

ORACY SKILL: PATHWAY TO POVERTY ERADICATION, EMPLOYMENT OPPORTUNITIES AND SECURITY CHALLENGES

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Abstract

Nigeria has been discoloured by different shades of crisis most of which have been connected but not limited to political propagandas and language infelicities. Several governmental interventions at ameliorating the challenges of the crisis have not yielded much positive results. This paper is an attempt to show that lack of adequate oral skills can threaten national security while the possession of it can strengthen economic and personal development as well as the security of a nation. Oracy skill is an aspect of communication which bothers on the ability to speak and understand a language effectively and appropriately. It encompasses how people say what they say as well as how they explicate meanings out of what others say hence, its coordinate terms on the other hand are literacy and numeracy. In this paper, we decry the erroneous focus on too much written responses in schools to the detriment of oracy and we expose some of the economic, psycho-social and educational benefits involved in developing oracy skills to include; the development of creative and critical thinking necessary for competence in written work, improved educational outcomes, inspired creativity and rich opportunities to flourish and access new grounds especially in a technological dispensation. Among the recommendations are a reorientation and a conscious effort in language education geared towards projecting more of oral responses to literary and non-literary texts and this must be integrated into all levels of the educational system.

Keywords: Oracy, oracy skill, poverty alleviation, employment opportunities, security.

The preponderance of conflicts emanating from language misfires and other infelicities which have bedeviled Nigeria till date is an indication that Nigeria needs an overhaul of her language teaching and learning system. Language is the live wire of any community where it serves as a weapon of control especially in a democratic society. A democratic society needs people who have the linguistic ability to discuss, evaluate and make sense of what they are told, as well as to take effective action on the basis of their understanding otherwise there can be no genuine participation, but only the imposition of the ideas of those who are linguistically capable (Wilkinson, Davis & Berrill, 1990).

On several occasions, the Nigerian schools have been indicted for producing unemployable graduates and in 2015, it was decried that over 60 percent of Nigerian students failed the May/June English WASSCE examinations. Nigeria is, on the other hand, plagued by misconceptions and conflicts emanating from ethnocentrism and extremism among other parochial views and stance. In the second quarter of 2016, Nigerians woke up to the devastating news of a recessed economy marked by a decline in economic activities, an up surge of exchange rates and high rate of inflation and unemployment. This was attributed to poor economic policies, insurgency, pipeline vandalism, and in more recent times, decline in agricultural products emanating from the menace of herdsmen among other issues. It is disheartening to note that not much success has been achieved in spite of governmental interventions and assurances on these issues.

According to Hashmi (2014) conflicts are most often than not unconsciously occasioned by misconceptions about other cultures as well as inadequate language use. Language use here
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presupposes *literacy* and *oracy*. Orators can effectively control the psyche of members of a community because their linguistic status frees them from the clutches of unnecessary intimidation and subjugation and on the other hand, empowers them to enslave others. Spoken words play vital roles in linking individuals to the world around them even from birth through to early childhood and ultimately to full adult life where it has the most overwhelming influence (Mercer, Warwick, & Ahmed, 2017). Hence, the demand for an educational progress that would engender positive thinking as well as very confident and fluent school leavers is rapidly increasing in the society. We posit here, that any intervention marked by dispassionate attitude towards language education especially the development of oracy skills and human capital development will continue to exacerbate the situation. The issue of concern here is the ultimate power of oracy skills in combating economic recession, unemployment and security challenges.

Language Studies and Oracy Skills

Language is a uniquely powerful instrument in the life of a people for coexistence and explicating meanings in their various contexts. As an instrument, its application must be learnt for effective utilization. This is corroborated by Bod (2014) where he states that the study of language involves the analysis of language form, language meaning and language in context. Language provides the springboard for reasoning abilities which is the basis for any meaningful language analysis hence, Littleton & Mercer (2014) opine that we use language to interthink. According to them, 'Interthinking' is the basis for the major achievements of human kind and this ability has to be learned.

The English language has been the fulcrum of any serious discussion in Nigeria since its bequeathal by the colonial masters and especially for the robust patronage it enjoys globally, it is perturbing therefore that its spoken form is not being given an utmost attention for development. Andrew Wilkinson, a British researcher and educator, in the 1960s coined the term 'oracy' as a reaction to the neglect of oral skills in British education. It is pertinent to state here that what is said is equally as important as how, when and where it is said as these are some of the basic determinants of the reactions generated by spoken words in recent times. Oracy is about learning to be conscious, tactful, considerate and sympathetic to the feelings of others in speech events. It is an aspect of language study that concerns itself with the exclusion of biased, prejudiced, offensive and hurtful words in our communications. Gurteen (2018) opines that 'If *literacy* is the ability to read and write, then *oracy* is the ability to listen and to speak'. With the concept of oracy skill thus established, it is ironic that most language studies in our schools are dominated by writing or reading activities with very little talk which is largely that of the teachers. The ability to cultivate wholesome speech in order to express ourselves openly with robust civility is a skill that must be learnt in language study (Gurteen, 2018). The question here is which is more important? The ability to read and write or the capacity for effective all round communication? The truth is that the duo are two sides of the same coin, we need both for survival in our families, offices, classrooms and even in our spiritual lives. In our daily transactions and negotiations, we get only brief moments of attention from clients, customers, influential politicians or to champion a cause and these require far more than summative academic success in written assessments which define our school system. According to Littleton & Mercer (2014), 'talk needs tuition; schools must teach spoken language for the sake of social mobility. They further stress that when students learn how to use talk to reason together, they become better at reasoning on their own. Alexander (2012) enumerates three basic benefits of teaching oracy in

language studies, to include; cognitive gains which enhances positive attitude towards learning, personal and social gains which boosts self esteem, self confidence and reduction in anxiety, civic engagement and empowerment gains which is the ability to understand social issues and manage differences. Alexander (2012) concludes that clear and concise oral skills culminate into good telephone skills. By implication therefore, the development of good oral skills, is a moral imperative for 'good manners' and this is one of the most remarkable milestones that an individual must achieve in life.

Developing Oracy Skills in the Classroom

In time past, the struggle for survival and enlightenment led to the quest for a process and structure by which humans would acquire knowledge and skills needed to function in their culture. This quest and process is 'education' and its functionality is culture specific which makes it essential in shaping our beliefs, ideas and attitudes. Looking at the Nigerian society today, it is an understatement that she is bereft of economic stability, tolerance and security. Conflicts emanating from ineffective use of the English language have been witnessed in some quarters owing to the fact that the English language is the vehicle for shaping our beliefs, attitudes and driving enlightenment and effectiveness is mostly based on its fluent use.

According to Alexander (2012) fluency in English language can be seen as an outcome whereby students learn to talk confidently, appropriately and sensitively. Success at developing oracy skills is therefore determined by series of adequate planning aimed at achieving a level of competence in the choice of vocabularies that are suitable for their different occasions while avoiding vocabularies that evoke emotions. This cannot be relegated to the background in a nation bedeviled with so much misconceptions, security challenges and high rate of unemployment.

According to Littleton & Mercer (2014) the society erroneously believes that talk is spontaneous and does not need tuition and that if children are talking they are not learning. Thus supporting their position on the development of oracy skill, it is argued that the emphasis in the preschool years should be on oral language experiences where they learn to interpret ideas and impressions through reading; to listen and respond through speaking; and to convey their ideas, impressions and feelings through writing (Evans, R. & Jones, D. 2007). Daniels (2016) further corroborates this where he posits that storytelling within the classroom is effective in helping children develop their own narrative forms through oral language. A discussion about a favourite book, geography, literature or even students' summer holidays can expand speaking skills and fine-tune both their oracy and literacy skills. Evans, & Jones, (2007) propose exposure to mind-related talk as an aid to metacognitive understanding, encouragement-of-autonomy, modulation-of-certainty talk and free play session to boost oracy skills. Five types of teaching which further promote oracy include; Rote, Recitation, Instruction, Discussion and Dialogue (Alexander, 2012). Dawes, Mercer, & Wegerif, (2004) advocate the revision of understanding through sustained and productive dialogue with peers using a system of turn-taking to ensure that everyone has a chance to contribute their ideas which in turn must be respected. In the same way, showing videos of good quality debates or discussions will give students vital tools that will strengthen their own speaking skills and all other communication skills. As students strengthen their oracy skills through classroom discussions, they are also being taught how to reason. The development of oracy skill is therefore the development of reasoning ability which is the basis of all relational issues.

Oracy Skill, Poverty Eradication and Employment Opportunities

The indices for economic advancement such as hyperconnectivity, globalization and technological advancement have resulted in challenges not only in the business world but also in individual lives, within families and across the globe. Presently, the world can only be navigated through effective language development. With the elitist nature of the present day society, organizations crave for prospective employees who would not only possess knowledge in their fields of study but who are loci of relevant technical knowledge, insightful and creative capabilities, mental and emotional stability and effective public communication skills. Oracy in the use of the English language has become pivotal to economic, political and educational development. According to Wilkinson (2010) Oracy skill is crucial, especially for managing interviews, adequate performance at work meetings or for clear and concise contributions in challenging discussions. Suffice to say that in the absence of full-time paid employment, some youths leverage on their impeccable verbal skills to anchor programmes such as weddings, book launch and birthdays for which they are remunerated. Some perform the function of rapporteurs and many other speech activities where eloquence in the use of the English language is germane. In recent times, natural boundaries which hitherto have been considered impenetrable have bowed to technological pressures and possibilities. This has influenced commerce by exposing new ideas, products and international procedures. Low level proficiency in English language use therefore, deprives one of access to economic development. To contribute to globalization, one needs to be a locus of the basic principles of correct grammatical prescriptions in speech. In the business world, multinational corporations are attracted to countries where interactions and operations are globally networked and facilitated by ICT and communication in English. The *power* of English language resides in competence at speaking it (its oral use) in social settings to perform resounding communicative functions according to the principles of discourse which operates therein. Research shows that children who are taught speaking skills perform better in mathematics, science and reasoning tests and they are also more likely to get a good job and find themselves in leadership roles, often leading in their countries' affairs (Mercer, Ahmed & Warwick, 2017). They further posit that the more adept learners become in reasoning through speech, the more likely they are to engage with other subjects that have their foundations in logical reasoning, such as science and mathematics. The eradication of poverty and unemployment indices in economic development of a nation can be tackled through the development of oracy skills at all levels of the educational system. Wilkinson (2010) maintains that, Oracy skills are not just essential for educational progress; they are critical for successful careers, interpersonal relationships and self-belief. It is an observable fact that most successful people are identified by one signature tune; their capacity to speak in public with absolute confidence which naturally earns them people's trust and beliefs and this is one of the traits that employers look out for. Most employers consider it burdensome as they now have to grapple with providing remedial training in English language proficiency and IT for their employees amid concerns that Nigerian youths are leaving school lacking these basic skills especially the use of English. These concerns underpin the instrumentality of oracy skills in the economic development of a nation.

Combating Security Challenges through Oracy Skills

In the general sense, security gives the import of safety of lives and property of individuals but national security goes beyond this to include even the efforts made or decisions taken in order to keep the people as well as the nation safe. Security involves some activities geared towards the protection of a country, a building or a person against attack, danger, etc. However, security can be

challenged by some imbalances in the society. Unemployment, especially among the youths, has been established as one of the issues which fan the embers of conflict. The Nigerian situation is paradoxical in the sense that her multilingual and multiethnic structures which should have spurred her into the position of a super economy have become sources of tension and discord. Misconceptions, miscommunications and misinterpretations arising from inappropriate language use have been the basis for most of the security challenges especially in this clime owing in part to the structure of linguistic diversity that defines the country. Ugwu (2009) attributes ignorance, rumours and unguarded utterances as factors that can lead to conflict or crisis (as cited in Ikejiani Clark).

In several instances brute force has been exerted to curb this menace of inciting speeches and in most recent times, what has been tagged 'hate speech' resulting in the abuse or violation of human rights. There must be maximum security ensured not just through military force but through something more subtle and yet more powerful than the brutality of the military force. That thing is effective and appropriate use of the English language. In other words, right choice of words that will not create threats, anxiety or danger for human existence (oracy skill). Wilkinson, et al (1990) opines that effectiveness in language use is about not being manipulated, about negotiating as equals, standing up and speaking the truth as we see it". This explains why Maduekwe (2007) asserts that Language is an instrument of liberation. It endows man with the ability to reason, lead and charge others to a predetermined action rather than being directed or misguided. While this is in the positive sense, it can also become an instrument of ensnarement, subjugation or relegation to primitive level. At the heart of every language activity is the oral use of it where it possesses the ability to unlock the mind of the individual. Words are not as important in themselves as much as the meanings abstracted from them and the quality of meaning abstraction is based on an individual's prowess at language use, this also modifies the individual's speech on the other hand. Speech is used to do things. In other words, actions start in the form speech using words which describe, explain thoughts, incite, threaten or persuade people to a predetermined course of action. Speech is powerful enough to make or mar situations depending on appropriateness of use. Instances of threats to security in Nigeria arising from misfires in speech events abound thus:

Instance 1

— Former President, Olusegun Obasanjo quoted in Vanguard News Papers, 24TH May, 2012 was reported to have expressed the following- 'Rogues, Armed Robbers are in the States and National Assemblies, what sort of laws will they make?'

In recent times, with the obvious level of corruption in Nigeria, a statement of this sort may be welcomed or even applauded as 'well said' but the infelicities are capable of inciting people into negative actions. We argue here that 'right to one's opinion' or 'freedom of speech' though sacrosanct, has boundaries supposedly located at the point of infringement on others sensibilities. The statements contain derogatory appellations hence sparked off some negative reactions from the law makers who felt seriously insulted especially where it emanated from the president of the nation.

Instance 2

—In another instance, President Mohammadu Buhari, the current president of the Federal Republic of Nigeria was reported to have said that-'God willing, by 2015, something will happen. They either conduct a free and fair election or they go a very disgraceful way. If what happened in 2011 should

again happen in 2015, by the grace of God, the dog and the baboon will all be soaked in blood'. The above statement was captured by Amanze Obi in the Daily Sun, Tuesday, May 17, 2012, P. 56.

Buhari's utterance above is not only inflammatory but inciting and intimidating with a number of infelicities. There is a speculative allegation against the conduct of the election and a clear cut warning of his battle readiness. To some people however, he merely stated his opinion but to some others especially the unemployed and aggrieved youths who were in solidarity with him, this statement could serve as a call for an action against the incumbent president.

In our educational system, stasis in the development of oral skills has metamorphosed into what is generally termed 'hate speech' which is inimical to the peaceful coexistence of the different blocks that constitute Nigeria. It is pertinent to state here that some of these speeches, if appropriately spoken, would serve reformatory purposes. Hence, another issue in security is the ability to defend oneself or assert one's position. In language development, a baby is only able to assert himself if properly spoken to and consequently, develops an oral motive power to liberate himself as well other persons for the eradication of social inequalities often present in speeches describable as biases, sexism or non inclusive communications. Once students are helped to discover the opportunities at their disposal, they'll use their voice to change the world around them. Oracy skill is therefore an invaluable tool in economic recovery, financial independence and combating security challenges.

Conclusion

We posit in this paper that ineffective and inappropriate oral language use generally threatens the security of a nation. The Nigerian situation shows that oracy skill has the propensity to unlock intellectual abilities. It is a tool for national rebirth, reawakening, reforming and transforming a society. The development of oracy skill is sacrosanct in creating 'new words' and ultimately 'new worlds' devoid of volatility and rancor. To forestall the problems highlighted in this paper, we propose the following recommendations.

Recommendations

1. We propose the development and implementation of an oracy-led curriculum where oracy is given adequate attention much more than other aspects of the English language.
2. Provision of oracy tool kits for instructors. If teachers are to help students develop their talking skills, then they need a teacher-friendly toolkit as frameworks for the teaching of oracy.
3. A grant from the Education Endowment Funds should be made available for the establishment of centres for the development of oracy skills.
4. Sensitization of teachers on instructional approaches which should be deliberately tailored towards encouraging 'heuristic talk'. This entails the use of relatively unstructured and exploratory use of the English language by the students to develop every new concept in the classroom.

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