Language and Communication:
Attaining Communicative Competence by Participants

Fidelia A. Okeke

Abstract

Observations on the use of language to communicate have revealed that most participants in various communicative situations lack communicative competence. Communicative competence involves a set of composite skills which include grammatical, sociolinguistic and strategic competence (communication strategies).The researcher, is disturbed by the fact that many language users, who claim to have attained linguistic competence, have not actually attained communicative competence owing to their inability to apply communicative strategies in order to succeed in doing what people use language in doing. There are, however, factors that are responsible for this problem but which can be solved by the knowledge of ethnography of communication and those factors that are relevant in understanding how a particular communication event achieves its objectives. These, of course, form the crux of this study. Recommendations have been made here, among others, that participants should carefully inculcate the rules of language use as well as communication strategies so that their knowledge of rules of grammar will be adequate. Again, awareness of the various factors that are relevant in speaking is necessary. This paper, therefore, believes that if participants could use language accurately, appropriately, and flexibly to communicate their ideas, emotions and messages, they will attain communicative competence.

Key words: Language, communication, communicative competence and participants.

Introduction

The fact that man is a communicator whose major tool is language has given both comparative and historical grammarians much concern as they strive to discover how human language and communication began. They have equally made efforts to show the relationship between them and possible things participations should do in order to communicate effectively.

Obviously, before God created man, He had been using language to communicate with other heavenly deities, hence, the expression "let us make man in our own image…" (Gen. 1:26). No wonder Halliday (2003) says that "language is as much a product of evolution as we are ourselves; we did not manufacture it. It is an evolved system, not a designed system; not something separate from humanity, but an essential part of the condition of being human". The possession of language is the most important

attribute that distinguishes human beings from other animals – it is language that makes us human. Thus Anyanwu (2002) rightly asserts that. "One striking characteristic of the human person and something that distinguishes him from other animals is the ability to use language in its most dynamic form, namely speech".

The philosophy expressed in the myths and religions of many people is that language is the source of human life and power and that it is only by acquiring it that we approach what might be called the "human essence" – the distinctive qualities of mind that are unique to man.

Essentially, man uses language to communicate his various experiences. By implication, there exist a mutual relationship between language and communication and which has made many to feel that language is synonymous with communication. The use of language, which may be spoken (speech) or written (writing), to attain communicative competence poses various problems to interlocutors in different communicative situations. Actually, the use of language is instrumental to human communication but there is a distinction between using language to do something and using it in doing something, although it is common and effortless to talk or utter the words of a language, using language successfully is a very complex activity just as communication itself turns to be complex and can only be successful if the participants were able to reveal a sensitively to and awareness of the rules of use. In other words, accurate, appropriate and flexible uses of language enhance effective communication. Through this article therefore, language users / participants are encouraged to build the ability to select from the totality of grammatically correct expressions available to them, adhering to the rules guiding their language so that they can attain communicative competence as they strive to use language in doing what people use it in doing.

To achieve the objective of this study, we shall explain the meaning, characteristics and functions of language, meaning of communication, barriers and factors that can negatively affect communicative competence. This would necessitate further attempt to examine the factors that are relevant in understanding how a particular communication event achieves its objectives.

Language

The definition of language has not been an easy task. There are as many definitions of language as there are language scholars or linguists of different persuasions, each claiming that language is vital to human existence. It is the greatest and unique gift from God.

Quirk, (1971) defines language in the abstract as our facility to talk to each other; it is the faculty of speech, which all human beings hold in common. This definition on its part does not tell us the whole truth about what language is. But it is able to tell us that language makes it possible for us to talk to one another as no other animal can. Obi-Okoye (2008) sees language as a means of communication by which members of speech community co-operate and share their world views, discuss, agree or even disagree with one another and finally reach a consensus or decision. This definition shows that there is an intricate relation between language and communication. Users of language can agree during communication if the rules are well adhered to or disagree when language is

inappropriately used. Meanwhile, Finegan (2012) views language as "a vehicle of thought, a system of expression that mediates the transfer of thought from one person to another. In everyday life, language also serves equally important social and emotional functions". The question this definition raises is: How competent are participants in organizing language in their minds and allowing it to be shaped by the social structures of human communities such that those structures will be reflected in their expressions and interpretations?

It is not intended here to enumerate all the existing definitions of language but let us adopt Fromkin and Rodman's (1978) definition which encapsulates all the divergent views of language. According to them, "language is a conventional system of habitual vocal behaviour by which members of a community communicate with one another". This and other definitions suggest that language has five characteristics which include that: language is conventional, systematic, habitual, a vocal behaviour and a means of communication. To say that language is conventional means that it a system of arbitrary signs which is generally accepted by a speech community to use in communicating for mutual intelligibility. By this, it also means that there is no natural relationship between the signifier (word) and the signified (object) as another word could have been used to represent the same object in another speech community. To say that language is systematic means that it is highly organized system, ordered to function as reliable vehicles of communication. There are always internal rules of how a particular language must be patterned to make meaning and a deviation from such will definitely lead to unintelligibility.

Language is habitual because it is a habit one forms from day one to the extent that it becomes one's second self or identity and such habit is difficult to be changed. This tells why it will be difficult for Igbo parents, for instance, to learn German language than a child born in Germany by the Igbo parents.

Language differs from community to community but there is an important way in which human languages share universal features in common. The features common to human languages are usually called "language universals" indicating that all languages have form and meaning. Form presupposes that every language has sounds. Meaning is the idea, which the form inheres to the listener or reader of the form. It follows that every form must be decoded and understood by the listener or reader. Another universal feature of language is that is primarily vocal or oral having a sound system and the rules guiding the combination of sound elements. Thus, language is said to be a vocal behaviour because voice is involved in speech production. It is, therefore, a behaviour, a deliberate act, as distinguished from such involuntary behaviours as sneezing, coughing, crying etc. A follow up to the universal feature of speech is writing. All human languages can be written in one graphic form or another depending on the graphic conventions of a language community.

An important characteristic of language is its role as a means of communication. Communication should be taken here to mean the movement of thoughts or ideas from the speaker's mind to the listener's mind. Hence, to say that language is a means of communication means that the speaker organizes the thoughts into ideas, adhering to conventional rules, which he wants to send to his hearer. The sole means of conveying

his message to his hearer is language. Hence, Fromkin, Rodman and Hyams (2003) maintain that:

> Whatever else people do when they come together – whether they play, fight, make love, or make automobiles – they talk. We live in a world of language. We talk to our friends, our associates, our wives and husbands, our lovers, our teachers, our parents, our rivals, and even our enemies. We talk to bus drivers and total strangers. We talk face-to-face and over the telephone, and everyone responds with more talk...(3)

Another function of language is its use to make statement, ask question, give command, persuade, threaten, entertain, express our feelings, to solve problems and to increase and stabilize our command over the world of things and ideas, to record and preserve experience etc. Language is also used for polite sociabilities as in greetings etc.

In addition to these, Sapir (1929) and Whorf (1956) cited in Kottak (2004) and Wardhaugh (2000) posit that language plays a deterministic function in our lives. That is, language to a very large extent determines our socio-cultural reality. To them, every language has an effect on what the people who use it feel, think, see and talk about. In other words, our ideas about what are real and what are not are determined by the language we use.

These go to show how essential language is to man, hence, it is said that man is language and language is man. It establishes a bond between human being without which, it is difficult to reach human essence. In view of this, Ogbodo (2002) asserts that "a thought about what man would look like without language poses a difficulty since the very thought itself must have been thought in language". This proves that language is uniquely human, it is specific to man and the sole means of communication to which we shall now turn.

Communication

Man in his very nature needs to communicate his thoughts to others, and in his daily activities, he is involved in communication so deeply that he hardly realizes the amount of time he has devoted to it. As an individual, man is incomplete and in order to complete himself, he must share his feelings, emotions and whatever he has with his fellowmen. It is in this regard that Maurus (2008) feels that everything is communication as all our activities communicate. Thus, he asserts that communication is "the process of transmitting information to another person. Though everything communicates, or sends a message, communication involves persons."

Similarly, Udall and Udall (1979) believe that communication involves one person (or group) sharing and imparting information to another person (or group) such that people (or group) clearly understand one another. In their view, Nwodu and Fab-Ukozor (2003) see communication as the verbal and non-verbal process by which individuals or groups share ideas, express their opinions or feelings, and disseminate information between one another. This definition is able to tell us that we have two types of communication: verbal and non-verbal and they usually involve the message and participants. Similarly, Agee (1976) defines communication as "the act of transmitting

information, ideas and attitudes from one person to another". These imply that communication is a process and involves "telementation" – the transfer of thought or ideas from one human mind to another human mind.

However, McLaughlin (2006) views human communication from behavioural, theoretical and linguistic perspectives. In his explanations, communication behaviourally, consists of social interaction among individuals whereby our actions affect the behaviour of another person or group of persons. He defines communication from theoretical perspective as the process of sending and receiving messages that serve to transmit information between persons or groups. This means that when someone successfully transmits a message that is understood by someone else, communication has occurred. And from a linguistic viewpoint, he defines communication as a rule-based mental system of language codes for expressing and understanding thoughts, feelings and ideas, where a code means a system of rules for arranging arbitrary symbols in an orderly, predictable manner that allows anyone who also knows the code to interpret the meaning.

Although language (oral/written forms) is our principal means of communication, it is not the only one we use. People consider language primarily as spoken and written words expanded to words, phrases, clauses and sentences. To look at language in this way, however, is to ignore the significant role played by non-verbal communication. For example, it has been estimated that in a conversation between two people, only 35% of the message is conveyed by the words. The remaining 65% is communicated non-verbally by how they speak, move, gesture and by how they handle (Spatial, proximal and distant) relations. We communicate when we transmit information about ourselves to others and receive such information from them. Our facial expressions, bodily stances, gestures, and other body movements convey information and are part of our communication styles.

Considering the oral form of communication, it can be achieved at levels of: intra-personal (when communication is not directed to a receiver external from the source), interpersonal (when the message is transferred through a channel to the external receiver) and group communication (involving mass audience). Communication at any of these levels is only possible because we have language at our disposal. A thought about what people use language to do make us think of what people are doing with words in a particular situation – the intention, purposes, beliefs, and desires that a speaker has in speaking. But we discover that to achieve communication purposes using language is not as easy as we can simply say it.

Thus, Akmajian et al (2001) note:

> As common and effortless as it is to talk, using language successfully is a very complex enterprise, as anyone knows who has tried as an adult to master a second language. Moreover, much goes into using a language besides knowing it and being able to produce and recognize sentences in it (263).

Therefore, they see communication as "a social affair" which usually takes place within the context of a fairly well defined social situation. In their words, "In such a context we rely on one another to share our conception of what the situation is. With

people we know, rather than spell every thing out, we rely on shared understanding to facilitate communication".

But we can only rely on one another to share the conception of what the situation is or rely on shared understandings when interlocutors or participants have attained communicative competence, which we shall examine in the next section.

Communicative competence: a review

Participants during communication strive to communicate effectively in their social interactions. To achieve effective communication, people do more than just talk. A mere utterance of words, sounds and grammatical sentences does not make one a competent communicator.

According to McLaughlin (2006), communicative competence occurs only when speakers effectively influence their listeners' behaviours. Most commonly, this occurs through using language – the forms, meanings and functions – appropriate to the speaker's status, the situational context and the listener's needs. It can be deduced from the above view that competent communication requires that the speaker's behaviour must relate to the topic or situation and must have a practical effect on the listener's behaviour.

Communicative competence means the ability of a language user to use it accurately, appropriately and flexible. Yule (1996) defines communicative competence in terms of these three components. He refers to accuracy in language use as "grammatical competence" which involves the accurate use of words and structures in the second language (L_2).In addition to grammatical competence is what he refers to as "sociolinguistic competence" which is the ability of a language user to interpret or produce language appropriately so as to know when and how to use language considering the social context. Finally, he calls the third component (flexibility) "strategic competence" and explains it to mean the ability of a language user to organize a message effectively and to compensate, via strategies, for any difficulties. Attainment of these of these skills will enable a language user to weave utterances together into narratives, apologies, requests, directions, sermons, scolding, jokes prayers and all other things we do with language in an appropriate manner (Communicative Competence).

It is obvious from the above explication that communicative competence cannot be attained if any of these components is neglected. These abilities must be fully developed, through a gradual process and determination, for effective communication.

Wardhaugh (2000) in his quest to define communicative competence quotes Gumperz (1972) as follows:

> Whereas linguistic competence covers the speaker's ability to produce grammatically correct sentences, communicative competence describes his ability to select, from the totality of grammatically correct expressions available to him, forms which appropriately reflect the social norms governing behavior in specific encounters (245).

This definition, like Yule (1996), stresses on the components of communicative competence – accuracy, appropriateness and flexibility. Again, Troike (1996) in Wardhaugh (2000) believes that:

> Communicative competence extends to both knowledge and expectation of who may or may not speak in certain settings, when to speak and when to remain silent, whom one may speak to, how one may talk to persons of different statuses and roles, what non–verbal behaviors are appropriate in various contexts, what the routines for turn taking are in conversation, how to ask for and give information, how to request, how to offer or decline assistance or cooperation, to enforce discipline, and the like – in short, everything involving the use of language and other communicative dimensions in particular social settings (246).

The above expression emphasizes on the rules guiding the use of language in doing certain things so that nothing goes wrong in communication encounter. One should not speak for speaking sake as loquacious speakers sometimes do since competence accounts for what a speaker needs to know to communicate effectively in culturally significant setting.

Otagburuagu (1997) observes that there are four dimensions of communicative competence identified by Canale and Swan (1980).These dimensions include:

- Grammatical competence which refers to the domain of grammatical and lexical capacity.
- Socio – linguistic competence which entails understanding of the social context in which communication takes place, including role relationship, the shared information of participants and the communicative purpose for their interaction.
- Discourse competence which involves the interpretation of individual message elements in terms of their interconnectedness and of how meaning is represented in relationship to the entire discourse or text.
- Strategic competence – the coping strategies that communications employ to initiate, maintain and redirect communication.

Similar to Canale and Swan's socio-linguistic dimension of communicative competence is Akmajian, et al (2001) proposal of inferential model of linguistic communication. With this model, they assert that communication is successful if the hearer recognizes the speaker's communicative intent. In view of these, Richards and Rodgers (1989) in Otagburuagu (1997) simply describe the acquisition of communicative competence as "an example of skill development which involves both cognitive and behavioural aspects."

This study believes that attaining communicative competence as a skill development is not automatic but involves a gradual and consistent effort with a high sense of determination. The problem is that, as much as the speaker and the receiver strive to succeed in attaining communicative competence, they encounter some barriers or factors that hinder their intentions. Such barriers are examined below:

1. **Semantic barrier:**

Message is the essential part of communication and its core is making meaning from the messages and making messages from the meaning (Maurus, 2008). Essentially,

the meaning is the significance which the communicator assigns to feelings and ideas, to objects, persons and events in his environment.

Language is "meaning potential" and meaning has become a way of sharing experience. Semantic barrier may, however, occur in communication among participants when they do not share the same code or language or even when they share a common code but are not at the same vocabulary level. Hence, the use of contradictory, anomalous, ambiguous, or vague sentences is capable of causing semantic barrier on the way of the learner.

2. **Over - worded communication:**
This occurs when the speaker or sender of message uses too many words, obscure phrases, ambiguous and difficult expressions to communicate a simple message, the result will be ineffective communication. These can cause mutual unintelligibility and depict communicative incompetence. In order to remove this barrier, the speaker should use words and send messages that are clear.

3. Information over-load:
In any communication encounter where a person receives more information than necessary, there is bound to be confusion causing a barrier in his ability to decode, understand and send accurate feedback. In situation like this, the receiver may do the following:

- omit certain things when the pressure is high
- que the information by piling them up thereby creating a lull in the communication process.
- filter the information to get only those he considers important, leaving the unimportant ones unprocessed.
- appreciate by lumping up all the pieces of information and giving them a blancket response.
- use multiple channels, that is, changing the flow of information by resorting to other channels to decongest the information over load.

Yet, another factor which can negatively affect communication is linguistic interference. Interference is the term used in describing what happens in a bilingual situation when two languages meet. There is bound to be conflict, for instance, when a bilingual tries to identify the phoneme of a secondary language with one in the primary language. In our situation for instance, our native languages (Igbo, Hausa, Yoruba, etc) are at conflict with the English language (L_2).The following are the different levels of interference:

1. **Phonological level interference:**
Phonological interference occurs when the sound systems of one language, (e.g. Igbo, Hausa, Yoruba etc) interferes with that of another language (e.g. English). This tells why an Igbo bilingual realizes "blood"/blʌd/ as /blɔ:d/; Yoruba speaker of English realizes "Eye" /ai/ as /hai/ or Hausa speaker realizing "people" /pi:pl/ as /fi:fl/. Such

mispronunciations (an indication of incompetence) will negatively affect effective communication.

2. **Lexical level interference:**

This involves interference at the level of words and word patterns. Lexical interference also takes the form of direct translation from the first language to the second language. For example:

- I hear what you said – for- I understood what you said.
- I hear the ordour of your soup – for- I perceive the aroma of your soup, etc.

3. **Semantic level interference:**

This type of interference is noticed in Africa mostly in expressions like kingship relationship in English. In Nigeria for instance, one is often seen referring to his village elder or uncle as "father" and any extended village relation as "brother" or "sister". Such language uses can lead to wrong interpretation because in British English, father, mother etc are strictly used for members of the same family while extended relations could be referred to as aunt, uncles, cousins and nieces.

Although these border on linguistic competence, we believe that whatever affects the eye equally affects the nose. Hence, the above factors as much as they negatively affect communication are believed to be capable of negatively affecting the attainment of communicative competence.

On the other hand, there are factors that are relevant in understanding how a particular communication even achieves its objectives. For convenience, we shall resort to Hymes (1974) proposal of an ethnographic framework in Wardhangh (2000) which takes into account the various factors that are involved in speaking. According to him, Hymes uses the word SPEAKING as an acronym for the various factors he deems to be relevant. Thus, Wardhangh explicates that (S) stands for "the setting and scene" of speech and are very important. While setting refers to time and place – the concrete physical circumstances in which speech takes place, scene refers to the abstract psychological setting or the cultural definition of the occasion. (P) stands for "participants" including combinations of speaker-listener, addressor-addressee, or sender-receiver and they play and swap roles in communication process. Then, (E) stands for "Ends" and refers to the conventionally recognized and expected outcomes of an exchange as well as to the personal goals that participants seek to accomplish on particular occasions. (A), on its own stands for "Act sequence" and refers to the actual form and content of what is said: the precise words used, how they are used, and the relationship of what is said to the actual topic at hand. (K), as an acronym represents "key" and is used to mean the "tone", "manner", or "spirit" in which a particular message is conveyed. (I) for "instrumentalities" refers to the choice of channel – oral, written, or telegraphic, and to the actual forms of speech employed such as dialect, code or register that is chosen. Different instrumentalities may be employed in the course of a single verbal exchange of some length. Then, (N) stands for "Norms of interaction and interpretation" and refers to the specific behaviour and properties that attach to speaking

and also to how these may be viewed by someone who does not share them, e.g. loudness, silence, talking in tongues etc. Finally, (G) stands for "Genre" and refers to clearly demarcated types of utterance; such things as: poems, proverbs, riddles, sermons, prayers, lectures in contrast to casual speech.

This study, like Wardhaugh (2000) deduces from Hymes' SPEAKING formula that communication is a complex activity, and that its success depends on the speaker's ability to reveal sensitivity to and awareness of each of the eight factors discussed above. It therefore, behooves speakers and listeners who aim at attaining communicative competence to work hard to see that nothing goes wrong as they strive to use language in doing certain things that people do with that language since language does not take place in a vacuum. Thus, as Brumfit (1990) in Otagburuagu (1997) advises, "attention came to be directed to the various constituent elements of speech events, such as participants, setting, topic, code, intention and medium etc which interplay to produce competence."

What it means to be a competent speaker-receiver of a particular language is the ability to inculcate the rules of use without which the knowledge of the rules of grammar is inadequate. This is because there is a difference between learning a language (where the learner needs only a certain linguistic competence) and learning how to use it in doing what people use it to do (where he needs communicative competence) in certain communicative processes.

Conclusion

Attaining communicative competence is not as easy as it appears. It is a complex adventure just as using language successfully is a very complex activity. And as a chain reaction, communication becomes complex if the participants fail to reveal sensitivity to and awareness of the rules of use.

In the foregoing discussions, this paper emphasizes on the relevance of using language accurately, appropriately and flexibly in doing certain things in various communicative situations. There is also need for users of language to develop the necessary communicative competence skills. Although there may be barriers or factors affecting the efforts of attaining communicative competence, learners should not be discouraged as to loose interest. Rome was not built in one day. Therefore, attaining communicative competence is not automatic but involves a gradual and consistence practice with knowledge of and sensitivity to the expectations of communication activities.

However, this study does not claim to be an end in itself but a means to an end. The efforts here to exploit the factors that can facilitate the attainment of communicative competence may be considered inadequate. Further research in this regard is therefore essential because without proper use of language to communicate, most of man's problems would remain unsolved.

Recommendations

From the discoveries made in this study, the researcher therefore recommends that:

1. Participants should carefully inculcate the rules of language use as well as communication strategies so that their knowledge of the rules of grammar will be adequate.

2. They should consider the various factors that are relevant in speaking in order to make communication easy and successful.
3. Speakers should effectively influence their listeners' behaviours through using language accurately, appropriately and flexibly considering the speakers' status, the situational context and the listener's needs.
4. Efforts should be made by participants to surmount communication barriers and linguistic interference in order to attain communicative competence.

References

Anyanwu, P.A. (2002). *Language acquisition: concepts and issues* In Otagburuagu, E. and Anyanwu, P.A. (eds). *Concepts and issues in language studies*, p.26. Owerri: Springfield Publishers Ltd.

Akmajian, A. et al (2001). *Linguistics: an introduction to language and communication* (5th ed). New Delhi: Prenticer- Hall of India Private Ltd.

Anumihe, N.C. and Kalu-Nwiwu, J.C. (2000). *Fundamentals of communication in english*. Owerri: Ihem Davis Press.

Agee, W. (1974). *Introduction to mass communication*. New York: Harper and Row.

Fromkin, V. and Rodman, R. (1978). *An introduction to language*. New York: Holt Rinchart and Wiston.

Fromkin, V., Rodman, R. and Hyams,N. (2003). *An introduction to language* (7th ed). United States: Heinle, Thomson.

Finegan, Edward (2012). *Language: it's structure and use* (6th ed). United States: WADSWORTH.

Halliday, M.A.K. (2003). *On language and linguistics* In Webster Jonathan, J. Vol.3 in the Collected Works of M.A.K. Halliday. London: Continuum.

Kottak, C.P. (2004). *Anthropology: the exploration of human diversity* (10th ed). New York: McGraw-Hill.

McLaughlin, Scott (2006). *Introduction to language development* (2nd ed). United States: Thomson Delmar Learning.

Maurus, J. (2008). *The art of communicating effectively* (5th ed). Mumbai: Better Yourself Books.

Nwodu, L.C. and Fab-Ukozor, N.(2003). *Communication Imperatives for Development*. Enugu: John Jacobs Classic Publisher Ltd.

Obi-Okoye, A.F. Ed (2008). *An introduction to applied english linguistics: from theory to practice*. Enugu: Frefabag Investment Ltd.

Ogbodo, J.C. (2002). *Problematic language communication as an index to retardation in national development* In Otagburuagu, E. and Anyanwu, P.A (eds). *Concepts and issues in language studies*. Owerri: Springfield Publishers Ltd.

Otagburuagu, E.J. (1979). *Teaching and learning the writing skill in the english language: theories, issues and practice*. Onitsha: Cape Publisher International Ltd.

Quirk, Randolph (1971). *The use of english* (2nd ed). England: Longman Group Ltd.

Udall, R. and Udall, S. (1998). *People and communication*. Amershani Bulks: Hulton Publication.

Wardhaugh, R. (1998). *An introduction to sociolinguistics* (3rd ed). USA: Blackwell Publishers.

Yule, George (1996). *The study of language* (2nd ed), United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press.