Chapter Nine

COMMUNICATION BARRIERS AND THE SECOND LANGUAGE LEARNER

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Communication Barriers and the Second Language Learner

The ability to interact among human beings is made possible by communication. Human language has a system of code that governs its usage. Communication has become so developed and complex in society to affect societal norms, needs and development. Communication plays a vital role in education, commerce, government, acquisition, dissemination and analysis of information.

Eyre defines communication "as the transferring of a message from one individual to another so that what is transferred can be understood and acted upon".   (qtd in Otagburuagu (1)

Nwosu views communication as "a social process that uses signs, symbols, language and other such means to bring about inter-change of thoughts and meanings between and among individuals and groups for better understanding and relationships. (qtd in Umoh (3).

Communication can be viewed as a means of transmitting meaningful messages from a communicator using verbal or non verbal symbols to modify the behaviour of an audience. Communication is an interactive action, a two way process that makes things acquire concrete meaning while shaping the life of the receiver.

Language is often the conventional system for communication, a system for conveying messages. Communication can be accomplished only because words have certain meanings to characterize the system of the language in use. For the learner in a second language situation a problem arises when the intended meaning of a speaker is not the meaning conceived by the learner. Besides, knowing a language and being able to produce and recognize sentences in it is not all it takes for a successful communication to take place, a lot goes into language use. Communication necessitates the ability of the writer to articulate in very clear terms so that the receiver can understand the message well. The more appropriate

and effective the language is, the more likely one will create satisfying productive, and meaningful relationship in personal, social, business, political, educational and public lives. In fact, the quality of ones life depends directly on ones ability to communicate.

Language therefore becomes the tool to use in advancing communication among human beings. Knowledge of language use is the knowledge of how to use language appropriately how to get it do what one wants it to do in the right circumstances. The English language is used to perform a variety of communicative roles. It is a system for the expression of thoughts, feelings and social togetherness through the use of conventional symbols. In communication, the first requirement is the ability to string words in meaningful sentences which can be intelligible enough to be transferred from one person to another. The flexible structure of language is used for a variety of functions – thinking, communicating, reasoning etc.

Knowing a language means to know how to produce and understand sentences with particular meanings (Fromkin et al 219).

In order to determine the meaning of expressions, the hearer must be able to mentally process sentences that reflect complex structural properties of human language. The decoding of the meanings of a sentence is certainly a crucial part of linguistic communication but the communication process does not end with processing structural properties and decoding meaning.

Communication becomes successful if the hearer recognizes the speaker's communicative intention. Linguistic communication works because the speaker and the hearer share a system of inferential strategies leading from the utterance of an expression to the hearer's recognition of the speaker's communicative intent (Akmajian et al 370).

As common and effortless as it is to talk, using language successfully is a very complex enterprise especially for the second language learner. Thus he encounters so many problems.

Elements of Communication
Communication elements are essential units that are important in the communication process. These comprise human and process elements.

The human elements are the transmitter or the encoder and the receiver or the decoder.
The process elements include:-
a)   The message
b) the encoding activity
c) the channel
d) The feedback.

The Transmitter

The transmitter is the key factor in the communicative event. He is the source of the information. He decides the nature of the language that will adequately convey the message. In a classroom situation this will be the teacher. He is expected to move and act in a manner that will lead the learner to participate and react meaningfully.

The Receiver

This can be referred to as the learner. His role is very crucial because he receives and processes the message from the transmitter and sends reactions to him in form of feedback. Once the message is not adequately understood, a breakdown in communication must occur and the message is lost.

The Message

This is the basic text in communication. It could be a policy statement, an instruction, a report or a process of learning. The message could be simple, complex, covert or overt. When the message is simple it does not go beyond the surface level of meaning of words that convey it. Complex messages lend themselves to different layers of meaning. For effective communication, the transmitter must endeavour to make his message explicit to make for a clear understanding.

The Encoding Activity

This is the process of using appropriate symbols in encoding a message. There must be correct choice of codes and style. This action helps the learner to produce a clear, logical and coherent message for the learner. The channel is the transitive element through which information is conveyed to the learner. The channel used to route messages may include the electronic media, face to face, visual aids, graphic symbols, etc. The choice of channel depends on which is available or affordable and the one that is most adaptable to the content of the message. The transmitter must use the one that will effectively transmit the message.

Feedback

Feedback is the turning point in a communication process. It represents the receiver/learner's participatory contribution in the communication process. It also helps the transmitter to evaluate the learner, because through it he knows whether the message has been successfully communicated.

Feedback can be in form of verbal, non-verbal, oral or written form. Effective feedback is usually clear, informative, sincere, spontaneous and adequate when considered in line with the context.

In communication therefore, there must be the source of the message, the sender, the channel through which the message would be transmitted and then the receiver.

A message or text becomes communicative if the intention of the sender is exactly what is decoded by the receiver. Whether the information is communicated or not rests on the possibility of choice or selection made on the part of the sender. If the sender fails to choose appropriately between two alternatives then he has not communicated. There are fundamental principles that cannot be overlooked in the matter or process of communication. The principle is that of choice or the possibility of selection between two alternatives, so the sender must be careful in his use of words so as not to create a barrier between his message and the receiver. According to Hybels and Weaver, meanings are ultimately determined not by words but by people (6). Effective communication is therefore, not just about transmission of ideas or messages from the sender to the receiver rather it is about the dissemination of properly worded meaningful ideas or messages that are comprehensible to both parties and which ultimately can attract the desired response or feedback.

Barriers to Effective Communication

Communication may be impeded by some barriers. A barrier is anything which does not allow the transmitter of a message to achieve his goal in a given communicative act or anything which may deprive the receiver the opportunity of giving effective feedback. Some of these barriers may be technical, environmental, psychological, or it may be due to some language factors or personality traits. The paper will discuss the last two.

1. Language Barrier: This is often a major cause of communication breakdown especially where the learner of a second language is already proficient in his mother tongue. The mother tongue usually interferes with the second language in areas of pronunciation, syntax, appropriate use of grammar and even in semantics. Language teachers have noted that communication often breaks down when vocabulary is inappropriate or language structure is wrong (Umoh 8).

The way words are used or interpreted or choice of words made also constitute barriers in communication. According to Lobner

> Many words have more than one meaning and even complete sentences may allow for several readings. The technical term for this phenomenon is ambiguity: an expression or an utterance is ambiguous when it can be interpreted in more than one way. The notion of ambiguity can be applied to all levels of meaning: to expression meaning, utterance meaning and communicative meaning (39).

Language ambiguity creates a barrier to effective communication because of the semantic confusion that arises from the susceptibility of an ambiguous expression to double or multiple interpretations.

Example: Visiting relations can be boring.
In this sentence the hearer must determine whether "what is boring is the act of visiting ones relations or whether "relations that visit people are the ones that are boring".

Since many expressions are linguistically ambiguous the hearer must determine which; of the possible meanings of an expression is the one the speaker intended as operative on that occasion.

The message transmitter should recognize the fact that words have different levels of meaning – the denotative, connotative and the contextual meanings. He must be very careful not to mix up these meanings. The receiver (learner) also requires the same knowledge about the nature of words. **Example**: I went to the bank to buy blood.

The transmitter must recognize the various meanings of the word "bank" while the receiver must note that the bank referred to in the above sentence cannot mean "a financial institution" but the blood bank in a hospital.

Communication breakdown occurs if the transmitter and receiver attach different meanings to a word. Language can also become a barrier if the transmitter fails to select words and language structures that will match the age and experience of the receiver.

In written communication, faulty spelling and punctuation can turn language into a barrier. Inappropriate or faulty use of punctuation creates barrier in communication. **Consider this example**: If you need a good car at the end of the month, bring your money.
This sentence is capable of double interpretation.
1)   If he has need of a car at the end of the month then he should bring his money.

                    OR

2)   If he is in need of a car he should bring his money at the end of the month.
The transmitter must achieve effectiveness in the written form of communication which requires accuracy both in the use of words and language structure and in the mechanisms of writing. Effort must be made by a transmitter to produce sentences capable of only one meaning.

2. Personality Related Barriers

These are constraints that arise from personality traits of those involved in a given communication act. There are several manifestations of personality related barriers such as arrogance, pride, hatred, anger etc. A transmitter who is arrogant may never influence the learner positively hence communication breaks down. **Example**: A mother sends her child to deliver a message to a friend and adds "if you like don't come back, stay and play games".

After about two hours, the mother sends for the child and when questioned reiterates that she told him to play games after the message. This is what Akmajian et al refers to as underdetermination of communicative intention. The mother simply meant that the child should hurry back home and not stay to play games.

Sometimes, in a face to face interaction the personal appearance of any of the human elements may militate against a free-flow of the message. **Example**: Madam to the maid – If the baby does not feed on the milk, boil it. Does "it" refer to the milk or to the baby? Defects such as speech, auditory or visual may hamper communication. Individuals with low attention span may impede the communication process.

Conclusion

The human elements in the communication process must strive to achieve by all means competence in the use of language in communication. First is what Chomsky described as linguistic competence and the other is Searle's communicative competence. According to Chomsky competence is the speaker/hearer's knowledge of his language while performance is the actual use of language in concrete situations (qtd in Cook and Newson (15).

Linguistic competence assumes that effective use of language for communication depends on the user's ability to use words and sentences correctly according to the grammars of language. Communicative competence looks beyond grammatical correctness.

Competence may be defined as the sum total of all the techniques a person employs to communicate effectively with another. This includes:

a)   matching the language with the context or situation

b)   appreciate the nature of the participant and the role he is required to play in the communication process

c)   recognize the purpose of the communication

d)   use the right words, phrase and sentences for communication

e)   assign the right set of meanings to the words, phrases and sentences used in the communication process.

The following should be borne in mind if barriers in communication must be eliminated:
1)   Words and sentences must be used clearly.
2)   They must be chosen to suit their context.
3)   Style must be adequate.
4)   Clichés, ambiguities, and/or vagueness must be avoided.

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There has been an increasing appreciation that motivational states influence not only the likelihood that people will engage in a particular behavior, but also the cognitive processes that they bring to bear on that behavior (Maddox, Markman, & Baldwin, 2006).