

Ineffective Communication in Nigeria: A Problem Associated with Low Level of Literacy

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Abstract

Communication is one thing. Effective communication is another. Specifically, for one to express an idea in speech or writing is one thing and expressing it as it is in one's mind is another thing. Furthermore, receiving the idea through listening or reading is one thing while understanding it, as it is intended, to be able to make an adequate and appropriate response is another thing. This paper, by a simple study instrument, argues that the political, religious, economic, medical and educational problems in the country are a function of ineffective communication. It however makes recommendations for how to reduce it.

Introduction

Communication has language as a system that plays prominent roles in it. The roles as identified by Ndimele (2001:3-4) may be informational, expressive, phatic, directive, ideational, performative, or ludic. According to him, language plays the informational role in its use to pass information from one person to another. It plays the expressive role when people use it to make their feelings and emotions known to others. Its phatic role manifests in its use to establish contacts and relationships. Furthermore, it plays the directive role when it is used to influence the behaviour and attitudes of people. Its ideational role is demonstrated in its use to control and seek compliance with the forces of nature. On the other hand, its role is performative when it is used in effecting a sudden change in the state of affairs in the real world. Lastly, it plays the ludic role in its use to create amusement for entertainment.

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Noteworthy is the fact that each of the roles is slightly or comprehensively revealed in any definition of language. Crystal (1997:376) presents the definitions of language given by three linguists. The one given by Sapir upholds language as a purely human and non-instinctive method of communicating ideas, emotions, and desires by means of voluntarily produced symbols. Furthermore, the one given by Tradger expresses that language is a system of arbitrary vocal symbols by means of which the members of a society interact in terms of their total culture. (Interaction as used here by Tradger could be substituted with communication.) Moreover, the one given by Hall posits that language is the institution whereby humans communicate and interact with each other by means of habitually used oral-auditory symbols.

Considering the roles of language, it is no wonder reading and writing are a strong factor in determining literacy. In fact, the state of being able to read and write a language is the definition of literacy. The implication here is that language plays the roles highlighted not only in speech, but also in writing, which automatically involves or motivates reading.

The foregoing is an indication that effective communication could only be achieved through literacy nay, high level of literacy. Based on this, this paper tries to answer the following questions:

- i. What is effective communication?
- ii. What type of communication exists in Nigeria?
- iii. What type of literacy does Nigeria have?
- iv. What is the state of the literacy?

Communication/effective communication

Communication is the transmission and reception of information (a 'message') between a source and a receiver using a signaling system: in linguistic contexts, source and receiver are interpreted in human terms, the system involved is a language, and the notion of response to (or acknowledgement of) the message becomes of crucial importance (Crystal, 1997:72).

Crystal's opinion points out two crucial elements of communication: transmission of a message, and reception of the message. The message may be the idea, feelings, etc of the sender and is intended to be received. Probably, it is consequent upon this that Ndimele (1997:124) comments, "Communication... means making oneself to be understood by the person or persons to whom the piece of information is addressed".

True, communication is not just essential in transmission and reception of messages. It builds a structure of relationships and interactions by the transmission and reception of the messages. This is captured in the words of Stewart and D' Angelo (1998:38), "Communication involves not just action but action and reaction, not just stimulus but stimulus and response". In fact, these words are a technical rendition of Cherry (1957:6) who has seen communication as a system of sharing elements of behaviour, or modes of life, by the existence of sets of rules.

Overall, it is easy to posit what effective communication is. It is communication that involves senders who know the message they want to send and articulate it in words (language) that capture the core and nuances of the message and receivers who would perceive the words and generate within themselves an appropriate interpretation of the words, which would manifest in their producing a corresponding and appropriate response to the message.

Communication in Nigeria

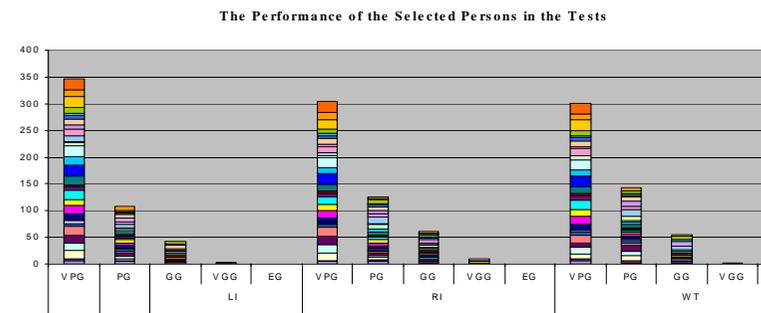
Communication in Nigeria is a complex sort: a situation arising from the multilingual character of the country. Most people in Nigeria send messages with basically two languages: their Mother Tongue (MT) and English or Nigerian Pidgin (NP). English or NP is involved when the sender and receiver belong to different speech communities. It is this that defines the status of the languages as lingua francas. Moreover, it is the multilingualism that necessitates the adoption of English as an official language: the language of government, mass media, law, education, etc. In this way, English becomes the language most used in communication in the country and, by extension, the language that determines literacy.

The question is, "How much of the Nigerian populace is literate?" The writers carried out a study to determine this. They selected five villages in the south-east area of the country. In each village, they selected 100 persons distributed as follows: Primary School Pupils (Primary 4-6)-10; Secondary School Students-10; Young Men (30-40 Years)-20; Old Men (50-100)-20; Young Women (30-40)-20, and Old Women (50-100)-20.

All the persons selected were born in the villages and have not gone out to live outside. Besides, care was taken not to select public or civil servants or university students.

The study used a test of listening and interpretation, reading and interpretation, and writing. The material given to the persons to listen and interpret was recorded and played on a cassette player. The hard copy of the same material was given to them to read and interpret. The material is the last paragraph of the article entitled 'A rule of the Mob' written by Igho Omoze and published in the Vanguard of Wednesday, November 22, 2006. For the writing test, the selected persons were asked to write five sentences, expressing what they liked about their rulers.

The chart below illustrates the performance of the selected persons in the tests. The first column shows performance of the persons in Listening and interpretation (LI); the second column, performance in Reading and Interpretation (RI), and the last column, performance in Writing, where VPG represents Very Poor Grade; PG, Poor Grade; GG, Good Grade; VGG, Very Good Grade, and EG, Excellent Grade.



The chart reveals that literacy in English in the selected villages is very low. In fact, their performance on the average is below the Poor Grade. It is lazy to over generalize. However, the writers strongly feel that the case as the chart illustrates is not peculiar to the selected villages but general in the country. If this is taken, it is easy to posit that literacy level in the country is very low. Indeed, this has implications for ineffective communication in the country.

Consequences of ineffective communication in Nigeria

Ineffective communication is responsible for most unsatisfactory situations that dominate all the facets of the country's life. Chief among the situations are:

Retarded economic development: It is our strong belief that the low economic status of the country stems from ineffective communication. Economic policies are formulated in English. It is an unvarnished truth that implementation of the policies is not only for those who formulated them but the responsibility of all: the elite and the hoi polloi. The hoi polloi constitute a greater part of the population and their illiteracy in English creates the difficulty in the implementation of the policies, especially the ones on agriculture and small scale industries, which largely concern them.

Poor education: English is the language of instruction in schools. That receivers of ideas communicated them are unable to express the ideas and translate them into performance is evidence of ineffective communication and what makes education in the country poor.

Restiveness: A few literate persons cash in on the illiteracy of the hoi polloi and use them to cause restiveness. In fact, they misinterpret to the hoi polloi government political policies and by that organize them to stage violent demonstrations.

Religious conflicts: Many a time, the information that the two main religions in the country, Christianity and Islam, preach peace

is aired. Hence, it is difficult for many to understand why religious conflicts occur. The truth, we believe, is that a majority of the members of the religious groups are illiterate in English (in the case of Christianity) and Arabic (in the case of Islam), and hardly receive appropriately religious information given to them in writing or speech in the languages.

Poor health and high mortality rate: Health workers are trained in English. Again, information about health matters is disseminated in English. The illiterate masses certainly have a problem with adequately and appropriately understanding the information. Nwaozuzu (2002) laments:

The situation where a people's health is dependent on the information passed on to them through a foreign language, is, to say the least, undesirable, taking into consideration the percentage of the populace who can comprehend and speak such languages.

Undoubtedly, this situation has brought about most of the masses patronizing native and witch doctors, etc. The result of this is obvious, poor health and high mortality rate.

Recommendations for reducing ineffective communication

The writers feel strongly that the following recommendations, if taken and applied would considerably reduce ineffective communication and automatically change for the better the unsatisfactory situations highlighted in the previous section.

Developing indigenous languages: Nigerian linguists have done a good amount of work on the indigenous languages. However, the work is not sufficient. This is because there are many of the languages that have received little or no attention at all: a situation that makes it difficult for information expressed in English to be translated into them. Worse still, the so-called major and main languages do not have enriched vocabulary to satisfy new developments in the world today. An example is Igbo

where 'iba' is used to refer to 'malaria', 'hepatitis', and 'typhoid': an indication that users of the language have a problem with the foreign terminologies. Besides, how many indigenous languages have adequate terms for 'monetization', 'deregulation', 'up-stream and down-stream oil sectors', 'recapitalization', 'micro loan scheme', etc. The point here is that all the indigenous languages demand varied degrees of attention for communication to improve.

Training teachers to use the MT for instruction: The compulsory use of English for instruction in schools should be minimized. Teachers should be trained in the MT of the area where a school is situated. Indeed, the Ife Six-Year Yoruba Primary Project (ISYPP) is evidence that the use of MT for instruction could be productive. Moreover, Okonkwo (2000:8) states:

The child thinks and dreams in the language which was used at the time he worked his way from the state of infancy to that of member of language community. This naturally is the MT/LIC. And for this reason the MT/LIC happens to be the best language of schooling for intellectual development of the child.

Making Nigerian Pidgin official: The Nigerian Pidgin is the language of widest inter-ethnic communication, especially between the members of the illiterate class (cf. Mann, 1990:99). It is easy to acquire or learn because of its simple grammar, hence, its widespread use in the country. In fact, making it official would largely reduce ineffective communication, which is associated with the official language, English. Again, that would initiate its creolization for the emergence of a true national language, which would not be seen as foreign.

Identifying the communicative roles English cannot play in the different speech communities in the country: Omego (2005) comments that there are certain communicative roles, which English or any other foreign language cannot perform. It

is therefore important to identify such roles and minimize the use of English in such instances. In this way, better communication would be assured.

Conclusion

Effective communication is necessary in any human society. It solves a lot of problems; resulting from the fact that information disseminated is expressed to represent what the sender has in mind and is received as such.

Nigeria is one of the countries in which ineffective communication instead of effective communication exists. A major factor causing this, as has been pointed out, is multilingualism: a situation that justifies the adoption of the foreign language, English as the official language. Literacy in this language is low and this is the source of ineffective communication.

This paper has discussed the consequences of ineffective communication in the country and has made recommendations as to how it could be reduced. Automatically, if it is reduced the consequences would be checked.

It is the writers' suggestion that more study be done on ineffective communication in the country for the purpose of realizing more ways of reducing it.

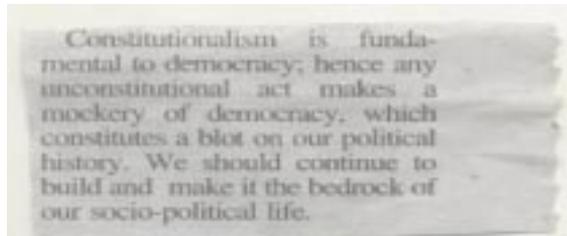
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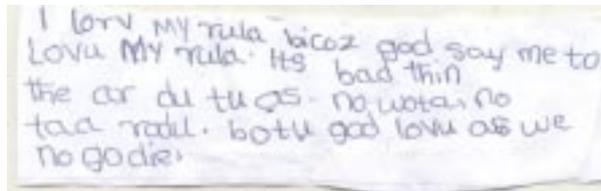
Appendix

A. The Newspaper extract used for the study



B. Two samples of the text written by the persons tested

I.



II.

