

Relating Communication Competence to Teaching Effectiveness: Implication for Teacher Education

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Abstract

There is wide practice of attributing students' achievement to teacher effectiveness. Some school authorities take this further by querying teachers over poor performances of their students. Although the teacher is just one factor among many that determine students' performances, the teachers' attributes and qualities are very important in the teaching and learning processes. Thus, it is important that teacher education emphasizes those qualities that will make the teacher more effective. The teacher has need of knowledge of content and communication skills to be effective. While several attributes have been used to describe an effective teacher, content knowledge and communication skills remain outstanding. This paper posits that teacher education should emphasize both content knowledge and communication skills instead of relegating communication skills because one cannot be achieved without the other. It follows up the contention by conceptualizing communication, exploring teacher communication competence, and finally suggesting the introduction of Teacher Communication Skills (TCS) course in the curricula of teacher education across levels.

Keywords: Communication competence, Teacher effectiveness, Teacher Communication Skills (TCS)

1. Introduction

Despite several innovations in the areas of individualized learning and computer-mediated learning, the centrality of the teacher in the teaching and learning process has not shifted. The role of the teacher as manager in a teaching-learning context is still sacrosanct. Haertel (2013) maintained that 'teachers matter enormously. A classroom full of students with no teacher would probably not learn much — at least not much of the prescribed curriculum'. Teachers appear to be the most critical within-school influence on student learning. It is to that end that teacher education continues to be given a major emphasis in education policy (National Policy on Education, 2013, 2007, 2004, 1981). However, while teacher education traditionally emphasizes mastery of content and pedagogical skills, something readily ascertained through course works, micro-teaching and teaching practice, it tends to subordinate competencies applicable to the communicative exchange process (Kearney and McCroskey, 2011). Content includes knowledge (i.e. facts, explanations, principles, definitions,) skills, attitude and values which are selected for the learner to learn in school (Olaitan and Ali, 1997). It refers to learning experiences which schools can offer to the learner (Eyibe, 2009). Content constitutes those things which the learner is expected to acquire. The mastery of content is inevitable but the teacher needs communication skill to convey the content. Communication competence therefore is as good as content competence. The combination of both makes for effective teaching.

What constitutes effective teaching however is not yet settled among experts. Weimer (2013) thinks that teaching effectiveness means 'teaching in such a way that learning results...' An effective teacher has been conceptualized as one who produces desired results in the course of his duty as a teacher (Uchefuna 2001). Effective teaching however may not be measured only by students' academic performance as other factors may combine to influence academic performances of students. Akiri (2013) has observed that teachers' effectiveness is not the only determinant of students' academic achievement. However, some teachers lack capability of the subject matter, knowledge and skills needed to transform their students. Phin (2014) thinks that core teacher competences should include knowledge, teaching skills and attitude. In a meta-analytical study in which 31 studies were reviewed, researchers compared the words and phrases students used to describe effective and ineffective teachers. The top three words used to characterize teachers with the highest ratings were: interesting, approachable, and clarity (Feldman, 1988). The definition extracted from descriptions of teachers nominated for teaching awards used these words: approachable, presents material well, makes subject interesting, helpful, and knowledgeable (Weimer, 2013). Also, Bangbade (2004) included teachers' knowledge of the subject matter, communication ability, emotional stability, good human relationship and interest in the job as attributes of an effective teacher.

From the above, it may be inferred that teaching effectiveness is a result of two main factors namely, knowledge (of content) and communication. While approachability and helpfulness are affective constructs, both also are subsumed under knowledge of the subject matter and ability to convey knowledge. A teacher who knows the subject and the communicative ability to impart it will be approachable and helpful. The teacher requires deep knowledge of content as well as the ability to communicate it. Content and communication competencies therefore add up to teacher effectiveness. This paper explores the nexus between teacher

communication competence and teaching effectiveness and contends that both should be emphasized in teacher education.

2. Conceptualizing Communication

The word communication is a difficult concept to explain because of its complexity. It is on this account that Ezeukwu (2000) noted that a sentence-definition of the word may not exhaust the major range of possible meanings and settings of human communication. In attempt to define the concept, the author identified four elements that must be present in a communication setting namely, source, message, medium and receiver. Communication therefore is an interaction and exchange of messages between two or more people usually through their vocal sounds, sensory organs, facial expressions, body movements and at times with a few mechanical devices (Ezeukwu, 2000). Communication in its simplest definition means the act of imparting, or transmitting information.

The purpose of communication is to transmit a message about our experiences or perceptions and to express our point of view about those experiences and perceptions. A speaker attempts to aid the audience in understanding the meaning of the message through the use of verbal and nonverbal communication. Language and words are symbolic – they represent ideas and things – and are the verbal tools the speaker uses to convey the true message – the meaning of the words – to the audience. The speaker also uses nonverbal tools – attitude, actions, and appearance – to share the meaning with the audience. An inspired presentation leaves the audience imbued with a real understanding of the meaning of the speaker's message, not merely superficial comprehension of the words used.

Hubley (1993) has shown that communication is a complex process and not as simply as defined. A communication system is often categorized into six main components or elements. The six components are: Transmitter (Speaker), Channels (Senses: speech, hearing, seeing, etc.), Message (Speaker's topic), Receiver (Audience), Noise (Internal and external factors that affect message reception by audience: e.g., daydreaming, traffic noise, etc.), and Feedback (Audience reaction). Of the six components listed, the speaker has immediate control over only three: self, the methods of communication chosen (visual, auditory, etc.), and the message itself. The speaker can influence, but not control, the last three components: the audience, distractions, and audience response (Hamm, 2006). At any stage of the communication process things may go wrong, making the communication less effective. For instance, the sender may not express what s/he wants to say clearly; or the room may be noisy; or the receiver may not understand the words the sender is using. It is the speaker's role to focus attention on the audience to enhance the probability of the receipt of the message. This is done by selecting the type of communication pertinent to the message, establishing a point-of-view, and communicating its meaning to the audience.

Communication does not only take place by means of words; non-verbal communication (or body language) is equally important. These include: ways of talking (e.g., pauses, body contact, stress on words), (e.g., shaking hands), posture (e.g., slouching), facial expression (e.g., frown), appearance (e.g., untidiness), closeness (e.g., coming too close to someone), eye movements (e.g., winking), head movements (e.g., nodding), sounds (e.g., laughing), hand movements (e.g., waving), etc. This kind of communication is usually subconscious. That is why it is said that 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. From the body language of their teachers students pick up whether they are confident and enthusiastic. Hamm (2006) argued that the brunt of the impact of a speaker's presentation is through nonverbal communication. According to Hamm, the meaning received by the audience is derived from approximately 1/3 verbal reception and 2/3 nonverbal reception. When the verbal and nonverbal messages are contradictory, most people will believe the nonverbal message they are receiving, not the verbal one. Hence, the nonverbal messages, conscious or unconscious, that are being sent by the speaker through appearance, attitude, gesture, and dress, are crucial to the communication of ideas.

3. Teacher Communication Competence

The explanation of communication in the foregoing clearly shows the link between teaching and communication; teachers are constantly imparting knowledge, or transmitting information. This is virtually a communication act. The teacher therefore needs to be competent in this act. Competency is a group of knowledge, skill, attitude, belief, habit, motivation, and personality being hidden in the persons, which reflect in their working behavior, as measurable and observable. Consequently, a competent teacher will be able to create an excellent performance as well as cause the goal accomplishment in the school through effective teaching and learning (Ozcelik and Ferman, 2006).

Effective communication is one of the sub-themes recognized as professional skills of qualified teachers (TRCN, 2012). Teachers must effectively use spoken language, gestures, symbols, signs, questioning and other techniques to share information with and enrich understanding of the learners. They should have ability to effectively pass information to learners and to understand precisely expressions of opinions and feelings of the

learner. Teachers should have excellent writing and speech skills that distinguish them in groups and make them popular choice when the need for public speaking arises. Effective teachers are communication experts - excellent in the language of instruction and a master of the art in classroom information management and public speech.

Some teachers like to talk, and expect the students to write down what they say and to learn it (this style encourages superficial learning – and rapid forgetting). Other teachers see their role as one of helping the students to learn at a deeper level - to understand new ideas and concepts so well that they can apply them in a work situation. Either way, these teachers will do a better job if they communicate well with their students and do not undermine the impact which their non-verbal means make on learners. According to N’Allah and Sanusi (1991) effective communication depends on one’s ability to express oneself in speech clearly, accurately and fluently. Although thoughts could be expressed in writing, it is only through speech that one’s thoughts would be put across accurately and effectively to one’s audience without any form of ambiguity. This is because in some cases, it might be difficult for a reader to guess and interpret exactly what the writer has in mind. Therefore, a good spoken form of any language is a virtue in communication.

An important element of communication in teaching is the use of instructional materials. A Chinese adage has it: What I hear, I forget; what I see, I remember; what I do, I know. Pictures, written posters and practical demonstrations improve communication. Abdu-Raheem (2016) defines instructional materials as essential and significant tools needed for teaching and learning of school subjects to promote teachers efficiency and improve students’ performance. Apart from verbal and non-verbal communication therefore, instructional materials are equally used by the teacher to communicate and make learning meaningful. Effective teachers engage student attention through dynamic delivery, vocal variety, appropriate employment of instructional materials and frequent gestures and movement.

The National Communication Association (the oldest and largest national organization to promote communication scholarship and education) has outlined five broad teacher communication competencies regarding informative, affective, imaginative, ritualistic, and persuasive instructional messages. Effective teachers should demonstrate competencies in sending and receiving messages that:

- (1). Give or obtain information,
- (2). Express or respond to feelings,
- (3) Speculate or theorize,
- (4) Maintain social relationships and facilitate interaction, and
- (5) Seek to convince or influence (Cooper, 1988).

When the teacher initiates classroom communication, it is basically to inform, clarify, question, and expects students’ feedback either orally or in written form. Clear, concise information is better than complex and ambiguous information. Teaching therefore is not a platform for the use of unfamiliar words superfluous phrases. The teacher’s communication style should also be such that will endear him to his students and by so doing influence their behavior. The only way a teacher determines the impact of his communication is through feedback. Prozesky (2014) stated that Communication is a skill and we improve our skills by getting feedback on the way we perform them. Teachers can get feedback by asking an experienced colleague to sit in on their teaching, and to give them feedback. They can also ask someone to record them on a videotape as they teach which they will then inspect critically afterwards. In either case the feedback will be better if a checklist is used to judge performances. The following checklist has been developed to assess teacher communication competence based on style of presentation, content, writing style (Prozesky, 2014):

Table 1: Checklist for Style of Presentation

Style of Presentation: Area of Measurement	Remark
Does the teacher speak clearly? (loud enough; not too fast; faces the class; avoids mannerisms like ‘oum’) Is the teacher’s non-verbal communication suitable? (appropriate gestures and expressions; moves around; eye contact with whole class) Does the teacher speak understandably? (uses words that the students should be able to understand) Is the speed of presentation right? (the students must be able to absorb the material that is presented) Is there two-way communication? (the teacher checks regularly if the students have understood) Is there evidence of a good relationship between teacher and students? (teacher and students respect each other, listen to each other)	

Table 2: Checklist for Content

Content: Area of Measurement	Remark
Does the teacher emphasize important knowledge? (the main messages are clear and emphasized, unnecessary detail is left out) Is information presented in a logical sequence? (bits of information follow logically after each other , easy to understand and remember)	

Table 3: Checklist for Writing Style

Writing Style: Area of Measurement	Remark
Are the sentences short? (not more than 20 words; one idea per sentence) Are active verbs used as much as possible? (feed children regularly, not children should be regularly fed) Are the readers likely to understand the words? (no jargon; using the simplest word that will say what you want to say)	

While the list in the foregoing may not be exhaustive, it provides a framework for development of a checklist for the measurement of teacher communication competence. One major advantage of using checklist approach is that it can provide a very economic and systematic way to ensure all relevant items are considered for evaluation (Wong, 2011). The teacher can use the checklist for self-evaluation, and as basis for improving on effectiveness.

4. Implications for Teacher Education

Effective communication is a necessary ingredient of teacher effectiveness. Teacher education in Nigeria however has little provision for training on effective communication. The closest to this are courses under the General Studies Education (GSE) that include (as in Nigeria Certificate in Education programme, considered minimum qualification for teachers) General English 1-5. These are not a supplement to teacher communication skill course. Teacher education needs a core Teacher Communication Skills (TCS) course that should attract higher credit and run through the levels. This is the only way to compensate for the imbalance in the curriculum of teacher education that tilts in favour of content at the expense of communication. There is the need therefore to review the curricula of teacher education across levels and programmes and infuse them with TCS courses.

5. Conclusion

Communication skill is as good as content knowledge in defining teaching effectiveness. One is not subject to the other if teaching must be effective. The present practice in teacher education emphasizes knowledge of content while subordinating skills in communication. Teacher Communication Skill is advocated in the curricula of teacher education across levels.

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