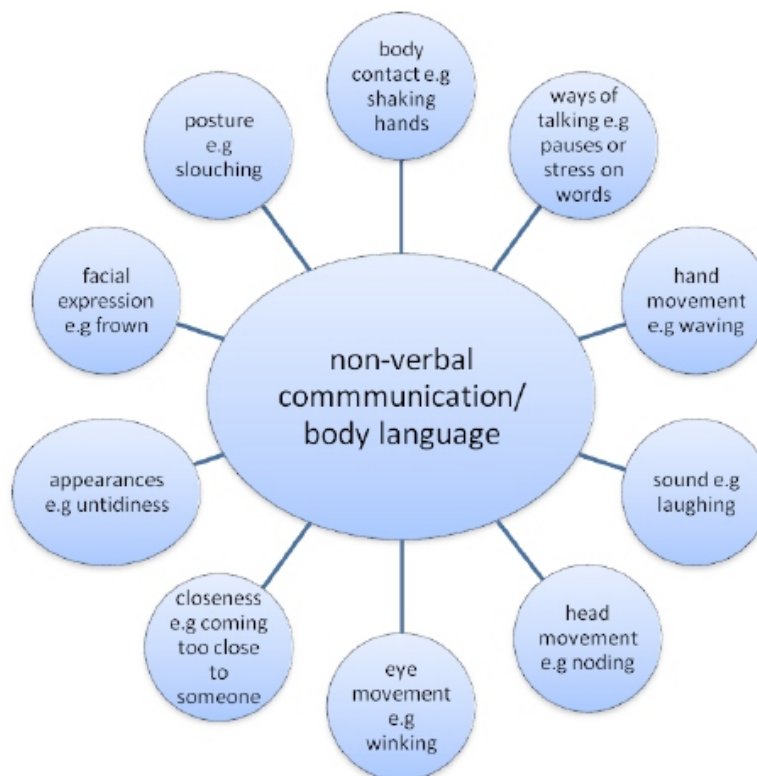
Figure 1. Communication Process



He (Detlef, 2000) remarked that things may go wrong at any stage of this process, making the communication less effective. For example, the sender may not express what he/she wants to say clearly; or the room/environment may be noisy; or the receiver may not understand the words the sender is using.

Communication is all about being understood. It does not only take place means of words; non-verbal communication or body language is of equal importance. The different kinds of non-verbal communication are as shown in figure 2, by Hubley (1993) in Detlef (2000).

Figure 2 Non-verbal communication/ Body language



Non-verbal communication or body language is usually subconscious- we use it without thinking about it. And, as the saying goes, “it is difficult to lie in body language.” If teachers really attend to the body language of their students they will know when they are bored or confused. Also, from the body language of their teachers students readily pick up whether they are confident and enthusiastic.

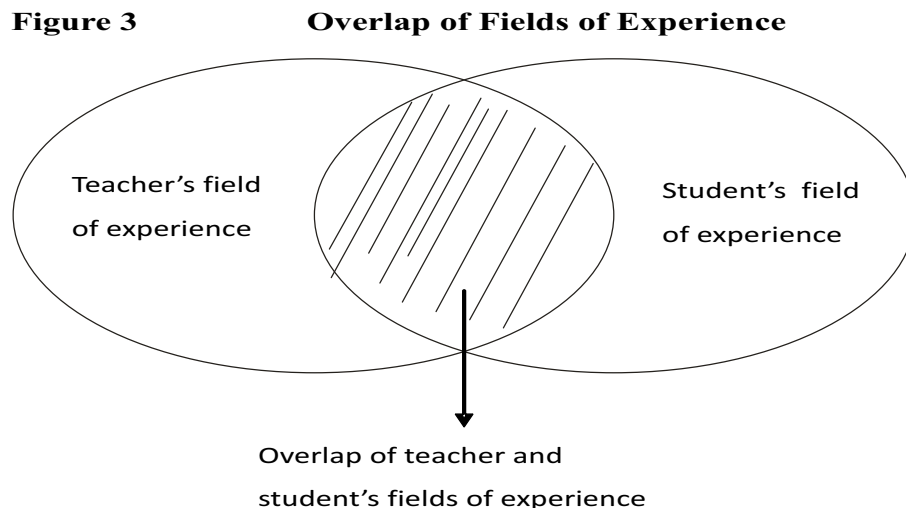
CLASSROOM INTERACTIONS

Interaction, according to the Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary (seventh edition) is the act of “communicating with somebody, especially while you work, play or spend time with them.” In this definition, the relationship between two or more individuals is highlighted. In a classroom setting, this type of relationship or interaction takes place between teachers and students on the one hand and within students on the other hand.

Teacher – Student Interaction

The teacher in this case plays the role of a facilitator of teaching and learning process. The ideas and concepts must be transmitted in codes (language/format) that the students can understand. The teacher, Jones and Fong (2007) said, is expected to use the simplest language possible, simplified charts and diagrams, and well designed activities. They also said that the student, who is the receiver of the message conveyed by the teacher, must be able to decode (attach the intended meaning to) the message. For effective communication, both the student and the teacher must attach the same meaning to the symbols, words, gestures and diagrams being used. For successful communication then, the teacher and students' field of experience must overlap.

This field of experience consist of attitudes, knowledge and social environment (Richards, 1998). According to Wilber Scram, who developed the model of communication represented below (figure 3), the greater the overlap the better the communication.



To this effect, it becomes advisable for the teacher to explore the students' pre-requisite knowledge based on the concepts he/she intends to teach. This implies that the teacher should take into account what the learners know when planning for a lesson. They should build on any relevant knowledge and interest of the learners while addressing any misconception. Richards (1998) cautioned that there is need for teachers to check rather than presuppose that the learners have the necessary level of knowledge, understanding and skills needed for the intended outcome of the lesson, or for effective communication to occur.

Student – Teacher Interaction

This form of interaction enables the teacher to establish the need of the learner and be in a position to address them. Kadriye (2009) observed that the teacher can enhance this form of interaction by creating an enabling environment for students to:

- Ask questions
- Seek clarification
- Answer questions
- Offer explanations
- Make constructive criticism
- Make presentation of reports on group activities
- Discuss experiment results and make conclusions
- Make accurate observations, listen carefully and explain ideas clearly.

Student – Student Interaction

This form of interaction is also known as horizontal/lateral or diagonal communication. According to Dilip (2009), this form of communication stimulates consultations, discussions, team work, sharing of ideas and experiences. It also creates a relaxed and healthy climate for learning. This is only possible because the field of experience between the source and the receiver is similar. The degree of communication is therefore, elevated. The teacher can enhance this kind of interaction by forming small learning groups. Group learning encourages learners to verbalize and discuss activities, clarifying new concepts thereof, and reinforce learning.

COMMUNICATION SKILL FOR TEACHERS

It is important that teachers are aware of the importance of communication skills in teaching. They must also realize that students have different levels of strengths and weaknesses. It is only through communication skills that a teacher can introduce creative and effective solution to the problems of the students. Thus, a teacher can enhance the quality of his/her interactions with the students. Worley, et al, (2007) gave a highlight of what constitute this communication skill for the teachers as follows:

- **Positive Motivation:** -teachers should have the ability to create enthusiasm and interest in the minds of the students towards a subject. It is also the teacher's duty to remove fear and inhibitions that a student may have towards a subject.
- **Effective Body Language:** -this is considered the most powerful communication skill that a teacher must possess for effective interaction with students. Good presentation skills include powerful body language supported by verbal skills. The duo creates a long lasting impression in the minds of the students. Teachers should

- learn to maintain the volume, tone and rhythm of their voice during a lesson.
- **Sense of Humour:** - a good sense of humour keeps the students active and interested in the teacher's class. A teacher who is dour and lacks humour does not contribute to the overall well-being of the students. Dirty jokes must not however be confused with humour.
 - **Understanding the Students:** - students should be encouraged to communicate openly by the teacher. It is always wise to hear the opinion of students while solving any problem in the classroom. Emphasis should be on dialogue rather than monologue.
 - **Team Formation:** - this entails dividing the classroom into small teams and asking them to solve problems or complete assignments. This practice increases interactions and mutual understanding amongst students as well as the teachers.
 - **Technical Skills:** - it is important that teachers should be up to date with all latest techno-tools for teaching. These include computers, audio-visually, slide projectors and the use of internet facilities. This will help the students to keep up their interest in the learning process.

DEVELOPING COMMUNICATION SKILL IN THE LEARNER

To develop effective communication skill in the learner entails the teacher helping the learner construct his/her own knowledge and experiences through modification of his/her pre-existing ideas in light of new insights and viewpoints gained through communication. The development of effective communication skills require the teacher, according to Kadriye (2009), involve the learner in activities that enhance the following:

- ✓ Inquisitiveness (inquiry skills)
- ✓ Questioning
- ✓ Pattern searching and attach meanings
- ✓ Make assumptions and statements
- ✓ Demand for verification
- ✓ Observation, thinking skills and action taking
- ✓ Collection of data
- ✓ Make logical inferences
- ✓ Draw conclusions
- ✓ Test for the formation of general principles
- ✓ Seek and apply the newly learned information.

These activities are further outlined in what is considered as the components of effective communication skills (Kadriye, 2009). They include:

- ❖ **Listening-** in order to understand what others say, and to understand the differences and similarities.
- ❖ **Asking questions-** in order to confirm main points.
- ❖ **Stating opinions-** to clarify whether one agrees or disagrees.
- ❖ **Explaining-** explain the reason, the process and the procedure in a logical manner. Show or give the facts or evidence.
- ❖ **Suggesting-** list possible solutions and ideas.
- ❖ **Demonstrating-** show step-by-step demonstration through a design or prediction.

- ❖ **Reporting-** record and report observations in relation to scientific process.
- ❖ **Discussing-** harmonize to draw conclusion.

IMPROVING TEACHER'S COMMUNICATION SKILL

Pedagogy is evolving with new technological aids for improved communication in the classroom. Various information communication technology (ICT) components help teachers in enhancing their communication skills in teaching and reaching out to the students. Dilip (2009), Abbatt and McMahon (1993) all identified short message service (SMS), e – mail, tweet, chat, web-spaces, facebook, etc, as facilities at the disposal of the teacher to be effectively used for:

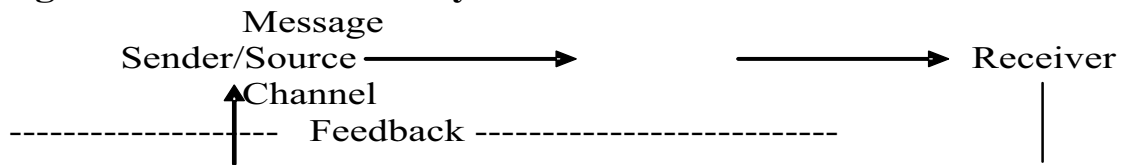
- Replying questions of students, solving their doubts, queries, etc.
- Giving some tasks for next class in advance
- Having group discussion out of the class
- Uploading lesson presentation to web-spaces
- Running websites to check students' progress, etc.

Very important to remember in improving teacher's communication skill for effective classroom interaction is the various learning styles. Three of these learning styles were mentioned by Wasik and Hinderman (2006), on which they gave a highlight, viz:

- a. Auditory Learning:** -a teaching and learning style in which a person learns through listening. The learner depends on hearing and speaking as a main way of learning. He/she must be able to hear what is said in order to understand and may have difficulty with instructions that are written. Auditory learners use their listening and repeating skills to sort through the information that is sent to them.
- b. Visual Learning:** - a teaching and learning style in which ideas, concepts, data and other information are associated with images and graphics/charts/play cards. A review study concluded that using graphic organizers improves students performance in retention, reading comprehension, thinking and learning skills; critical thinking. Students remember information better and can better recall it when represented and learned both visually and verbally.
- c. Kinaesthetic Learning:** - a teaching and learning style in which learning takes place by the students actually carrying out a physical activity rather than listening to a lecture or mere watching a demonstration. Kinaesthetic learners are thought to be discovery learners. They have realisation through doing, rather than thinking before initiating action. They may struggle to learn by reading or listening. They succeed in activities such as chemistry experiments, sporting activities, art and acting. They also may listen to music while studying. It is common for them to focus on two different things at the same time. They possess good eye-hand coordination.

Whichever learning style, communication is a skill. We improve our skill by getting feedback on the way we perform them. To be effective teachers have to try to minimize barriers to communication a feedback mechanism. We do this in a number of ways. We can ask an experienced colleague to sit in on our teaching, and to give us feedback. We can also record our teaching on a video tape, to be viewed afterwards. Nevertheless, one of the most effective ways of getting feedback that will bring improvement in classroom interaction is the two-way communication, depicted in figure 4 (Detlef, 2000).

Figure 4 Two – way Communication



Feedback improves teacher's communication skill. This means getting regular feedback from the receivers (the students in this case): do they really understand what we are trying to put across?

Feedback, on the other hand will be better if the teacher seeking improvement in his/her classroom interaction uses a checklist to assess/judge his/her performance during the teaching-learning process. A modification of such a checklist for the teacher as provided by Detlef(2000) is given below:

Figure 5: Checklist for Communication during Teaching-Learning Process

<p>About the style of presentation</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ <i>Does the teacher speak clearly?</i> (loud enough; not too fast; faces the class; avoids mannerisms like ‘um’) ➤ <i>Is the teacher’s non-verbal communication suitable?</i> (appropriate gestures and expressions; moves around; eye contact with whole class) ➤ <i>Does the teacher speak understandably?</i> (uses words that the students should be able to understand) ➤ <i>Is the speed of presentation right?</i> (the students must be able to absorb the material that is presented) ➤ <i>Is there two-way communication?</i> (the teacher checks regularly if the students have understood) ➤ <i>Is there evidence of good relationship between teacher and students?</i> (teacher and students respect each other, listen to each other) <p>About the content</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ <i>Does the teacher emphasise important knowledge?</i> (the main messages are clear and emphasised, unnecessary detail is left out) ➤ <i>Is information presented in a logical sequence?</i> (bits of information follow logically after each other – easy to understand and remember) <p>About the teaching place</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ <i>Is the place conducive for good communication?</i> (enough light; no noise from outside) ➤ <i>Are the students comfortable?</i> (adequate seating; students can see the teacher; not too hot/too cold) <p>About the use of teaching aids</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ <i>Are the teaching aids relevant?</i> (the aids only deal with the subject matter of the lesson, and clarify it) ➤ <i>Are the teaching aids well prepared?</i> (only contain highlights/main points; neat; different colours are used) ➤ <i>Are the teaching aids easy to read and understand?</i> (letters and pictures are large enough; not too much crammed onto one aid) ➤ <i>Are the teaching aids skilfully used?</i> (the teacher handles them with confidence; uses a pointer; does not mix them up)
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COMMUNICATION BARRIERS TO EFFECTIVE CLASSROOM INTERACTION

Despite careful preparations, communication may still not be obvious due to verbal and non-verbal, or internal and external stimulations that play important roles in the way one interprets words. A number of communication barriers considered key to ineffective classroom interactions include issues stemming from the language used, differences in perception and lack of interest or fundamental knowledge, personality traits and distractions due to appearance, poor organization, poor listening skills, gender insensitivity, and text book knowledge versus practical experience (Gower and Waters, 1995; Pratt, 1992; Malamah, 1987).

Language Usage: - language is central as a medium of communication during lesson. Teachers must be aware of variations in language usage in different parts of the country, as well as dialects and local expressions with attached meanings. Problems in interpretation of language usage arise through differences in interpreting statement, inadequate vocabulary and precision of thought, pronunciation errors and written spellings, level of language used for a particular level of audience.

Difference in Perception: - this stems from how the receiver sees, understands, decodes, translates and interprets the message based on the age, past experiences, cultural influences, previous learning or setting and national origin. No two people with these differences may interpret a stimulus (perceived or heard) in a similar manner.

Lack of Interest: - if the teacher or learners lack interest then it leads to inattentiveness, misinterpretation, or deterrent to the reception of ideas.

Lack of Fundamental Knowledge: - lack of fundamental knowledge on the topic of discussion by the teacher could be a communication barrier. In the process of beating around the "bush" one may cause more confusion.

Distractions: - any upsetting factors that interfere with any of our senses, for example visual, auditory, olfactory will deter clear transmission and reception of ideas. Examples include inadequate illumination, sound of passing vehicles or machine, poor ventilation, uncomfortable room temperature, etc.

Poor Organisation: - when ideas are presented in a disorganised manner, it is difficult for the receiver to follow through. The objectives must be clear, and the knowledge of how to achieve them. Good planning and presentation are important for maximum understanding.

Personality and Appearance: - the personality of a teacher may result into his students/audience accepting or rejecting whatever is said without reason. Also the appearance of the teacher or instrument used in communication is crucial in the transmission of ideas and feelings. Otherwise, the attention is focused on the appearance instead of the lesson/message.

Poor Listening Skill: - generally, people talk at an estimated rate of about 140 words per minute, but are able to perceive about 500 words per minute (Worley, et al, 2007). This explains why listeners wonder ahead of speakers' ideas. Often a listener is left thinking of what a speaker will say next after one is finished. The listener's preconceptions may be preoccupied with screening out most of what is being said, to hear the ideas beyond words and appreciate desires and needs of the speaker. This is listening actively. In this case, the teacher can help the student/listener pay attention by being motivating in his presentation.

Textbook Knowledge versus Practical Experience: - many teachers tend to use textbook examples to explain concepts, principles and theories portraying how they learned; and also, it is the easy way out, or maybe that is all the teacher knows. To improve the understanding of concepts, it is important to communicate effectively using the immediate environment, the local area, or the background experience of the learner.

CONCLUSION

Teaching can be a rewarding profession, but it is more than just imparting knowledge to students. A large part of teaching is about being able to communicate effectively to everyone in the classroom and in the school. When effective communication is missing, teachers can misunderstand or be ignorant of students' needs and expectations. Furthermore, students may not feel listened to or understood and they may start acting out in other ways to get their needs met.

Students are the future of every nation. That is why the role of teachers is so important to the society. It is through a teacher that generations of young stars are deeply influenced. Overall improvement in a student can be expected when communication skill is given due place of importance.

RECOMMENDATION

Communication is a skill which must be learned and developed by the teacher for himself. Teachers communicate by speaking, but also by writing. It is thus, important that communication skill becomes an important ingredient of teachers' professional training and competency. This is necessary because success comes in direct proportion to the command one has over communication.

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