On Communicative Competence and Students' Performance in English Language

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---**ABSTRACT**--
Many Nigerian English as L2 students particularly in secondary schools are still finding it difficult to effectively communicate using English as viable medium. Spoken and written texts in English of most students are of no enviable standard. The necessary knowledge in English appears lacking due to absence of sound oral and written drilling in English. This paper therefore, focuses attention on exposition of students to basic communicative competence in English using comparative and pedagogical approaches. The linguistics features of students' mother tongues in terms of phonetics and phonological systems as well as syntactic structures are compared with those of English. Thorough drilling in the identical similar and different speech sounds of the students' mother tongue and English assisted in no small way in fortifying the students' communicative competency in English. This paper supports the notion that any competent user of a language should demonstrate accuracy of the grammatical and vocabulary aspects and also use such linguistic knowledge appropriately. To achieve this, the paper recommends among other things, communicative approach to teaching of English language which enables learners to understand and use utterances rightly in different contexts; also that learners should be exposed to consonant and vowel sounds which are absent from their mother tongues (MT) and also mentions the need for the teacher to drill the taught in extensive reading.

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I.   INTRODUCTION

Listening and Reading, the receptive skills as well as speaking and writing, the productive skills possess interlocking relationships in their usage. They are all fundamental to competence and performance in English language however communicative competence emphasizes mastery of oral (speaking) and written communications by learners.

Communicative competence according to Opara (1999) p.5 deals with "performance, that is, the speaker's ability to understand and use utterances appropriate to different contexts. It means fluency in oral and written communication".

According to Yano (2003), "successful language use for communication presupposes the development of communicative competence in the users of that language which is constrained by the socio-cultural norms of the society where the language is used. He further explained that Chomsky (1965) made a distinction between grammatical competence and 'performance'. The former is the linguistic knowledge of the idealized native speaker, an innate biological function of the mind that allows individuals to generate the infinite set of grammatical sentences that constitute their language, and the latter is the actual use of language in concrete situation". This implies that communicative competence denotes demonstration of the grammatical skills.

Pillar (2004) opines that linguistic competence refers to the mastery of knowledge of the language code itself. This involves controlling the formal organization of the language for producing or recognizing correct sentences and organizing them to form texts. Linguistic competence includes the rules of word formation and vocabulary (lexicon), pronunciation (phonology) and sentence formation (syntax)".

Communicative competence is sine qua non to students' academic success due to the fact that proficient speaking opens the door of success while writing tests students' linguistic ability. For students to attain academic peak, mastery of English language knowledge is important. Everyday interactions demand demonstration of mastery of linguistics knowledge.

According to Okoh (1998) p.9, for academic purposes, speech and writing represent the main means of expressive. But while speech deals essentially with sounds and hearing, writing remains a primarily visual phenomenon, in other words, a system of graphic symbols to be interpreted by the reader, who runs his eyes to and fro the page".

"Acquiring oral skills in an L2 context is no mean task. There are several reasons for this; ranging from problems with the phonology of the L2, the phenomenon generally referred to as mother tongue interference, to cultural differences between the different languages or peoples". (Okoh, 2002) pp.150-151.

Canale and Swain (1980) defined communicative competence in the context of second language teaching. Their view of communicative competence is "a synthesis of knowledge of basic grammatical principles, knowledge of how language is used in social settings to perform communicative functions and knowledge of how utterances and communicative function can be combined according to the principle of discourse".

Oral and written communications are key parts of language teaching and learning. It is difficult to exhibit performance in written skills without knowledge of grammar. Grammar aids quick and efficient learning of a language. Grammar which specializes in syntax, morphology, semantics is an essential tool for written communication. Thus an English language student must master grammatical intricacies for accomplishment.

Furthermore communication cannot take place in the absence of structures or grammar. To effectively communicate, knowledge of grammatical forms, lexical, morphological, syntactical and phonological features of English language is `crucial. Any competent user of a language should not only demonstrate an accurate use of the grammatical and vocabulary aspects of that language but should be well equipped to use such linguistics knowledge appropriately.

Hindrances to Students' Performance in Communicative Competence

Learners of English as a second language experience some difficulties in the mastery of communicative competence. This is due to a number of reasons. Opara (1999)pp.2-3, stated that "some phonemes which are present in English language are absent in Nigeria indigenous languages. For example, the Igbo language has eight vowel phonemes /a,e,i,o,u,,u,y,i/ whereas English has twelve vowel phonemes, eight diphthongs and three triphthongs whereas Igbo has none.

Moreover, English vowels have been further divided into long and short vowels consequently Igbo speakers of English find it difficult to distinguish between the pronunciation of words such as sit and seat, bad and bard; first and feast and further pronounce 'ch' for 'S'. For example, miss becomes mich. Others cannot distinguish between 'l' and 'r', 't' and 'th'. The result is that they pronounce 'schoor' for 'school' and 'tink for think (ti k).

Yoruba users of English find it difficult to pronounce certain English sounds like /
z, f / because they are absent from their language. Thus pronounce
think /tink/   instead of   /   k/
/zip /sip/   instead of   /zip/
/fery /   instead of   /very/

Moreover, students lag behind in communicative competence because according to Roach (1997:3) in Soneye (2001)p.75, English language has notoriously confusing spelling nature. For example, the following words can pose a problem to learners of English as a second language

omission	xylophone
orchestral	juvenile
anecdotal	philanthropist

Okoh (2002) p.162, buttressed this point that "English has quite a number of words which are pronounced differently from the way they look. Several words even while sounding exactly the same have entirely different meanings, while others are spelt in terribly odd and awkward ways … oral skills hardly stand alone; they enter into such other regions as spelling, writing, even vocabulary building". This implies that teachers should drill students well in spelling in other to be able to write words like

owl	awl
altar	alter
alley	ally
thought	taught
braising	brazen
shore	shawl
feed	feud
hole	whole
cease	seize etc

Barrow (1938) in Fatiloro (2005) p.77 said "there is no consistent method of representing sounds in English. English alphabet does not contain letters enough to represent English sounds adequately. The phonetic representation of English sound calls for at least thirty eight different symbols while our alphabets contain only twenty six letters thus in most cases, a letter must stand for more than one sound as in letter "a" which has different pronunciations in

at	/æ/	art	/aːt/
at	/et/	sofa	/səufə/
all	/ɔːl/	village	/vIlIdz/

Letter c stands for three different sounds as in

face	/s/
cat	/k/
ocean	/sh/

Letter "k" may be represented by k, c, q, ch, ck and x as in

kit	/kit/
cat	/kæt/
quite	/kwaIt/
ache	/eik/
sick	/sik/

A major hindrance to second English language learners' performance is inability to distinguish between formal and informal style of writings. Okoh (1998) p.10 opines that "we learn to speak ever before we are in a position to write. One important difference following from this then is that while we learn to speak, we have to be taught to write. In spite of such teachings some never learn to write fluently in an L2….. spoken language adopts a less formal style while written language maintains a more conservative and formal posture". Hence the students' writings are full of incoherent and non-standard expressions like

I beg you.	instead of	I plead with you.
How is the body?	instead of	How is your health?
Please give me pen.	instead of	Please give me a/the pen.
She is my junior sister.	instead of	She is my younger sister.
My father is an academician.	instead of	My father is an academic.

Moreover, students demonstrate lack of mastery of basic grammatical structures which is foundational to appropriate and standard writing. Learners of English as a second language are fond of committing errors ranging from tautological error to misappropriation of words or neologisms, coinages etc. Okoh (1998) p.76 posits that "we cannot achieve an effective style in English until we have acquired sufficient mastery of the basic unit for constructing any stylistic edifice namely words". Thus, a good knowledge of grammatical features will greatly assist students' communicative competence.

Strategies for Effective Teaching and Learning of Communicative Competence
The language experts suggested a number of methods of teaching English Language ranging from Grammar-Translation, Audio-Lingual to Communicative Method. It has been discovered that a major deficiency of Grammar-Translation method is its focus on development of written skills to the detriment of oral skill.

Audio-lingual method emphasizes drills and exercises not rules and regulations about grammar. Williams in Opara (1999) p.8 stated the following as disadvantages of audio-lingua method:
1. The tendency to focus on discrete items in isolated contexts.
2. Mechanical laboratory drills not representing language as it is used for real-life communication.
3. Overemphasis on aural aspect, to the detriment of those who are visual minded.
4. An unrealistic instance on error-free learning

For a result oriented teaching of communicative competence, communicative method should be adapted. This method assists fluency in oral and written English and enables learners to understand and use inferences appropriately in different context. Opara (1999) suggests the procedure for communicative method of English teaching:
i. Teacher presents the topic and facts to be known about it.
ii. He drills the students on the topic.
iii. He presents a model of what is required in a communicative exercise or activity in pairs or groups.
iv. He allows the students to practice the communicative exercises.
v. The teacher listens to the group interactions taking note of the language use (ignoring inaccuracies of grammar, pronunciation but making a point to deal with them later).

vi.   Towards the end of the lesson, the teacher holds a discussion on the appropriateness of language based on his notes.

Okoh (2002) p.160 stated that "one important aspect of oral skills concerns the need for fluency which can only come from the habit of doing the language we are learning … the practicing ESP teacher is likely to structure his oral lessons to follow the basic pattern of three stages or the three Ps- presentation, practice and production. In presentation, the teacher presents some new materials, in practice, the students are made to work under his direction and finally in production, students are allowed to work on their own.

The bilinguals must be well versed in English language phonetic alphabets to avoid mispronunciation. It is essential to understand that there are too many words in English that are not produced as they are spelled. E.g.

Total   /Totl/
Straight   /streit/
Palm   /pam/
Wednesday   /wenzdi/

Both the teachers and students alike must be eye and ear-minded. There is a need for training to notice what sounds make the spoken word, irrespective of the letters with which it is spelt. Teachers should engage students in distinguishing between different sounds as well as different shades of the same sounds.

There is a correlation between extensive reading and perfect writing. Thus students should be exposed to wide reading. This will go a long way to boost their vocabulary and strengthen mastery of grammatical structures which are foundational to written communication.

For clarity in writing, teacher should emphasize the need for right choice of words and parallelism. Writing should be devoid of ambiguous expressions through the use of correct simple sentences and choice of identical grammatical structures (parallelism).

Conclusion and Recommendations

Communicative competence is an integral aspect of English Language classroom. To attain success in academic career, a good grasp of both oral and written communication cannot be neglected by students. The paper has been able to point out the hindrances and strategies for its attainment. It behooves both the teacher and the taught to work hard for practice makes perfect for the overall benefit of all stakeholders in English language. The paper thus proposes the following:
1.   That the student should be encouraged to read wide because extensive reading empowers vocabulary development which is a necessary tool for written communication.
2.   Learners of English as a second language should be earlier exposed to consonant and vowel sounds that are absent from their mother tongues (MT) to avoid interference phenomenon.
3.   Nigerian government should stimulate reading by providing numerous well equipped public libraries for students and English users generally.
4.   Communicative approach which emphasis not just grammatical knowledge but also oral and written skills should be adopted by English teachers in L2 classroom.

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