

EXAMINING THE IMPACT OF COMMUNICATION SKILLS TOWARDS ENHANCING STUDENTS' COMMUNICATION COMPETENCE IN OUR TERTIARY INSTITUTIONS

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ABSTRACT

The need to make the teaching and learning of language less abstract and more pragmatic and relevant to the students of higher institutions has generated changes in the approach to the teaching of English language as communicative skills. It places emphasis on the use of language in real life situation for the learners to be proficient. The need for communicative competence of the average Higher Institution students has become a growing concern to English language educators and specialists, as well the society at large. The attempt to address the problem of incompetency resulted to the shift of focus on language education to participatory teaching methodologies for the functional improvement in communicative skills of our students. This paper therefore, attempts to examine how the communicative approach could be applied in teaching Higher Institution Students to acquire the necessary skills effectively which will enable them to communicate competently in either spoken or written English and in different facets of communication.

Keywords: *Examining, Impact, Communication, Skills, Enhancing, Students' Communication, Competence, Tertiary Institutions*

INTRODUCTION

One of the major factors responsible for the poor performance of students in language and communication skills is that teachers do not put in enough effort towards making students realize the relevance of English Language to their experience and communicative needs (Ezema, 1996:1). Again, the teaching of English as a second language has become technical that teachers forget that language is meant for interaction, Doff (1988:22) claims that the language used in lessons is often unnatural and artificial. But if the teacher uses English to say real things to the class, it will give the students the feeling that English language is used for communication and not just a language that belongs to the textbook. Secondly, language learners can therefore develop competence in the target language if the classroom context is provided with adequate opportunity for target language use. For comprehensible output to be produced, learners have to be pushed into negotiation of many. Swain (1985:252) argues that comprehensible output provides opportunities for contextualized, meaningful use to test out hypothesis about the target language and to move the learner from a purely semantic analysis of the language to a syntactic analysis of it. This will enable the second language learner to benefit from communicative language teaching at the classroom level.

LANGUAGE AND COMMUNICATION SKILLS IN OUR TERTIARY INSTITUTIONS

Language and communication skills in the tertiary institution classroom

Communication skills classes in Nigeria High Institutions are characterized by:-

- Larger classroom
- Overcrowded classrooms
- Over reliance on lecture method the non-interactive teacher centered approach
- Abstract vocabulary teaching in that it provides the context to make it real and

practical.

These factors and others affect the desirability of achieving the philosophy of the programme objectives. Again, the ill-equipped language environment and lack of instructional materials as well as the inadequate teaching techniques contribute to the ineffectiveness in the communication skills lesson

Communicative Competence as observed by many, involves much more than acquisition of grammatical competence. It entails acquisition of competence to use the language in varying ways to suit both context and user as Williams (1982) puts it, language is concerned with both functions and structures, this implies that successful importation of language skills need to adopt the communicative approach to language and communication skills classrooms. In effect, the emphasis in communication skills is no longer grammatical competence but communicative competence.

It is noteworthy that functional use of language in no way precludes the knowledge of the structure of the language. Indeed, application of the rules of grammar to situation and context as demanded in order to achieve communicative competence, a number of language and communication skills methods have emerged in which the function of language as emphasized. One of such is the English for Specific Purposes (ESP) method.

WHAT IS COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE?

Canale and Swain in Bologun (2002) explained communicative competence as the underlying systems of knowledge and skills required for communicating the socio-linguistic convention of a given language. According to them, the components of communicative competence are grammatical competence, and socio-linguistic strategic competence.

GRAMMATICAL COMPETENCE

It is concerned with the teaching of rules of language in its different forms; verbal and non-verbal, its focus is the form of language, phonology syntax and semantics. It lays the foundation for effective use of language.

SOCIO-LINGUISTIC COMPETENCE

This examines the use of language in different context and how such factors as status, purpose and societal norms impact on utterances and meaning. Hence appropriateness of meaning is conceptualized, as such. What is appropriate to a particular situation may be inappropriate in another situation. Hence meaning and forms are not fixed but are determined by socio-linguistic perspective. This type of competence seems to be giving less attention in curriculum development and implementation in Nigeria.

DISCOURSE COMPETENCE

This is the act of synthesizing language parts (forms and meaning) to achieve a unified utterance or writing. This is the competence needed for the writing of various discourses, reports, essays, correspondence, etc. It teaches order, coheance, logic and unity in the use of language, order refers to chronology of ideas in a text, coherence implies the presence of interconnectedness of the ideas, logic is the art of reasonableness in expressing ones thought and unity is the cohesion of ideas through structured linkages.

STRATEGIC COMPETENCES

This is an integrative approach in which the main goal is to prepare and encourage learners to exploit in an optimal way the limited communicative competence in the second language Canale (1983:11).In other words, it is a strategy used to cope with

breakdowns in communication and limited knowledge of a language. This is illustrated by the use of paraphrase in situations where a learner lacks adequate knowledge of words form this type of competence is commonly used in comprehension text.

The foregoing illustrates that English Language and communication skills in our tertiary institutions education needs to reflect and emphasize the acquisition of the four competences above. It has been observed by Odejide (2002) that functionalism is more of an approach than a methodology, while methods are fixed systems with prescribed practices and techniques, approaches represent language teaching philosophies which can be interpreted and applied in a variety of ways in a classroom. The teachers can adopt approaches that suit the needs of the situation, this is the basic need analysis approach which in itself is a communicative approach. Its emphasis is the diagnosis of the needs and differences in the communication needs of the speakers and the building of courses round each situation for the different classes of speakers. It is based on communicative language course designed in which emphasis is on the “perceived” not “felt” needs of the learners (Aborisade, 1997).In this process, the teachers play a very vital role.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The impact of communication skills is certainly a contemporaneous assessment. Its fundamental goals are for language teacher’s capacity awareness as well as techniques and strategies constantly assessed and where necessary to modify and improve as well as encourage organizational adaptation to change embodied within this framework.

CLASSROOM COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES

Effective exchange of meanings between one or more individuals through a common system of symbol i.e. communication, has been a great challenge through the ages and the world over. Some philosophers and educators tend to classify society as developed, developing or under developed on the basis of the sophistication of their means of communication.

The subject of communication has concerned scholars since the time of ancient Greece. Until modern times, however, the topic was usually subsumed under other disciplines and taken for granted as a natural process inherent to each. In 1928 the English literary critic and author I. A. Richards offered one of the first and in some ways still the best definition of communication as a discrete aspect of human enterprise:-

"Communication takes place when one mind so acts upon its environment that another mind is influenced, and in that other mind an experience occurs which is like the experience in the first mind, and is caused in part by that experience".

Richards' definition is both general and rough, but its application to nearly all kinds of communication, including those between humans and animals (but excluding machines), separated the contents of messages from the processes in human affairs by which these messages are transmitted.

Communication occurs in diverse situations and fields of existence. However, our concern in this session is the communication in the classroom situation in general and in the area of mathematics and science education in particular. The process of communication in the classroom involves teaching and learning activities. So far in any meaningful teaching and learning, a teacher and students (pupils) must be involved in the sharing of common meanings and receiving messages either from

each or from the environment.

RATIONALE

Effective teaching essentially entails effective communication between the teacher (facilitator) and the learner (pupils) with the quality of interaction being in direct proportion with the quality of communication. Thus a teacher who is a master of the communication process is an asset in the classroom. Effective communication; a skill that can be cultivated even by those who are not naturally endowed, can go a long way in improving participatory approach in lessons. The existing gaps in teachers' communication skills in the teaching and learning of mathematics and science ought therefore, to be explored and ways and means of addressing the gaps identified.

This module, if it is employed into usage, the following objectives would be achieved:-

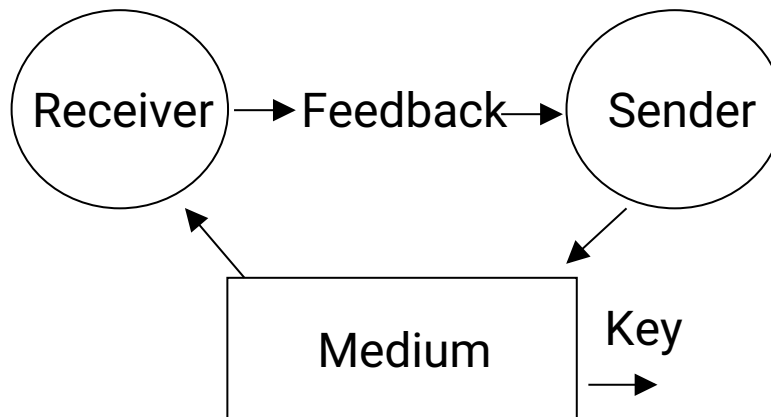
1. Appreciate different forms and processes of effective verbal and non-verbal communication.
2. Develop effective questioning techniques.
3. Use appropriate illustrations for effective communication.
4. Take necessary steps to reduce or eliminate barriers in communication.

THE COMMUNICATION PROCESS

Communication is a two-way process from the sender through the medium to the receiver then feedback to the sender. There are five basic elements in an effective communication (NCCE: 2008):-

1. Sender: The source of communication signal.
2. Message: The transmitted signal.
3. Medium: The channel of conveyance.
4. Receiver: The target of the signal.

5. Feedback: how the receiver responds to the signal.



It is a common saying in communication that the message is with the receiver because it can be interpreted into various shades of meanings depending on the:-

- Level of experience of the receiver.
- Quality of transmission skills.
- Knowledge of what to transmit.
- Personality of the sender.
- Disposition and the commitment to participation by the major actors in the communication process.

In any effective communication the sender and the receiver must be in mutual interaction, exchange and share meanings in the message(s) sent. Complete communication does not take place unless there is a feedback.

TYPES OF COMMUNICATION

In general, there are two types of communication; verbal and non-verbal. Verbal communication refers to the application of oral/aural signals in the act of communicating while non-verbal employs the use of symbols. In other words sound-hearing stimulus events and symbolic languages e.g. gestures, signs, touch, sight can

be used in effective communication.

OBJECTIVES OF EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION

Effective communication in the classroom situation could be used to:-

1. Convey, transmit or share meanings, experience and actions.
2. Bring about proper thinking and learning.
3. Modify improper thinking and learning.
4. Describe self, others and environment.
5. Clarify conflicts and doubts.
6. Motivates and express desires, interest and feelings.
7. Develop decision-making and problem solving skills.
8. Create entertainment and relaxation.
9. Development, control or modify behaviour.
10. Consider the interest of those involve in the communication.

CHALLENGES TO EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION IN CLASS

Not every instance of communication achieves what was intended, however, communication is only effective to the extent that it produces the desired effects. Factors that limit the effectiveness of communication are communication barriers and can be caused by personal characteristics inherent in the individual or by environmental factors. Communication barriers are numerous and include:-

1. Lack of confidence as a result of ignorance, inferiority complex and shyness.
2. Use of inappropriate language/vocabulary which is above the level of the pupils or considered indecent.
3. Teachers neglecting pupils in the communication process when they use inappropriate approaches/methods such as teacher-centred chalk and talk.
4. Pupils' perception of the message, topic, teacher and for the method of

presentation.

5. Poor audibility/voice projection.
6. Mother-tongue interference.
7. Inappropriate and poor usage of the teaching materials, in which case they end up being distracters.
8. Teachers' mode of dressing.
9. Quality of teachers' grooming.
10. Socio-economic backgrounds of both the teachers and learners.
11. Noise from outside the classroom.
12. Indecent relationship with the pupils.

ATTAINING EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION

In order to achieve effective communication in mathematics and science classroom, facilitators (teachers) (NCCE 2008) has suggested that teachers should endeavour:-

1. Give information that is precise and meaningful both in concrete and in behavioural terms. This means that the meanings must be simple, straightforward and appropriate to the mental age, ability and the need of the pupils.
2. Select appropriate, simple, familiar and understandable medium to the receiver.
3. Appropriately use both verbal and non-verbal modes when and where necessary.
4. Avoid harsh words and shouting but use moderate and perceptible tones.
5. Present messages in orderly, comprehensive sequence.
6. Look up and face the audience while talking.
7. Minimize or altogether remove all forms of noise.
8. Adopt a participatory approach in teaching to ensure active pupil participation.

9. Clarify doubts, confusions and misconceptions in the receiver.
10. Put up a high degree of patience and establish a friendly relationship with the students (pupils).
11. Ask for stories or explanation from the student.
12. Request students to narrate experiences or practical work.
13. Apply question and answer method of teaching to ensure active participation of the pupils.
14. Be patient enough to repeat the message passed on if need be.
15. Examples and teaching aids should be from the environment that the pupils are familiar with.
16. Ask students to interpret teacher's demonstration of an experiment.
17. Ensure that both the teacher and pupils pay attention to each other.

In summary, the breakdown in communication many times leads to disastrous consequence. Most air disasters are as a result of breakdown in communication between the pilot and the control tower. One historical account found in the Christians' Holy Book "The Bible" gives a dramatic illustration of the effects of both effective communication and breakdown in communication. In the building of the "Tower of Babel" the people spoke one language and achieved a level of understating and unity to an extent that they were confident of building a tower reaching all the way to heaven. However, immediately their language was confused, the project not only stopped but they ended up scattered all over the earth's surface! Let our lessons not be a "Tower of Babel"! Achieving effective communication between teachers and learners is critical to realizing the goals of teaching effective communication skills for technological advancement. Let teachers, therefore, spare no effort in seeking to attain it.

ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE AND THE LANGUAGE AND COMMUNICATIVE SKILL SITUATION IN OUR TERTIARY INSTITUTIONS

It is not in dispute that the quality of education today is constantly on the decline as evidenced in the academic performances of our students in Higher Institutions of learning even in the fields of work, the linguistic competence of the products of our tertiary institution is visibly low. This led to the questions of whether the standard of education is falling or has fallen. This question arises from the misconceptions surrounding the term performance in Education. Performance in Education refers to the achievement of an individual student in the educational process while quality of education refers to the various conceptions/judgments that people make of the value of education. The issue therefore is not that of a falling standard alone but rather that of the inability of performance to match the set standards (Esimeje 2002). The search for the causes of poor performance attentionists and specialist in various fields of study, indeed, a number of causes have been identified. Primary education constitutes the first stage of learning and as such it is the foundation upon which other learning will stand in our country. This foundation is generally weak because of the inadequate attention it receives and this takes toll on the other stages of learning.

The ability to read is an important factor in the education of the Nigerian child. It is unfortunate, however, that in 2017 many of our children are unable to read in their mother tongue, nor do they know English at a level of transition to learning in English in primary four (4) and the upper grades: NCCE (2017:2).

There are critical issues in the language curriculum that the language teacher educator needs to understand. Language learning is an important aspect of the child's developmental process. Secondly, successful language learning means effective acquisition of language skills which include listening, speaking, reading and writing.

These skills are traditionally conceptualized as discrete components of language learning in contemporary methodology. They are treated as integrative skills.

Considering that communication requires the integration of both the main and the subsidiary skills i.e. grammar, punctuation and pronunciation, it makes sense that language is taught in a communicative promoting way.

Examination malpractice is a monster in our Educational institution today, despite attempts to curb it; malpractice has remained a persistent problem in our schools. It begins at the primary level through tertiary/university levels of education. The most painful and lamenting aspect is that major stakeholders aid this practice in different ways.

The admission policies in our tertiary institution constitute yet another problem beside the minimum entry requirement of five (5) credits passes including English language, the system has devised other means such as quota, disadvantaged areas as well as catchment zones, which necessitate lowering the entry qualifications and ultimately the quality of education. Even the introduction of post-jamb examinations, pre-NCE, Pre-ND is an indication of the weakness of the secondary system. A census of the admissions into our institutions will readily reveal that most of the students passed through the remedial programme. A nagging question is, has the programme succeeded in remedying their deficiencies?

Despite the attempts to remedy the problem of falling performances in education, the menace has persisted and in fact seems to be worsening. This is most visible from the linguistic performance of our contemporary graduates and students of our institution of Higher learning. The low performance linguistically is more noticeable.

The correlation between performance in English language and performance in other fields of study in the school system has been established through a research as Ohuche (1993) Ojo (1986) Kalajaiye (1982) and Adeboyega (1993), observe, the problems of students poor performances which have been associated with the language of institution. They noted that inadequate linguistic competence is an impediment of effective communicative skills, and consequently cause of the low performance of students generally.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study is grounded within the content analysis research paradigm. Content analysis is a specific research model which centres on certain characteristics of texts. This approach involves both quantative and qualitative analysis of the content of communication. Quantitative content analysis has been in communication research which provides in-depth analysis and quantify the text in terms of features (Naidu, 2017)

In this regard, the paper adopted the quantative content analysis research model in order to examine the communicative competence of ESL learners at the tertiary level. 30 respondents were selected from three institutions in Bauchi. They were; Bauchi State University Bauchi Campus, Abubakar Tatari Ali Polytechnic Bauchi, and College of Education Kangere. Data were collected through writing task of one hour within which the respondents' essays of 500 words each. After the task the scripts were collected and marked by two independent examine who are experts in the field through the use of a standard rubric. The data were analysed on the basis of the rubric and presented in a table.

RESEARCH FINDING AND DISCUSSION ANALYSIS

Table 1: Writing Quality of the Respondents from Bauchi State University, Bauchi

Candidate	Organization	Content	Mechanics	Vocabulary	100%
1	12	15	10	08	45
2	09	13	06	07	35
3	10	14	09	11	44
4	16	12	08	10	46
5	20	17	12	12	61
6	18	15	10	09	52
7	15	19	07	08	49
8	21	16	06	09	44
9	19	20	09	10	50
10	14	17	10	10	46

Table 1 above indicates that the respondents have shown satisfactory performance in the good writing task. Moreover, their performance is in terms of organization and content however, they are weak in mechanics and vocabulary. A bar chart is presented below for visual illustration.

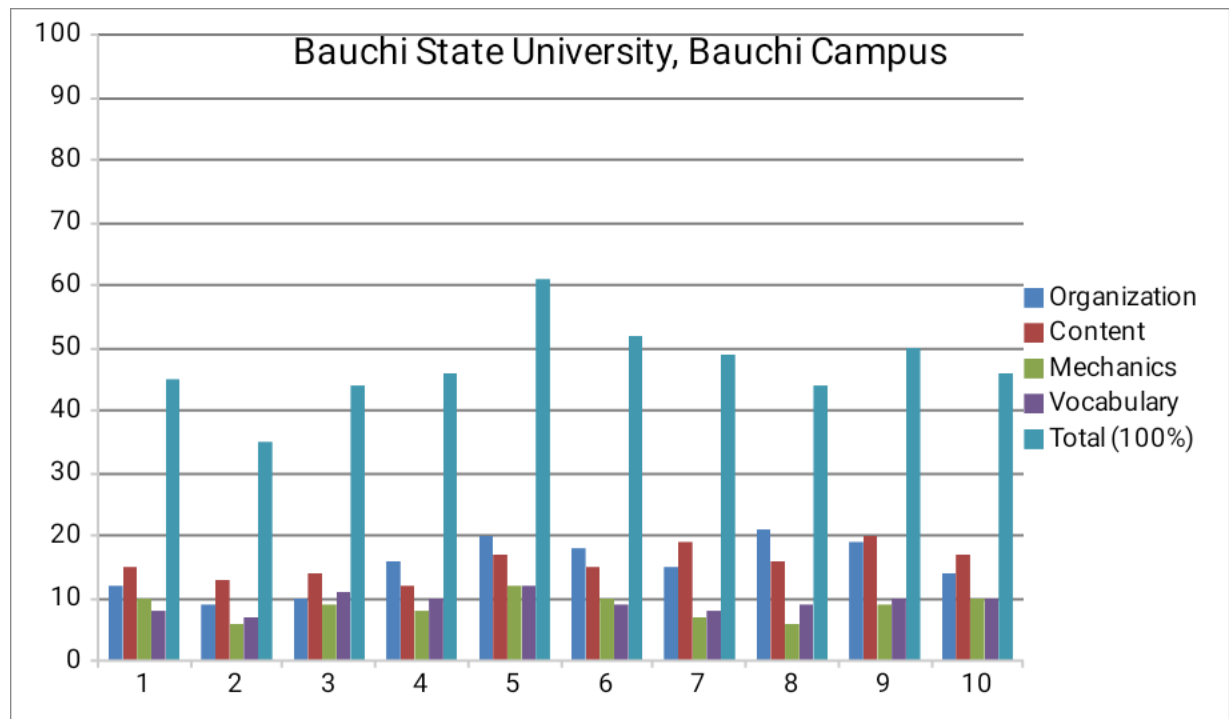


Figure 1

Table 2: Writing Quality of the Respondents from College of Education Kangere, Bauchi

Candidate	Organization	Content	Mechanics	Vocabulary	100%
1	20	16	12	06	56
2	18	20	10	09	55
3	21	15	11	09	55
4	16	19	06	06	49
5	17	20	12	08	57
6	20	17	06	07	39
7	16	10	08	06	54
8	20	20	10	10	60
9	22	18	05	04	39
10	15	15	08	06	50

Table 2 above indicates that the respondents have shown satisfactory performance in the good writing task. Moreover, their performance is in terms of organization and content however, they are weak in mechanics and vocabulary. A bar chart is presented below for visual illustration.

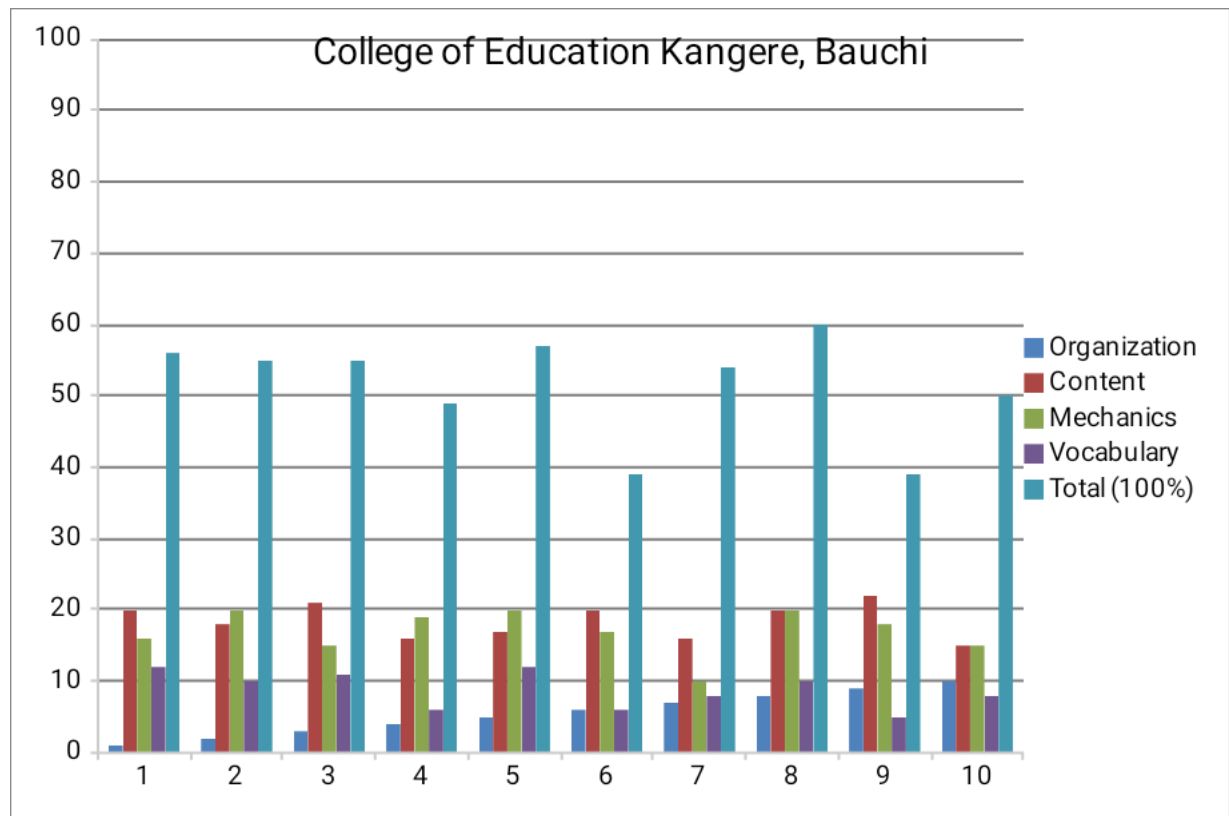


Figure 2

Table 3: Writing Quality of the Respondents from Abubakar Tatari Ali Polytechnic, Bauchi

Candidate	Organization	Content	Mechanics	Vocabulary	100%
1	19	17	06	07	51
2	21	18	08	06	49
3	23	19	10	05	48
4	20	18	09	09	52
5	19	20	09	05	49
6	22	19	06	08	54

7	24	11	05	04	53
8	22	10	07	08	42
9	19	09	06	09	43
10	20	10			

Table 3 above indicates that the respondents have shown satisfactory performance in the good writing task. Moreover, their performance is in terms of organization and content however, they are weak in mechanics and vocabulary. A bar chart is presented below for visual illustration.

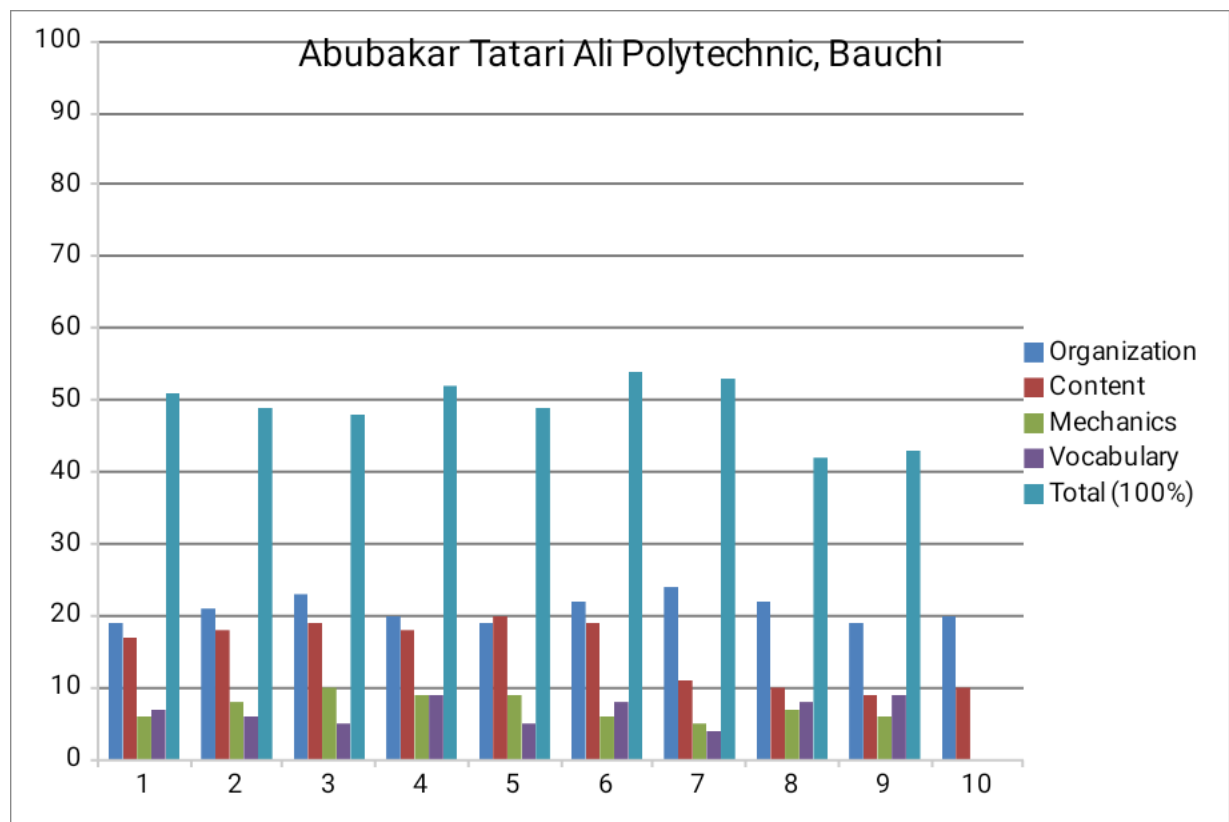


Figure 3

SUGGESTIONS

A major impediment to functional education is the over generalized nature of the English language curriculum for higher institutions. Language teaching should be differentiated on the basis of the categorized needs of the learners and also language

teachers should have the needed competence and drive to direct teaching towards the fulfillment of the identified needs.

As stated in the paper, the students need the English language for its process function, not for its content. The teacher must know the needs of various categories of students and tailor their teaching materials and methods towards enhancing the ability of the learners to acquire knowledge in their chosen fields. The language teacher may have to play the roles of a sociologist, psychologist, and philosopher in order to lay the foundation for effective teaching.

The teaching of English language and communication skills should be made interesting to the learners as a primary motivation to learn, one way to do this is to establish a link between it and the subject areas of the learners. For instance, in teaching comprehension to engineering students, the passage should be sourced from engineering field (discourse). This is very important because it is a familiar terrain to the learner and also in the process obtains content knowledge. So, his interest is motivated and learning process occurs naturally in this regard.

CONCLUSION

It is very imperative that teachers of language and communication skills explore the role and usage of assessment, both in formative and summative in students' language development. Since the communicative competence of our tertiary institutions is unsatisfactory and grossly inadequate due to a number of measures ranging from the method of teaching to the attitude of the learners, there is a need for a change (Okoh 2000). This change should start from the method of teaching. Therefore, this paper calls for an active participation of the learners in the learning experiences while the teacher should serve as a guide, an analyst as well as a facilitator in the lesson

delivery of language and communications skills. This may be achieved through the use of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) with some modifications in our tertiary institutions' classroom.

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