Students Learning Needs in Language and Communication Skills

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Abstract: This study is a needs analysis study designed to identify the learning need of year one students in Colleges of Education in Nigeria. The data collected will enable the lecturers to address specific areas of need of these students during teaching so as to produce students who are proficient in the language. Among the factors identified as posing problems are speaking skills, writing skills, grammar and others.

Key words: Learning needs, language and communication skills, lecturers, grammar

INTRODUCTION

Language and communication skills are designed to improve the communication skills of teacher-trainees in Colleges of Education in Nigeria. The aim being to equip them with listening, speaking, reading and writing skills that will enable them to follow the substance of class lectures, taking down notes and in engaging in meaningful discussion outside the classroom as well as equip them with the tools to use in imparting knowledge when they become teachers. However, from observation, in the course of interacting with students during teaching practice and at graduation, most of them are still not proficient in the language probably because of the poor foundation they had before being admitted into the college.

To this end, much has been said about what English teachers need to do, to effectively perform their roles. Some of such suggestions were that teachers should rely on theories of learning (Aborisade, 2003). These theories emphasize needs analysis and the adoption of communication methodology of second language (L2) acquisition (Otagburuagu, 1997 and Olaofe, 1995). Each of these aspects according to Bodunde (2005) revolves round learners. Learners as it were are the major factor in needs analysis, their contribution in determining the content of what to be taught and the methodology to employ in facilitating teaching and learning need be considered.

Needs analysis is an important aspect in course design and teaching and in recent time, has received attention due to its importance in communicative language teaching. Communicative language approach emphasizes that learners must make grammatically correct sentences and also develop the skills to use language to get things done. The use of needs analysis in instructional design process is therefore important.

There are various approaches to needs analysis. Aborisade (2003) identifies three models in the study of three different studies - the council of Europe, Munby (1978) and Hutchison and Waters (1988). The council of Europe states that all parties involved in language programme should contribute to the choice of data and resources, objectives, method of assessment and curricula. Hutchison and Waters (1988) categorized the constituents of a learners need into Target Needs (TN); Otagburuagu (1997) specifies that the second constituent element of need is the gap between the target proficiency and learner performance in the target language called "lacks". According to him the third component is the learners genuine demand for proficiency in the target language which is represented by aspects of the language the learner is motivated to learn. In other words, people build the usages of their needs on the basis of data relating to themselves and their environment. So needs analysis from Otugburuagu's point of view is a kind of consultation for learner input in the language programme, which is learner specific. This then forms the basis for which the teacher can teach. Since the learner is the key factor in learning, learners should be involved in identifying their needs in language learning so as to improve the teaching and learning of the course.

The earliest study of needs - based ESP (English for Special Purpose) was that of Adedeji (1984). Adedeji identified six communication needs of technical students of polytechnics. These include the need to define concepts, describe substances, explain procedures and process, report facts and listening and speaking needs. In another study by Otagburuagu (1996) the needs of chemistry students of the University of Nigeria Nsukka were identified. Otagburuagu (1996) found that the students need cohesive strategies and syntactic strategies. Oguine (1998) study identifies the needs of

medical students of the Jos Medical faculty as speaking in class, reading course books, writing and summaries and study skills. Bodunde (2005) found that students recognize the importance of English Communication Skills (ECS) in their academic pursuit while giving reason for learning English communication skills. The needs as identified by the students in her study include the improvement of speaking skills, communication, writing and reading skills. Hence, the purpose of this study is to determine the needs of college students in the use of Language and Communication skills. Students of Federal College of Education (Technical) Omoku, Rivers State, Nigeria, will be the focal point. Specifically, the study sought students opinion on the area of difficulties they have in learning language and communication skills; to state the area they want to improve upon i.e. what they want to achieve by the end of the course; to determine the adequacy of the time allotted for the course as perceived by trainees; and to suggest how the teaching of the course can be improved

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study sought students opinion on the aspect of the use of language and communication skills they find difficult. The involvement of learners in identifying their need will enable teachers to address the areas they are deficient in. It is hoped that the study will be of benefit to learners and provide an insight to teachers in handling this course. The target population was Year One students of the Federal College of Education (Technical), Omoku, Rivers State, Nigeria. Out of the 400 students in the four schools of study; Business education, Science Education, Vocational Education and Technical Education, 150 students were randomly selected thus: Business education (45), Science Education (40), Vocational Education (35) and Technical Education (30). The instrument for data collection was a structured interview designed so that students had the opportunity to express themselves without any restriction. The instrument consisted of questions based on the aspect of the course they find difficult to understand. They were also requested to state what they will gain in the lecture that is the aspect, they want to improve on in order to communicate effectively. Finally , they were asked to provide their views on the adequate of the time scheduled for the course and how to improve the teaching. The instrument was administered to them at the beginning of the first semester. The subjects responded to the questions in the classroom under the supervision of the

researcher. The data collected were collated and analyzed using the simple percentage. The results are presented in a tabular form.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 1 shows that most of the students want to improve how they speak (80%). This shows the importance they attach to speaking. It also means that they are willing to improve this skill despite their poor command of the language. This finding collaborates with Ohale (1990) and Oguine (1998) who found that students know the importance of speaking skills.

Another benefit they expect from the course is to be able to read and understand (66.6%) to write well and summarize texts (76.6%) to improve listening skill (53.3%) and to improve grammar and vocabulary skills (73.3%). This result shows that students rate speaking skill highly and so perceive it as the most important followed by writing and summary, skills, grammar and vocabulary, reading skill and lastly, listening skill.

Perceived difficulty areas: Table 2 indicate that FCE(T) year one students have greater difficulty, with speaking skills followed by grammar, writing, listening and reading. This is as a result of their perception of the role speaking plays in communication. Grammar was the next in the list. This portrays their actual need since most students' grammatical competence is poor. This may be due to the preconceived idea that grammar is difficult to learn and so they have a negative attitude to the learning of grammar. Another factor may be the poor background students had in their secondary school days.

Multiple responses recorded: However, writing which was rated third on the list is another area that student find difficult. Infact, based on their written assignments, their written expressions were below expectation probably due

Table 1: Benefits expected in the use of English and communication skills

Response	F	(%)
To improve how I speak	120	80
To be able to read and understand	100	66.6
To be able to write well and summarize texts	115	76.6
To improve my grammar and vocabulary	110	73.3

Table 2: Difficult aspects

Response	F	(%)
Speaking	60	23
Grammar	57	21.8
Writing	50	19.2
Listening	50	19.2
Reading	44	66.8
Total	261	100

Table 3: Adequacy time allocated for the course

Desired hours	Frequency	%
1-2	50	33.3%
2-3	72	48%
3-4	28	18.6%
Total	150	99.9%

Table 4: Students' responses on teaching improvement

Areas of improvement	Response	%
Provision of public address system	90	16.1
Employing more teachers	60	10.7
Provision of learning aids	80	14.3
Reducing class size	100	17.9
Provision of more classroom	120	21.7
Increasing lecture hours per week	110	19.6

to the poor foundation they had in primary and secondary schools. But Bodunde's (2005) study rated writing as first in the order of the difficulty of the language skills while speaking was rated second. Another finding in this study was that the students rated listening and reading as easy. This rating may be based on students' assumption that listening and reading are not difficult. In this regard, the actual situation is that most of the student from observation have difficulty with listening and reading techniques, these areas should be addressed by lecturers. Given the fact that listening and reading are skills used in taking in information from lectures adequate attention should be given to these skills for them to have a successful academic activity.

Adequacy of time allocated for the course: In determining adequacy of time allocated for the course, students responded by stated that the usual 2 h lecture period was found not to be enough.

From the Table 3, it is evident that 33.3% of the respondents want the 2 h to remain, 48% want the time to increase from 2-3h, while 18.6% want the lecture hour to last for 4h. This means that majority of the students want the lecture hours to last for 3 h. Given that the use of English and communication skills is activity based, there is need for adequate time to be allocated for the course to enable students practice some of the skills in the classroom. In this way, the learners will be actually involved in the learning process. When students are involved in classroom activities learning becomes meaningful. Bodunde (2005) is in agreement with this finding.

Table 4 indicates that students rated the provision of more classroom highly because of the overcrowded nature of the class. (21.7%). This is followed by increasing lecture hours (19.6%) reducing class size (17.9%) provision of public address system (16.1%) so that all the students will hear the lecturers clearly, provision of teaching aids (14.3%) and employment of more lecturers (10.7%). The desire for more classrooms by students is

because language and communication skills is offered by year one students, his requires a big hall for the whole year one students. Again, reduction in class size is informed by the fact that all the students in a large class cannot be attended lo by the lecturer in a class.

Implication of the findings: The findings reveal that students realize they have a need which the have to satisfy. This realization implies they have an interest in learning the course and hope to be successful in this (Ohale, 1990). In other words, they are self- motivated this type of motivation according to Baldeh promotes learning, the teacher should therefore take advantage of this during teaching. Furthermore, the areas of difficulty they mentioned should be addressed. Though, the actual needs of the students should take priority over their felt needs. So, listening and reading which the researcher observed is very important to students should be taught diligently in addition to other needs. This will help them to remedy some problems and improve their performance in the course and in other courses.

CONCLUSION

This study has made suggestion based on its findings on the teaching of the course as regards to the area of difficulties. Teachers should therefore teach to remedy the problems of their students. Teaching aids such as radio/cassette, Television, ICT facilities should be provided to make learning meaningful.

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