LANGUAGE USE IN THE WORKPLACE: IMPLICATIONS FOR EMPLOYEE COMMUNICATION AND PRODUCTIVITY

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Abstract

Communication is the key to successful organizations as it opens the way to good relationship among employees and enhances productivity. Today's organizations are characterized multilingualism where people from different languages and cultures are employed. This gives rise to the need to annex employee communication needs for effective productivity. This study assessed language use in the workplace, considering the implications on employee communication and productivity. The study was reviewed by assessing the role of language in workplace communication, the 21st century multilingual workplaces, cultural diversity and its impact on workplace language use, impact of language on employees' productivity and efficiency, impact of effective use of language on employees' communication and productivity, need for diversity and inclusion in the workplaces, and strategies for effective communication in the workplace. Based on the review, it was concluded that effective language use in the workplace has positive implications for employee communication and productivity while language barriers can lead to misunderstandings and communication breakdowns, negatively impacting on all members of the organization. Recommendations, among others, are that employers should ensure/facilitate friendly workplace environment through teamwork and collaborative efforts among their employees, and organizations should train their workers in communication skills and the 21st century office competencies to ensure global competitiveness among their staff.

Keywords: Workplace, Language, Communication, Impact, Productivity.

Introduction

Communication is an essential aspect of any workplace environment, the effective use of which plays a vital role in facilitating goal attainment individuals, groups, and teams within organizations. Communication, the process of sending and receiving information, ideas, knowledge and facts from one person to another in an organization, is an important tool for achieving organizational success.

With the proliferation of ICTs and globalization, workplaces have become multilingual with people from all works of life and different parts of the world becoming employees in different organizations. For effective job performance, workers must collaborate and communicate with

one another. A workplace is a place, virtual or literal, where people interact for the purpose of earning their living.   It could be a secure platform for online collaboration and communication. Rönnlöf (2014) agreed that today's globalized world calls for a multilingual workplace, with employees who can communicate effectively and efficiently with colleagues and clients around the world.

Communication is very important in the workplace because it ensures sound cooperation and collaboration among workers, thereby enhancing productivity and increase employee job satisfaction. It also helps in achieving organizational goals when workers are able to work=in the atmosphere of unity, and also ensures effective team building. Communication in the workplace is inevitable because it ensures cooperation among workers and helps the work to progress. Ufuophu-Biri and Ayewumi (2022) remarked that effective communication is the inevitable and binding activity of individuals, groups, organizations and communities in all human societies. They agreed with Rahjans (2012) and Habibur, Rinu & Hazrat (2019), that communication in organization helps in motivating employees, thereby leading to interrelationship between organizational communication and employees' motivation, which creates a congenial working environment that helps to ensure performance efficiency.

For communication to achieve its purpose, it must be effective, encompassing all the elements of communication. It must be purposefully clear, with the use of a language that is well understood by the receiver. Effective coordination among the different parts of the organizational system is ensured through the use of a clear language. It is usually a two-way process and can be internal and external. Joo and Teng (2017) agreed with DeVito (2005) that communication can be of intrapersonal (with oneself), and interpersonal (one interacts with a person whom he or she has some kind of relationship) such as face-to-face or through electronic channels, where mediated-communication brought up to the understanding that it occurs when one sends a message through some electronic device to a receiver.

The importance of communication in organizational development cannot be overemphasized. Research has shown that language diversity in the workplace can be sources of both challenges and opportunities. Language differences can be a source of innovation, creativity, and cultural richness in the workplace. Ishtiaque and Habib, (2016) noted that internal communication plays a massive role in organizational development as it binds the entire community together and allows

employees of various departments to work cooperatively to meet organizational agenda; contributes significantly to career development of employees; boosts up employees' morale and providing high level of confidence to deal with various stakeholders of organization; it reflects strength and capability of human resource of the organization by taking initiative to perform meaningful work and confront ad hoc situation; allows employees to implement cutting edge technology at workplace to retain competitive edge in the industry at times of globalization; and plays pivotal role in implementing organizations' strategic objectives to meet deadlines and perform complex tasks with creativity and enthusiasm.

On the other hand, language diversity can lead to communication breakdowns, misunderstandings, and conflicts. Krauss and Chiu (1998) identified listeners' attitude, social category and linguistic style, as factors that can present as challenges to the use of language in diverse areas. Rönnlöf (2014) also identified interpersonal relationship, social perception and social identity to be challenges to language use. This means that the language a person speaks will mark that person's identity for others and that defines the speaker's identity for him- or herself and others. Hence Fasae (2020) affirmed that what you say speaks volume about your person.

In view of the importance of effective communication in the workplace, this study reviewed literature on communication and language use in the workplace, examining its impact on employees' communication and productivity.

The Role of Language in Workplace Communication

A workplace can be regarded as a place where an organization carries on its activities, which could be virtual or face-to-face, in order to achieve its goals and objectives. Language, as a tool of communication, must be used appropriately, however, when not used in the appropriate manner, its objective of effective communication is hindered (Fasae, 2020). The workplace of the 21st century is diverse in many respects and this diversity presents both opportunities and challenges in terms of communication and language use which tend to affect employees' productivity. Communication becomes effective when involves sharing information, ideas, and thoughts between individuals and groups by creating a common understanding that is vital to the success of the organization.

Language is a vocal means by which people communicate in an organization. In Nigeria, English language is the official language. A multilingual office or organization will be characterized by

different language from different cultures and effective interaction must be ensured for work to progress which is made possible through effective use of language. Rönnlöf (2014) agreed with Angouri & Miglbauer (2014) and Ehrenreich (2010) that English language is the language of choice in multinational corporations and used widely across the globe, hence, it is a chief part of the discourse when discussing multilingualism in white-collar workplaces (although the use of English does not entail that other languages disappear or become redundant.

Communication, as a human activity, links people together, creates relationships and a positive attitude in the minds of the employee who exchange information with each other to get the understanding and emotion behind the information and involves interpersonal skill, communication skill and interpretation skill (Ahmad, Ahmad, Zulfakar, Aliyashak, Isham, Iazhar 2022). Creating an open communication relationship in the organization is necessary because communication is an important part of working life, and in forming an effective and efficient organization (Agustini, Amanah & Harahap, 2022).

Communication involves speaking, reading, listening, and reasoning skills. For communication to occur, it must pass from a sender to a receiver, must be understood by the receiver and can be responded to. As communication passes from the source to the receiver, there is plenty of opportunity for its original meaning to change, therefore listening, reasoning and feedback is an important part of the process as it is an opportunity for the sender to make sure the receiver has understood the message (Effective Communication in the Workplace Reference Guide, accessed 2024).

People are the most important resource of an organization through which communication takes place. Ishtiaque and Habib (2016) averred that communication plays a cooperative role in connecting and coordinating activities through better management of core resource, which are people and is imperative to sustain in today's globalized world.

The 21st Century Multilingual Workplaces

Today's globalized and diverse workplace consists of employees from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds which can cause both positive and negative implications on the workplace, and according to Fasae (2021), it is characterized by communication through information received, analyzed processed, and communicated for further use in achieving the organizational goals. The

multilingual workplace is also characterized by people from different nations with different languages and culture.

For communication to be effective in a multilingual workplace, there must be effective means of transmitting messages, to ensure that messages are not distorted, few among which are the face to face, social media platforms, live video, conferencing technology, group forums, tablets, podcasts, smart speakers, web chat, and email.

Language barriers can negatively affect teamwork, employee morale, and organizational productivity which inclusive language can facilitate among employees. Rönnlöf (2014) believed that the new work order and advanced technologies call for a multilingual workplace, and agreed with Angouri & Miglbauer (2014), Gunnarsson (2013), and van den Born Peltokorpi (2010)that with employees who can communicate effectively and efficiently with colleagues and clients all over the world. Communication within and between workplaces is thus becoming increasingly important and organizations and corporations are putting language policies in place, using corporate languages, to regulate and facilitate functional communication (van den Born & Peltokorpi, 2010).

Furthermore, communication barriers and misunderstandings can arise due to differences in language use, cultural background, or even educational level.

The multilingual workplace is also characterized by interaction. Where there are people, there is bound to be interaction. Rönnlöf (2014) noted a significant aspect to language practices is the activity or the function of interaction and social goals, such as building rapport and team spirit which can affect the choice of language, hence, language use in work settings is therefore not only concerned with transactional but also with relational communication (Kingsley, 2013; Pullin, 2010 & Tange & Lauring, 2009). Getting the job done is evidently fundamental, but social interactions such as small talk, have been said to be vital for productivity and performance in the workplace.

In view of the fact that the 21st century workplace is characterized by employees from different language background, the need arises to adapt language use to the needs of workers and the organization in order to ensure successful operations and organizational performance. Agustini, et. al. (2022) believed that organizational performance is related to multiplicable function of motivation which leads to performance, and ability to enhance employee behaviour, hence

employees and employers must think broadly about the productivity of things to make the effort, skills, and results in line with the success of an organization.

Cultural Diversity and Workplace Language Use

There is a close connection between language used in the workplace and organizational culture and identity. This is because language(s) used by an organization can reflect its values, norms, and traditions, and can have a significant impact on how employees perceive the organization and their role within it. An organization that promotes multilingualism and encourages employees to use their native languages in the workplace may be seen as more inclusive and welcoming to diverse employees. Ofodu (2014) in Fasae (2020) observed that the language of a people is the identity, culture and value of such a people, the importance of which entails the whole spheres of life of the citizens. It is a very important natural and unnatural phenomenon in any society, has codes and systems that are used for representations and communication, and is at the centre and basic to the transmission of values, culture and the identity of a people. A loss of a language translates to the loss of a people, their values, culture and identity.

Culture of a people is the way of life of the people. People from different cultures must be ready to relate well in order to work together effectively and efficiently. Since the 21st workplace is multilinguistic, it is also multicultural, hence cultural diversity is in place. Krauss and Chiu (1998) argued that the effect a particular linguistic variation has on a speaker's perceived effectiveness and credibility will be determined primarily by cultural conceptions of how a competent communicator speaks. For instance, Miller, Maruyama, Beaber, & Valone (1976; Bradac, Davies, Courtright, Desmond, & Murdock (1977); Hosman (1989); and Paradise, Cohl, & Zweig (1980) agreed that competent communication in most Western cultures is characterized by fluency, confidence and articulation, and perceived effectiveness is seen as less effective and less credible when speakers speak slowly, or when their message is low in lexical diversity (or filled with hedges, filled pauses and parenthetical remarks; using inappropriately crude language also hurts the communicator's credibility. Krause et al (1998) agreed with Burgoon (1990) that the communicator's social category where, if the speech conforms to normative expectations, the recipient may evaluate the communicator positively and be more receptive to the persuasive message, but if it falls outside the acceptable normative range for a member of the speaker's category, the receptivity will be lowered. Rönnlöf (2014) maintained that speech contains

information about the social categories to which a speaker belongs, and serves as a rich source of data for impression formation.

Linguistic style was also identified to affect the comprehensibility of a persuasive message. Communicators who speak rapidly may be judged more credible than those who speak at a normal rate, but their rapid speech may adversely affect the clarity of their messages (Smith & Shaffer, 1995). Rönnlöf (2014) established that when people interact, the nature of their interpersonal relationship is manifested in a variety of ways such as distance, postures, facial expressions, gaze, among others, which is implicit in the language they use, and the expression of relationship in speech can be quite subtle. It was noted, that higher status and more powerful individuals accommodate less than their lower status, less powerful co-participants (Gregory & Webster, 1996). Relationship is also manifested in lexical choice – particularly in the terms people use to address each other. Social Perception and identify are other factors that affect language use in the workplace. Rönnlöf (2014) affirmed that the way a person speaks will mark that person's identity for others and that language also plays an important role in defining the speaker's identity for him- or herself.

In view of the fact that English as a lingua franca is acknowledged to be means of communication of the globalised economy, Ayeni (2021) investigated the effects of language choices in a culturally diversified Nigeria business places and the kind of interaction that emerges in such. His research answered the questions on how language is used when people of different gender, culture and ethnicity, social and occupational status, age, and so forth meet at different business places in Nigeria and brings to the fore, how the different personal and social identities are negotiated during interactions, among others. He came to agree with Salvi and Bamford (2007) that the close connection between language and business is not limited to trade but permeates the whole of the workplace, and that one of the consequences of globalisation is that skills in other languages have come to play an important part at all levels of the business hierarchy, no longer merely at the top.

Impact of Language on Productivity and Efficiency
Language can either impact employees' productivity and efficiency negatively or positively. For instance, language barrier can lead to time wastage (poor time management), material resources wastage, wrong decision making and high cost of production.

Lack of effective communication can lead to communication gaps and misunderstandings among employees, cause confusion, waste time, and reduce productivity, whereas all these could be avoided by communicating effectively. Rönnlöf (2014) investigated ethnographic insights from the language practices in the workplace from two multilingual companies in Sweden and found and agreed with Angouri, (2013) and Angouri & Miglbauer (2014) that communication, both in the sense of actual language use and of language management, is an important but often forgotten part of productivity and performance in multinational corporations (MNC) and small/medium enterprises (SME). They agreed with (Tange & Lauring, 2009; Lønsmann, 2014; Pullin, 2010), that linguistic issues and difficulties often appear, such as thin communication or knowledge loss, language clustering and exclusions or power imbalances; these issues hinder effective communication and even risk company productivity (Marschan, Welch, & Welch (1997), Millar & Jensen, 2009).

Kingsley's (2013) study shows that the linguistic competence and limitations of the people involved are a key factor in communication. Angouri & Miglbauer (2014) investigated employees' perceptions of multilingualism and language use and found that language is negotiated among the employees, and whilst English is most widely used, it is not the only language of interactions. Parallel language use (wo or more languages with near equal status), which can be used interchangeably is often seen as potentially problematic (Ehrenreich, 2010). Also, Tange and Lauring (2009) contributed that language clusters often lead to knowledge loss and group separation. Angouri & Miglbauer´s (2014) study also discussed the employees' linguistic flexibility, willingness and ability to shift between languages and adapt to different situations to be more complex and flexible than the official written language policy may prescribe. It was also stressed that although English is a functioning and common corporate language, it is not adequate in all situations (Thomas, 2011). Van den Born and Peltokorpi (2010) also discussed centricity in language policy which usually centres around one of parent language, local language or corporate language and will lean towards one of the three, and therefore, not rarely clear-cut.

Language barriers can lead to any type of crisis in the workplace, whereas it is language that could be used to resolve crises through effective communication. Alghamdi (2016) noted that communication barriers have great impact with regards to workplace crisis and noted that personal conflicts between workers or departments tend to lead to communication breakdown and lower the

productivity because in most operations all workers and departments have to work together in the organization.

Rönnlöf (2014) noted that when multilingual workplaces use a corporate language or a lingua franca, a bridging language for speakers who do not share a mother tongue (usually English), linguistic barriers such as language clustering or thin communication (communication within smaller groups who share a minority language) often appears between the corporate and local languages; people feel excluded from the group or interaction, and may rarely or never be a part of one, which can create barriers for effective communication and lead to information or knowledge loss between different language groups, as employees prefer to discuss problems, solutions or briefings with people they share a native language with (Kingsley, 2013; Tange & Lauring, 2009). It was stated further that effective communication is not only dependent on a common language, but on employees' willingness and openness to use the common language in work-related as well as social interactions, however, it was also noted that participants of intercultural contact situations frequently deviate from the norms.

Effective use of Language and Employees' Communication and Productivity
Effective communication can be a tool for solving workplace crisis. It can be used to checkmate employees' behaviour, a tool for motivation for enhanced job performance, a tool for collaboration and linkages for goal attainment, hence, a tool to achieve overall organizational performance and evaluation. As a model for the employees, managers should show strength in dealing with the situation thereby positively influencing the employees by way of assisting each other in emotional support to try and clear the effects of the crisis, and saying this is an aspect of proper communication.

Effective communication can have adverse or positive effect on employees' communication and productivity in diverse ways. Yasser (2016) recommended that the most important aspect of the solution to workplace crisis is the manager's personal reaction to the crisis. Ufuophu-Biri and Ayewumi (2022) observed that communication acts to control members' behaviour. For instance, when employees are expected to communicate any job-related grievances to their immediate boss or clarify their job description or compliance with company policies, the control function that enables the employee to maximize performance is communication. They noted that relationship

between organizational communication, employee job motivation and employee job performance are vital in projecting the organization to a higher pedestal, hence, stressed that employees tend to perform much better when they are positively and consistently motivated.

On the impact of communication in organizational development, Ishtiaque and Habib (2016) found that communication plays a massive role in organizational development. They investigated the impact of internal communication in organizational development in private banks and found that communication binds the entire community together to allow employees of various departments work cooperatively to meet organizational agenda; contributes significantly to career development of employees, boosts up employees morale and providing plenty of confidence to deal with various stakeholders of organization, among others.

It is important that management maintains employees' productive relationship by assisting and guiding employees in their work and progress, and recommending them for career development programmes within and outside the organization through effective communication.

Need for Diversity and Inclusion in 21st Century Workplaces

In view of the fact that today's workplaces are becoming increasingly diverse, with individuals from different linguistic backgrounds interacting on a daily basis, there is need to be more inclusive in the workplace. For instance, in Nigeria, the situation is more complex because of its multilingualism which give rise to multiculturalism. Muhammad, Ya'u, Aliyu and Hassan (2018) emphasized that the importance of English language cannot be overemphasized due to its role in social, political, economic and environmental development and its function as a vehicle of interaction and an instrument of communication.

Ayeni (2021) observed that Nigeria's peoples belong to 250–400 different ethno-linguistic groups, with three major groups accounting for almost 70 per cent of the population, and several minority groups, some numbering more than 10 million. However, there have been arguments that this level of ethnic diversity has been an obstacle to economic development in Nigeria and other countries in sub-Saharan Africa with similar levels of heterogeneous populations (Easterly and Levine, 1997; Sowell, 2004). Ayeni in agreement with Onyejeli, 2010) noted further that Nigerians belong to several different religions as well, with Islam and Christianity accounting for approximately 50 and 40 per cent of the population, respectively, with Islam dominant in the

northern region; Christianity in the south, and indigenous African religions commonly practised around the country.

In spite of these differences, Mustapha (2009) in Ayeni (2021) noted that the business environment does not bother itself with this diversity as the Nigeria business places put up inclusive mechanisms that foster successful business meetings among the many tribes because the smart businessman is more concerned with making profits, as the currency has neither tribes nor culture written on them. When it comes to having successful business sales, the average Nigerian forget tribe, religious or sexual orientation as money has a way it establishes the slogan 'One Nigeria'. It is therefore imperative to look at how the Nigeria business places include everyone, in a bid to make the most in their businesses.

Effective communication is crucial for the success of organizations, and language plays a critical role in facilitating communication.

Strategies for Effective Communication in the Workplace

Choose the right channel: All organizations must communicate with various stakeholders in order to achieve their goals, hence, choosing the correct and acceptable means, which can vary, is very important. Whatever channel chosen must be able to achieve the purpose of communication. Agustini, et. al. (2022) maintained that whether communication runs smoothly and effectively can be seen from the effects after communication if the message or information received gets the right response by the communicant or not.

Possession of good human relation: Good human relation is indispensable in a workplace. Ability to build a team that relates well will help organizations to be focused and succeed. Ishtiaque and Habib (2016) agreed with Gondal & Shahbaz (2012) that internal communication is mandatory as it creates employee confidence and enhance positive atmosphere to public relations. Ufuophu-Biri & Ayewumi (2022) intoned that improvements in supervisor-subordinate communication will assist organizations toward the goal of managing diversity by promoting equality and integration in the workplace.

Good knowledge of grammar: There should be no ambiguity in the use of language when communicating to and among employees so that messages are well understood. Ability to use correct tenses will boost organizational communication. As noted by Strachan (2018), indicators of effective communication include the ability to understand messages carefully as intended by the

communicator; a successful process taking place in a pleasant atmosphere for both parties; producing a change in behavior which means the communication is effective; increases the level of interpersonal relationships; and, both parties communicate about an action.

Choice of words: Ability to communicate in a simple but correct language is important to language use and organizational success. Ahmadi and Heydari (2011) in Fasae (2020) intoned that mastering a language must involve both aspects of politeness and impoliteness. Though a common part of everyday language use, there is need to be able to make distinction between polite and impolite use of language. Workers should be taught to communicate in pleasant and respective way by identifying potentially impolite practices and offensive language. Dozie & Otagburuagu (2019) discussed that reprimand discourse acknowledges that in human interaction there is always the tendency for an out of line behavior and in the event of any impropriety, the defaulter is always censured, criticized or even condemned for such acts. Fasae (2020) opined that a foul language can go a long way to affect conversations in any setting.

Mutual respect: There must be respect for one another in the workplace, hence it is essential to use the properly developed means of communication in negotiations to reach mutual understanding and respect towards the interlocutor (Zygmunt, 2016).   He maintained that misunderstanding is more dangerous for discourse and its final output than the lack of understanding.

Yaser (2016) stressed that exercising good communication skills would help employees in understanding each other by involving them in discussions about the crisis and offering solutions and prevention measures to curb such crisis is helpful in reassuring and instilling a positive attitude towards the workplace. He also noted that trauma is common in workplaces after the occurrence of traumatic events and workers may give suggestions on how to improve the safety and health of the working environment, this is also important in reassuring the workers of the management willingness and concern for their welfare. Employers can also use counseling to help the workers recover from traumatic workplace crisis.

Conclusion

The paper discusses language use in the workplace and its implication on employee communication and productivity. Effective language use in the workplace has positive implications for employee communication and productivity while language barriers can lead to misunderstandings and communication breakdowns, negatively impacting on stakeholders. If

organizations improve workplace communication, it will enhance employee productivity, and create a more inclusive and equitable workplace for all employees.

Recommendations

Based on the review, the following are recommended:

- Employers should ensure/facilitate friendly workplace environment through teamwork and collaborative efforts among their employees.

- Organizations should train their workers in communication skills and the 21st century office competencies to ensure global competitiveness among their staff.

- Organizations should be conscious of the diversity in the workplace acknowledge it as so.

- Employers should encourage and create awareness on the impact of both negative and positive use of language in the workplace.

- Employers should embrace the culture that values multilingualism and encourages the use of different languages in the workplace.

- Employers should regularly assess the language needs of employees and meet these needs.

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