

Language as barrier to communication among black African students at the University of Johannesburg, Soweto Campus (Gauteng, South Africa).

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Abstract

This paper explores the inadequacy in expressive language of undergraduate (diploma) students. It adopts a communication systems approach and data was collected through one-on-one and focus group interviews with 120 black African students at University of Johannesburg Soweto campus and analysed qualitatively. The findings revealed that if African student's language does not fit the cultural norm of a group, society or nation, they easily "disown" or reject it and this obviously inhibits an individual's potential which becomes a cause of dysfunctional interactions.

Keywords: Business communication, Language, Language barrier

1. INTRODUCTION

Concern for English as a business communication tool has grown particularly in South Africa partly because of affirmative transformation as advocated by the African National Congress (ANC) government. A more important reason for large businesses demanding a high standard of communication in the workplace has been because of the new demands made by an increasingly sophisticated (Black bourgeois class in South Africa) and technology. Economic globalisation has made business communication a prerequisite for negotiations and to broker deals, locally and internationally. Language is crucial to a person's identity. It allows the individual to transfer knowledge and information, share feelings, tell stories and convey complex messages. Language is the conduit that allows us to relate and understand each other [1]. It can be defined as a system of concepts and symbols that allows us to communicate. It ensures us a defined frame of reference and a relational context that sustains our identities [1]. The social identity theory [2] concerns the understanding of psychological processes which form the foundation for intergroup communication. The inability to identify with another group can lead to negative attitudes towards such groups [3]. A sense of ignorance can exacerbate the situation which can result in periodic xenophobic violence, as has been the case in South Africa. Consequently, the understanding of the connection between language and social identity patterns is of great importance in understanding how effectively black African students assimilate with their peers.

As a key element of a culture's identity, language is also incendiary [4]. A communities' language can be considered essential to its very existence. It is no surprise that the more vulnerable a group feels, the more passionate it becomes of its language. Ho, (1991), graphically argues that 'a community without a language is like a person without a soul.'

Language barrier is a term used to imply all the problems encountered by an individual as he/she tries to communicate with a group of people who speak a tongue other than his/her own. It is prevalent in scenarios which involve the assembly of people from different cultures, speaking different languages. It is also used as a blanket term for all the challenges associated in the learning of a foreign language.

2. Problem statement

The Soweto campus (SWC) of the University of Johannesburg boasts an African population which surpasses that of many public universities in South Africa. In such a diverse body as this, it is not surprising to note that English as a language barrier is prevalent within the community. In attempting to establish a thread of communication, one often finds that many students from African countries though not proficient can speak English. Over the years, various attempts have been made to increase resources available to facilitate the learning of English. Realizing the importance of English as a means of communication, this research therefore investigates the multi-faceted problem of language barriers. On the Soweto Campus of the University of Johannesburg, it is a common phenomenon that large

groups of students from African countries are brought together in lecture theatres [5]. Even though this university has the lowest out-of-state population [5], there is a vast number of those students who face problems associated with language barrier [6]. Compounded by the numerous other issues that an international student has to face, this is considered one of the primary reasons for the lack of motivation in both academic and social life [7].

3. Objectives

Inspired by the personal experiences of the author while working as part of UJ's staff network since 2009, this paper has two primary objectives:

- To report on the perceptions of a sample of African students on SWC in relation to their study experiences in and off campus.
- To investigate if English as the language of teaching and learning act as a barrier to communication.

4. Theoretical framework

This article adopts the communication systems approach because of its applicability to the investigation. The communication systems approach focusses on the interactive nature of communication phenomena and interactive elements of a given system as 'co-determining the outcome being investigated' [8]. It also identifies the structure of a system and the kinds of information exchange which arise in the system. The communication systems approach also highlights the importance of identifying 'law like principles and patterns of interaction among system's elements' [8]. The communication systems approach considers communication as 'an emergent and interactive process' and emphasizes the whole of a communication system. Therefore, this approach incorporates the external "objective" patterns and the internal "subjective" experiences of individuals' which operate simultaneously and are inseparable [8]. In this article, the communication scenarios prevalent at the University of Johannesburg-Soweto Campus has been reviewed. The elements under investigation are the black students from Africa and their daily communication episodes.

A theory which is also pertinent to this study is the Constructive theory of communication and culture, particularly because it reveals the impact of culture on individual communication behaviour [9]. The thrust of the theory is on the interpretative nature of communication, the interconnected culture and the individual's cognitive construction of reality. The constructive theory focuses on how individual differences in social perception processes affect the development and use of 'person-centred' communication behaviours [9]. This theory represents the humanist approach to research into intercultural communication. This theory concentrates on micro perspectives as to how to make intercultural communication applicable through an analysis of individual differences, cultural identity and management of meanings as well as social situation. It accentuates a 'synthetic-holistic-ideographic-contextual' methodology [8]. Humanist research is mainly concerned with the 'historical meaning of experience and its developmental and cumulative effects' at the individual and social levels [8]. Thus, the theoretical goal is chiefly to describe and clarify a given communication phenomenon, primarily to investigate the subjective processes of interpretation and perspective employed in communication [8]. In the case of this study the communication phenomenon under investigation is Business Communication 1 which is a compulsory course in the National Diplomas: Entrepreneurship, ATK 11A/B1, Business Management BAC11A/B1 and People Management PME11A/B1. The Business Communication 1 curriculum, is balanced between oral and written communication in semester one; semester two concentrates on the theory of communication, however the student has to make an Oral Presentation which is a crucial promotion requirement with a weighting of 30% in both semesters.

5. Background

Language is a means of expression and allows a person to participate in community activities. It can be used as a medium of fostering a democratic culture. In this sense, language policy plays a vital role in the process of democratic transition [7]. The African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights succinctly captured the first and second points when it argued that; "Language is an integral part of the structure of culture; it in fact constitutes its pillar and means of expression par excellence. Its usage

enriches the individual and enables him to take an active part in the community and its activities. To deprive a man of such participation amounts to depriving him of his identity” [8].

Languages are also prized as collective human endeavours and on-going manifestations of human creativity and originality. This is buttressed by UNESCO's contention for language preservation that: The world's languages represent an extraordinary wealth of human creativity. They contain and express the total 'pool of ideas' cultivated over time through heritage, local traditions and customs communicated through local languages [9]

Language can also be a source of power, social mobility and opportunities. Williams and Snipper convincingly argue that in some quarters, language is a form of power [10]. The linguistic situation of a country's society usually reflects its power structure, as language is an effective instrument of societal control. Most African states are characterised by Makoni and Pennycook's averment that 'it is undeniably true that communities of speakers of smaller languages tend also to be the less politically empowered communities' [11]. This is particularly true of the Khoisan communities in South Africa, whose language is vital for their cohesion and preservation. May contends that 'Language loss is not only, perhaps not even primarily, a linguistic issue – it has much more to do with power, prejudice, (unequal) competition and in many cases, overt discrimination and subservience.

A large number of students from African countries are admitted to the University of Johannesburg every year [12]. Most of these students come to South Africa to fulfill their academic goals without consideration of the social aspect of their educational lives. The problems that language barriers create within the social realm can lead to many damaging outcomes. Social scientists connect feelings of anxiety, depression, and alienation to a lack of contact with members of the host nation [13]. These conditions often lead to a difficulty in adjusting academically at U.J. which in turn leads to a negative effect on the black African student's academic progress.

6. Causes of Language Barriers in General

South Africans are generally identified by their accent the influence of mother tongue languages can be heard when South Africans articulate certain words, in communities where Afrikaans is the primary language one will detect the guttural “r” in words like “mother” and “father”. Similarly with black African students from the Congo, Cameroon and Uganda, the influence of Portuguese and French interspersed with their local languages is easily detectable when students converse in English. This difference in accent is very often, the reason why African students are discriminated against. To make the condition more difficult, South Africa is a very diverse country where people from different provinces speak a different African language and at times, do not understand each other. Hence, familiarizing with the nine official African languages could be extremely challenging for African and international students. Oftentimes, the meaning of phrases and idioms are not obvious and sometimes could deviate totally from its root words. Also, some phrases and idioms are used commonly in spoken English only, not in writing. As a result, students with little exposure to these phrases and idioms would find them particularly difficult to comprehend. “A black African student is likely to be misled by

'Short left,' for example, especially if 'turn left or take the slip through "is more accurate and appropriate" [14]. Figure 1.



The map of Africa above and Table 1 below show a list of official, national and spoken languages of Africa. Only Ghana, Nigeria and Cameroon have English as the official national language. However in reality even in these three countries only people living in the capital city or larger cities use English regularly. Another crucial consideration about English as a National language in these countries is that only the more affluent can afford schools where English is the language of teaching and learning. Most Africans use a dialect that is peculiar to their residential area such as Mashi/Swahili in the Democratic Republic of Congo. Table 1 reveals why, after twelve years of schooling a student will be overwhelmed if compelled to suddenly communicate socially and worst still to be assessed at university through the medium of English.

Table 1: Official and spoken languages of African countries.		
Country	Official and national Languages	Other spoken Languages
Algeria	Arabic, Berber languages, four dialects (by constitutional amendment)	French
Angola	Portuguese	Narrow Bantu like Umbundu and other African languages.
Benin	French	Fon and Yoruba (most common vernaculars in south), tribal languages (at least six major ones in north).
Botswana	Setswana (national language with minor differences in dialects), English is the official business language and it is widely spoken in urban areas.	
Burkina Faso	French	Native African languages belonging to Sudanic family spoken by 90% of the population.
Burundi	Kirundi, French	Swahili (along Lake Tanganyika and in the Bujumbura area).
Cameroon	English, French	24 major African language groups.
Cape Verde	Portuguese	Kabuverdianu (Crioulo) (a blend of Portuguese and West African words).
Central African Republic	French, Sangho (lingua franca and national language)	Banda, Gbaya and other tribal languages.
Chad	French, Arabic	Sara (in south), more than 120 different languages and dialects.
Comoros	Arabic, French	Shikomoro (a blend of Swahili and Arabic).
Democratic Republic of the Congo	French	Lingala (a lingua franca trade language), Kingwana (a dialect of Kiswahili or Swahili), Kikongo, Tshiluba.
Congo, Republic of the	French	Lingala and Monokutuba (lingua franca trade languages), many local languages and dialects (of which Kikongo is the most widespread).
Côte d'Ivoire	French	60 native dialects with Dioula the most widely spoken.
Ethiopia	Amharic	Tigrinya, Oromo, Gurage, Somali, Arabic, 80 other local languages, English (major foreign language taught in schools)
Gabon	French	Bantu languages like Fang, Myene, Nzebi, Bapounou/Eschira, Bandjabi.
Ghana	English	African languages (including Akan, Adangme, Moshi-Dagomba, Ewe, and Ga)
Guinea	French (spoken by 15-20%)	Eight national languages, Soussou (Susu, in coastal Guinea), Peulh (Fulani, in Northern Guinea), Maninka (Upper Guinea), Kissi (Kissidougou Region), Toma and

		Guerze (Kpelle) in rain forest Guinea; plus various ethnic groups with their own language.
Guinea-Bissau	Portuguese	Crioulo (a mixture of Portuguese and African), other African languages.
Kenya	English, Kiswahili	numerous indigenous languages.
Lesotho	Sesotho (southern Sotho), English	Zulu, Xhosa.
Liberia	English 20%	some 20 ethnic group languages, of which a few can be written and are used in correspondence.
Malawi	English, Nyanja (Chichewa, Chewa)	Lomwe, Tumbuka, Yao, other languages important regionally.
Mali	French	Bambara (Bamanakan), Arabic and numerous dialects of Dogoso, Fulfulde, Koyracini, Senoufou, and Mandinka/Malinké (Maninkakan), Tamasheq are also widely spoken.
Morocco	Arabic	Berber dialects, French often the language of business, government, and diplomacy.
Mozambique	Portuguese (spoken by 27% of population as a second language)	Makhuwa, Tsonga, Lomwe, Sena, numerous other indigenous languages.
Namibia	English 7%	Afrikaans common language of most of the population and about 60% of the white population, German 32%, indigenous languages: Oshivambo, Herero, Nama.
Niger	French	Hausa, Djerma
Nigeria	English	Hausa, Yoruba, Igbo (Ibo), Fulani, Ijaw, Ibibio and about 250 other indigenous languages spoken by the different ethnic groups.
Rwanda	Rwanda (Kinyarwanda, Bantu vernacular) French, English	Kiswahili (Swahili) used in commercial centers.
São Tomé and Príncipe	Portuguese	
Senegal	French	Wolof, Pulaar, Jola, Mandinka
	English (regular use limited to literate minority) Somali	Mende (principal vernacular in the south), Temne (principal vernacular in the north), Krio (English-based Creole a first language for 10% of the population but understood by 95%) Arabic, Italian, English
South Africa	11 official languages, including Afrikaans, English, isiNdebele, Pedi, Sesotho (Sotho), siSwati (Swazi), Xitsonga (Tsonga), Tswana, Tshivenda (Venda), isiXhosa, isiZulu	
Sudan/South Sudan	Arabic	Nubian, Ta Bedawie, diverse dialects of Nilotic, Nilo-Hamitic, Sudanic languages, English. note: program of "Arabization" in process
Swaziland	English (government business conducted in English), siSwati	
Tanzania, United Republic of	Kiswahili (Swahili), Kiunguju (name for Swahili in Zanzibar), English (primary language of commerce, administration, and higher education)	Arabic (widely spoken in Zanzibar), Gogo, Haya, Makonde, Nyakyusa, Nyamwezi, Sukuma, Tumbuka, many other local languages.

Togo	French (the language of commerce)	Ewe and Mina (the two major African languages in the south), Kabye (Kabiye) and Dagomba (the two major African languages in the north)
Tunisia	Arabic (and the languages of commerce)	French (commerce)
Uganda	English (used in courts of law and by most newspapers and some radio broadcasts)	Ganda (Luganda; most widely used of the Niger-Congo languages, preferred for native language publications), other Niger-Congo languages, Nilo-Saharan languages, Acoli, Swahili, Arabic
Western Sahara		Hassaniya Arabic, Moroccan Arabic
Zambia	English	major vernaculars: Bemba, Kaonda, Lozi, Lunda, Luvale, Nyanja, Tonga, and about 70 other indigenous languages.
Zimbabwe	English	Chishona (Shona), Sindebele (Ndebele), numerous but minor tribal dialects like: Sotho and Nambya, Shangani, Venda, Chewa, Nyanja, and Tonga.

Sources: Ethnologue, ISO Country Names (ISO 3166-1), ISO Languages Names (ISO 639-1), African Academy of Languages (ACALAN) and others.

7. Structure of English: Many languages in the world have structures different from English. For example, in Mashi a dialect of Swahili used in the Democratic Republic of Congo, sentences are constructed in a subject-object-verb structure; a pattern very different from the subject verb-object sentence structure in English. In Mashi/Swahili, there are suffixes which cannot always be converted into English. This has made communication in English very difficult for black African students. Almost all of the students in the sample used a mixture of Mashi/Swahili and French to mentally codify English.

8. Culture: “Language reflects culture and tends to control or influence processes used to think and to perceive” [14]. Thus, sometimes, the barriers are not due to the use of words in the language, but the ways the speakers go about saying it or the ways the listeners go about perceiving it. In addition, cultures also shape the way students communicate with others. Black African students chiefly come from male dominated cultures; they are then particularly sensitive to the issue of a female student offering assistance to a male student. In an attempt to provide assistance or instruction to a Congolese male student a female South African student (the class representative) asks the male student whether he understands a concept, the student would likely respond, that he does understand, even if he does not. Such an attitude would generate a barrier in communication [14].

9. THE RESEARCH DESIGN

The data in this research was obtained by using a qualitative approach. With respect to the qualitative collection of data, one-on-one and focus group interviews were conducted with 120 black African students from the Democratic Republic of Congo Ethiopia, Angola, Nigeria Gabon, Malawi, Mozambique, Zimbabwe, Zambia, Cameroon, Somalia, Ghana and South Africa (see Table 2). The guiding criterion employed in selecting the respondents for this study was not whether they represent the totality of students from Africa or even in one country, but rather that they make up a volume of black African students at UJ –Soweto campus and thus comprise the collective case study. They were selected as they are scattered along a range of criteria, including different mother tongue -lingua franca, studying at UJ and having studied Business Communication 1. A key consideration in the choice of students was that they did not have English as a first language.

10. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

Data was gathered from a series of focus group and one-on-one interviews with different groups of black African students at UJ from various African countries (see table 2). The findings emanating from the data were categorised under the following themes (table 2)

Table: Analysis of qualitative data.

Themes	Evidence from Interviews with SGBs
English demotivates and impacts on academic progress	Uhm, I would say it acted as a barrier since like we have opportunity back homeland. If we like go to UK, or a French speaking country we won't be spending the full year studying English or the local language, but here in South Africa, we have to spend one year studying English before we attend the University.
Cultural differences	Learning English, we have to translate it first in which ever language we understand, and then translate it to English, it's easier for us to do that.

South African languages as a barrier	Ja, negatively it's a barrier it is sad and you feel a bit left out, when people are talking the language you basically do not understand. But the negative aspect is to communicate, some people are experiencing Xenophobia against us. Yes, because we are foreigners because we can't communicate effectively and properly with them, we feel left out and they definitely don't want to approach us , like sometimes maybe when you in a taxi rank
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In order to reveal the rationale behind the themes arrived at they are now discussed:

10.1 English demotivates and retards academic progress

All the interviewees pointed out the English language as a barrier, and the main reason for stress. Interviewees mentioned that the difficulties in expressing themselves or understanding what the senders were saying were the main problems. As foreigners in South Africa, they blame themselves for the problems they encounter and become subservient, unless the service failure was severe and obvious. Only in desperation will black African students plead for a measure of service and if denied generally they accept their "fate".

10.2 Cultural differences

Most of the cultural differences between black African students and South African students on the Soweto campus leads to African students being discriminated against, by South Africans. This is surprising considering prior studies suggest that customization leads to higher satisfaction, more positive attitude, and greater willingness to accept the foreigner [15]. Another major cultural difference that surfaced was the type of food South African's ate as opposed to black African students. Power distance is "the extent to which the less powerful members of institutions and organization within a country expect and accept that power is distributed unequally" [16].

10.2.1 Sensing problems

Miscommunication and the difficulties in obtaining accurate information from taxi drivers and shop personnel particularly at "Checkers". This, in turn, affects the black African student's purchase decisions, because they are not well-informed about the products and procedures.

10.2.2 Emotional/cognitive reactions

Emotional responses that black African students' experienced, most frequently were anxiety, fear, and embarrassment. They were anxious, due to a lack of knowledge, such as not knowing why they received such hostile treatment and the ridicule they had to succumb to, or not knowing what to answer when service providers and lecturers asked questions. Fear was mainly related to "face consciousness." The interviewees in this sample were afraid that they were going to be embarrassed in front of the waitron or their friends and embarrassment is the emotion they experienced when they lost face. According to [17], face is defined as the reputation and the credibility one has earned in a social network. Prior studies show evidence that Africans are more face-sensitive than Westerners [16]. On the other hand, their cognitive response was mainly confusion, which comes from not knowing how to react to unexpected situations or when they don't understand what the senders were saying because they lacked any knowledge of the South African black languages.

10.2.3 Coping behaviours

Coping behaviours are closely related to sensing problems and are largely affected by emotional responses. Interviewees identified embarrassment, fear, and anxiety as the emotions they encounter. Their coping behaviours such as, not asking the service provider or not complaining unless the service failure is severe may reflect their behavioural responses to such emotions. Their coping behaviours were severely affected by many service provider's attitude. When the service provider was attentive, in the Taxi, Checkers or a caring lecturer for example, Black African students were encouraged to ask

the service provider questions or to complain if there were problems. However, when the service provider was unfriendly, they were reluctant and even afraid to do so [18].

11. CONCLUSION

The sense of belonging and the desire to be in groups exist today despite mass modernisation partly because it has enabled survival during years of oppression and suffering [19]. A respondent, according to [19], considers individualism as “associated with a lack of caring and generosity because people are perceived to be alienated from their traditions, culture and each other”. This explains why a black African student’s language which does not fit the cultural norm of a group, society or nation are, “disowned” or denied, and this obviously inhibits an individual’s potential which becomes a cause of dysfunctional interactions. This barrier caused by an black African student’s home language causes group polarisation which is a process by which African students build a bulwark against Xenophobia which in most cases was ignited by African students home languages..

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