Teaching adult illiterates how to communicate effectively in Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

Communication is a lifelong phenomenon. It cuts across all human segments of the Nigerian society irrespective of age, sex, educational qualification, gender, race or religion. Communication is a power tool in every society without which that society cannot function effectively. Learning to communicate for the illiterate group is problematic in Nigeria as the illiteracy rate is high. This group is usually misunderstood as they live in ignorance, abject poverty and are often neglected. This paper seek the direction in which poor illiterate Nigerians can be assisted to attain literacy education so that they can learn to communicate effectively, live healthier lives as well as enhance their standard of living.

Keywords: Communication, Illiteracy, Ignorance, abject poverty.

INTRODUCTION

Communication is a lifelong phenomenon and it is central to the acquisition of literacy. It constitutes the basis of all human interaction and for all group functioning. Imagine what the world would look like if individuals cannot communicate. Every human action, especially in relation to learning is contingent upon effective communication. It is through it human beings can reach an understanding of certain issues, build confidence and trust in themselves, coordinate their actions and plan strategies for the accomplishment of goals especially as it relates to communication. It is an essential tool for the establishment and maintenance of good human relations, or social working relationships.

Communication is a powerful tool in every society, without it human societies cannot function effectively. According to Okenimkpe (2004), communication is the means by which people can be introduced and orientated to their environment, therefore, information to the illiterates is meant to achieve a number of objectives. Basically, communication to the illiterates seeks to facilitate the acquisition of basic knowledge and skills needed to function effectively within the environment in which they live. The quality of lives can be improved tremendously through effective communication. Moreover, individuals, groups and organizations can become confused, frustrated and disappointed if they cannot communicate effectively. As a result of the foregoing, basic literacy education affords the opportunity to acquire the skills of reading, writing and numeracy in the mother tongue or language of the immediate environment and this enhances communication skills. (Biao, Akpama, Tawo and Okukpon, 2009). Therefore, for the people to live a meaningful life there must be effective mechanism to inform and educate the people so that the main purpose of communication is fully understood.

In Nigeria, communication for the people particularly the illiterates is problematic. This is because the level of illiteracy is very high. The people are often misunderstood because they cannot communicate in an effective manner. Consequently, the illiterates are unable to properly organize their daily activities and may seek help from others in order for the communication process to flow. If the illiterates are to grow and organize their daily activities properly for effective functioning within the society in which they live, they must be helped to communicate effectively. According to Okukpon (1997:55) slogans and messages that touch the heart of the people using leaflets, posters and billboards should be used to reach all illiterate Nigerians in order to achieve the goals of literacy and effective communication. The
messages read thus:

a) Illiteracy is nauseating and should be eliminated.
b) Help to wipe out illiteracy from our society.
c) Illiteracy is a problem of developing countries.
d) With illiteracy, we shall remain backward.
e) Literacy is the key to the outside world.
f) Literacy helps to build self-confidence in people and enhance communication skills.

Illiteracy remains a challenge in practically all countries of the world. Realizing the right to learn for everybody is a cornerstone to equitable and inclusive societies. Furthermore, Sussmuth (2009) emphasized that communication skills must be clearly taught and given its meaning and what it fully represents in the Nigerian economy.

Concept of Communication

The term communication has been defined in different ways by different scholars, it has become difficult to pin it down to a definite meaning. Steven (1978) defines communication as ‘the discriminatory response of an organism to a stimulus. While Beagle and Looms (1976) referred to it as the process by which information, decision and directives pass through a social system and the ways in which knowledge, opinions and attitude are formed. In essence, communication is a form of interaction between two or more persons in which they seek to exchange ideas with the intent to educate, inform or learn from one another. This means that it is a kind of a dialogical process in which individuals, (the communicator) exchanges ideas with another (the communicate) in order to educate and inform. It is a social process, that is, it is essentially a social affair. It has been evolved by mankind to render his social life possible and practicable. It involves the transmitting and receiving of information through a common system of symbols whether in form of writing or other signs, expressive movements or the spoken word. It takes place when the behaviour of one person serves as a stimulus for the behaviour of another (Okoli, 1991).

Literacy is considered an educational process which aims at inculcating in the individual the ability to read, write and compute or carry out basic arithmetic computation. Literacy skills differ from one social group to another. Central to the issue of literacy is communication. A literate person is expected to be able to communicate to an appreciable level in a given language or any language accepted for interaction within the environment in which the individual finds himself or herself. This implies that communication plays a significant role in facilitating the acquisition of literacy skills. The acquisition of literacy skills by the individual is also expected to help the individual improve on his/her communication skills and networking ability.

Communication is defined in different ways by different scholars for varied reasons or purposes. Philip (1998) affirms that communication means sharing messages, ideas or attitudes that produce a degree of understanding between a sender and receiver. This implies that communication is expected to facilitate the exchange of ideas or messages and promote its understanding. The messages or ideas constitute the stimulus to which the individual is expected to react or respond to. The reaction or response of the individual is important in determining the level of effectiveness of the communication process.

Beagle and Looms (1976) are of the opinion that communication is the process by which information, decision and directives pass through a social system in which knowledge, opinions and attitudes are formed. This underscores the fact that communication is essentially a social affair. Man, according to Omoruyi (1999), has evolved a host of different systems of communication which render his social life possible and practicable communication involves a process of sending and receiving information (message). It includes all the ways through which we can let other people know and share our thoughts, feelings, experiences and knowledge.

What makes for effective communication is a common frame of ‘reference’ between the parties involved. This has to do with a common understanding of the intent and objectives of the message sent by the sender and well received by the receiver. Effective communication therefore, takes place when a message is sent, received and understood clearly by the parties involved.

Forms of Communication

Communication takes one of two forms namely verbal and non-verbal communication. These two forms apply essentially in communicating with the adult illiterates. Verbal communication involves oral interaction with the adults. In this case both the facilitators and illiterate adults make use of vocal sounds to present facts, news and opinions known. This could be amplified and disseminated through the use of auto equipment. The non-verbal form is used to pass out or send to the adults items of information in graphic or written forms. This could also take the form of using gesture, body movement or the eyes or other signals to pass on or send to those with whom we relate pieces of valuable information. This aspect is a little bit technical. Hence, the facilitator must ensure that what he is sending as signals and signs are clearly understood by the receiver (i.e. adult learners). This is necessary because interaction or communication takes place at different levels. This according to Omoruyi (1999) could be at the inter-personal level and mass communication or impersonal level. While communication or interaction could involve a face to face or person to person interaction, sometimes, the facilitator and the adult learners may not need to see or interact physically.
The Communication Process

A number of communication processes or models have been developed by scholars for facilitating communication. Okenimkpe (2004) gave a simple model of communication. This is presented in Figure 1.

Figure 1, S represents the sender of the message, M represents the message sent, C represents channel of communication, R represents the receiver of the message, while F represents, the feedback or response of the receiver to the message sent. Relating this to the literacy session learning programme, S represents the facilitator, the teacher or the change agent, M is the curriculum or content of the learning programme, C – the appropriate method/materials/equipment used to impact or transmit the curriculum content, R is the adult learner while F is the evaluation process to ascertain whether the teaching/learning objectives have been accomplished or not. This could take the form of assignments, exercises, tests, examinations, quiz and interviews and so on.

In the literacy session, the facilitator or teacher tries to influence the learner by trying to persuade, demonstrate or illustrate on the correctness, importance or relevance of the information provided. Often times, the sender has to stimulate the receiver of the information to put his/her fresh knowledge into use. The information given by the teacher is unique, because the message clearly conveys knowledge about our physical and social environment. It gives practical skills that can enable the adult learner solve problems that stagnate his/her development and progress.

According to Paulo Freire (1976), there are two main techniques open to the facilitator or educator to convey information to his/her learners or receivers. These are the top-down approach and the man-directive approach or technique. In the top-down or directive technique, information or knowledge is conveyed through one-way direction process from the educator or expert down to the learners. The educator determines the what, how and where to teach his adult learners.

On the other hand, the non-directive approach recognizes the valuable role of the adult learners. In this case, the teaching/learning processes seen as a dialogue or interaction between the educator or facilitator and the learners. It is also seen as a process of conscientization in which the adult learners are not seen as passive recipients of knowledge, but active learners developing a critical level of awareness. They are regarded as collaborators with the capability and endowment to transform their reasoning and lives into a meaningful and pragmatic entity. This approach seeks to equalize the process between the educator and the learners, by making both of them “Knowing subjects”. They both contribute relevant knowledge which they exchange and discuss through dialogue. In this wise, the learners are not fed with information they do not ask for. By stimulating the critical awareness of the learners and giving them the opportunity to express themselves, the facilitators or educators turn his/her information to the needs of the adult’s learners. This process is not a transfer of information but a two-way process which brings individuals together to solve common existential problems. This demands mutual creation of norms, rules, procedures, policies and a translation and transformation of a complex system of interrelated realities. This process can further be illustrated diagrammatically.

The Place of Communication in Promoting Effective Literacy Skills for Adults

Communication is an essential tool in promoting literacy skills. It is indispensable in seeking to make literate the illiterate adults. In fact, it is an indispensable management tool for literacy delivery. Literacy education involves a process of decoding and encoding pieces of information with the intent to educate by transforming the level of understanding of the learner. This process involves the exchange of ideas, opinion facts, beliefs and feelings between the educator and the adult illiterates in order to acquire knowledge and translate same into their thinking and way of life. The way the process if managed will determine its level of effectiveness. Communication form or mode undoubtedly determines greatly the level of effectiveness. This is because according to Agbadudu (2012) communication network is what makes for the success of any learning or human activities. The network comprise of numerous channels through which the message or interaction is carried and promoted. The link may be one-way or two ways. But emphasis is on the use of the two way process which makes the process truly dialogical in nature and guarantees the humanistic nature of the parties who must see themselves as partners in progress.
It is obvious that communication is central in the efforts aimed at promoting effective literacy skills. The process enables the learners to understand and interpret issues in literacy accurately and appropriately as intended and maintaining record or memories of the knowledge acquired. When issues are clearly understood, they can be reacted to accordingly. It is only at that point that learning can be said to have taken place and communication effective.

In addition, in seeking to promote effective literacy skills delivery, the interactional skill of the individual is enhanced which in turn make for effective communication of the individual with other members of the society in which they live.

However, communication is not an easy process. It is a very complex one. This is because the process of ensuring that it is properly managed in order to achieve the purpose intended may be cumbersome and in fact, involves some technicalities that must be handled with utmost dialogue and caution. Otherwise, the learners may be dehumanized or domesticated rather than been liberated and transformed. This situation demand for the use of other means like media to ensure that communication process is made more concrete and rewarding.

### Using Media for Communicating with Adult in Promoting Effective Literacy Delivery

The use of the media, especially where it is adapted to suit the needs of the illiterate adults can help enhance their interest and learning capacity. The Media can be made relevant to the educational development of the adult learners in seeking to acquire literacy skills. A number of media resources are appropriate for transfer of information to the adult learners in seeking to promote the acquisition of literacy skills. They include still pictures, paintings, charts, maps, cartoons, posters, slides, transparencies, overhead projectors, display boards, chalkboard bulletin, bill boards, flannel graphs, audio materials such as radio, recorders and video as well as audio-visual materials such as television, films and video tapes, among others.

In selecting relevant resources for the education of the illiterate adults, the communicators or facilitator must consider the subject matter, the level of understanding of the adult learners, the type of task, availability and accessibility of a conducive environment, ability and expertise needed to ensure that the communication skills represent what it actually means.

The radio can be put to maximum use in the teaching/learning process of the adult learners by organizing them into different radio forum groups. This is a small listening group that meets regularly in order to listen to and receive special radio programmes relevant to their learning, which they are expected to discuss later. On the basis of their discussion, they are able to decide the type of action to take.

In applying the radio forum, when the facilitator has taken the learners through a session on an issue he/she refers the learners to listen to further discussions on the issue in a radio forum. This process can be supplemented with live discussion from which they could benefit further.

Besides, the print media is equally important in communicating with the adults. This is particularly useful in the learning process of those at the post literacy level. This use of the print media will help to promote mastery and help them make the skills acquired permanent and prevent a relapse into illiteracy. In this regard, Newspapers, Magazines, and Papers can serve as effective means of communication for effective dissemination of information, accelerating literacy and spreading news about national and international events. These new literate adults can be encouraged to cultivate the habit of buying and reading regularly written text in form of magazines and newspapers. The purchase of these papers could be done by the authority and put at the general town hall where adults could have access to them and encouraged to use them.

In addition, other media for communication such as puppet, popular theatre could be used to facilitate communication with adult learners. Puppets are particularly suited for presenting humorous topics such as numbers, concepts, letters recognition, words formation, pronunciation and making conversation more meaningful for illiterate adult learners. It enables the learners to understand better and develop retentive memory.

Popular theatre takes the form of a play where activities are freely undertaken or performed to entertain and drive home a particular point or issue affecting the people. It can be used to inform and entertain people particularly at the grassroots level. It could serve as medium of information as well as, promoting ideas of modern communication activities, what it represents and its meaning.

### Barriers to Effective Communication

In communication a number of elements are involved. In the teaching learning exercise, communication process involves the educator, curriculum-content, medium of instruction, the learners and mode of evaluation. All these must be carefully linked together in a communication network without any hitch for the purpose of the teaching/learning exercise to be successfully attained. Any hindrance will undoubtedly, truncate the smooth operation of these elements and constitute a barrier to the attainment of the teaching/learning objectives. Some of the barriers that could hinder effective communication are:
• Verbalism this occur in the case of using words or terms far above the language difficulty level of the adults. It also occurs where there is no coherence and uniformity in the use of words or language.
• Lack of knowledge or interest – learners often misunderstand messages when they lack knowledge or have limited understanding of the subject or are not interested.
• Word choice- sometimes, the words we use can cause a barrier. This is because some words can have several meanings, and a receiver may not know the exact meaning intended by the sender or may give the word a meaning different from the one intended by the sender. Again, the thinking of the sender maybe fuzzy, and so the word chosen may not describe the idea or thought precisely (Agbadudu 2012).
• Poor listening skill: This constitutes one of the greatest barriers in communication particularly with the adults. Because of physiological changes, the hearing and listening skills of the adults may be affected or impaired. Besides, the appearance of the facilitator or personality, can lead the adult learners into other thinking or thoughts.
• The difference between talking rate and listening rate can make understanding difficult since thinking process cannot be slowed to equal the speakers’ variation in experience and perception. Messages are received through the five senses according to interest, needs and background of the receiver. No two persons hear, see or inwardly feel the same way at the same time even when they stand side by side witnessing the same event. The ways the individual perceive a message determine their interpretation of it and subsequent reaction. When a message is perceived wrongly, it can cause barrier in the communication process.
• Distraction - This results from improper dressing mode or physical disability. Environmental circumstances such as noise, smoke, rain and fire hazards could also lead to hindrance in communication process. Interruption by unconscious or partly conscious mechanism such as previously learnt concept, idea or interruption by physical or mental discomfort, example itching, aching, limbing, etc. Poor evaluation system. If proper evaluation system is not applied to assess the learners or curriculum content, there will be poor feedback to the teacher. This could hinder effective communication in the course of teaching and learning.

**Measures to Mitigate Barriers to Effective Communication**

A number of measures can be taken to mitigate the various barriers to effective communication. Some of these measures are:

• Ensuring that lesson content meet the interest and needs of the adult learners.
• Efforts should be made to ensure that the lesson content and delivery take into consideration the language difficulty level and level of understanding of the adults are met.
• The facilitator must use the type of language that people will understand.
• In the course of interaction new words and terms should be explained, using concrete examples and illustrations drawn from the adult learner’s existential situation or from their experiences and environment.
• Basing learning on the entry behaviour of learners to enable them understand the procedure to new things and what they represent and mean.
• The physical appearance of the facilitator is very important. He/she must endeavour to dress moderately and neatly too. The teacher must also adopt appropriate evaluation system that will enable the learners benefit from the teaching/learning process.

**Conclusion**

The relevance of effective communication in promoting literacy skill acquisition for the adults cannot be underestimated. It is a very crucial element in the teaching/learning process of the adults. To ensure that the number of adult illiterates is reduced drastically to the barest minimum in Nigeria, there will be a need to explore appropriate means of communication for the people which will enhance their day to day activities as societal members. This is to ensure that the people are kept abreast of modern communication facilities at all times, bearing in mind what these communication facilities represent and mean in the communication process. The effective use of communication resources will undoubtedly eliminate adult illiteracy, ignorance, abject poverty, and enhance communication and participation of the adults in local and national affairs in the country.

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