

BRIDGING COMMUNICATION GAP AT CONSTRUCTION SITES IN ABUJA: THE PIDGIN ENGLISH ADVANTAGE

BAMGBADE, Adebisi Abosede & JIMOH, Richard Ajayi

Department of Building, Federal University of Technology, Minna, Niger State, Nigeria.

Communication among different cultures is very vital in workplace and in the society as a whole. Negative occurrences of misunderstanding due to breakdown in communication often occur on construction sites with the attendant consequences on productivity and well-being of the site workers. Hence, the study assessed communication among diverse workers on construction sites in Abuja through the use of unobstructed observation in ten selected sites in Abuja; In addition to this, ten managers/supervisors were interviewed. The study showed that interactions among the workers basically were in English and Pidgin English. Furthermore the study revealed that although 71% of the selected construction firms operate formal organisational structure which entails standard communication in English Language, but in reality, there are informal interactions among the diverse workers within the organisations which give room for informal mode of communication. Despite this unanimous communication in Pidgin English majority of the Hausas could not communicate with other tribes in either English or Pidgin English except with the assistance of an interpreter. Needful to say that the communication bridge among the diverse tribes is not sufficient since majority of the Hausas are yet to assimilate into the Pidgin English mode of communication culture. This therefore call for concern from construction firms to create awareness and also ensure proper training of the affected tribes on the use of Pidgin English as a means of effective communication among diverse workforce on construction sites in Abuja.

KEY WORDS: Culture, Ethnicity, Communication, Pidgin English, Construction firms.

bisbam@gmail.com

rosney@futminna.edu.ng

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Introduction

Communication is a very powerful tool in the world today. Ability to interact and communicate with one another is a great asset for humanity (Can and Patton, 2010). Language is a means by which we communicate and the world is filled with various languages as we move from one place to another. There has also been the transformation or transition of languages as the world progresses over time from one place to the other (Altintas, Can, and Patton, 2007).

Organisations all over the world can achieve nothing without an effective communication structure; information from one person to the other should be well encoded and decoded respectively for it to have positive impact on productivity thereby sustaining the organisation. Imagine a construction site without an effective communication, there will be confusion and hardly will anything be done properly and effectively.

There are arrays of languages being communicated by people of similar and dissimilar tribes in Nigeria (Lera, 2009). For inter-tribal communication, official means of communication-English language is used for formal setting. However for ease of communication between members of dissimilar tribe with no understanding of English language, the language devise – Pidgin English is being used by many Nigerians, with different versions depending on the tribal language intonation structure.

Although Pidgin English is well spoken in our society, yet its use within the construction industry inspired another level of exploration and adaptation. Generally some people think that Pidgin English is spoken by the low people in society as well as the semi-illiterate or illiterate people in the society (Funke, 2012), but today its fast becoming popular among the generality of people in our society. Nigerian Pidgin, as a contact language, is right now witnessing a shift in its status. Because of diachronic development over the years, the use of Nigerian Pidgin English is now becoming very popular among many speakers than ever before. Nigerian Pidgin English has gone through a lot of adjustment and transformation over the years by drawing its rich lexicons from various Nigerian indigenous languages as well as the contact language (English). The historical contact of the indigenous languages with English language has metamorphosed into what we know today as Nigerian Pidgin English (Balogun, 2013).

The Pidgin English is growing out of the negative views to a more positive use for the purpose of easy but effective communication in our society. At the moment literacy activity are on-going on its development as we now find Pidgin English dictionary, Pidgin English on Nigerian Google site. There is a very popular radio station in Abuja known as WAZOBIA FM (Balogun, 2013), it is tuned to by a very large population in Abuja and its environ. Their major medium of broadcast is Pidgin English, ordinarily it would not have been thought to gain such an enormous popularity but it did, showing the acceptance and popularity of the language in the society.

Construction workers are made up of different categories of people with different level of mastery of the Standard English language. However, those in the lower cadre responsible for works such as digging, carrying of materials like moulding blocks, mixing of cements, or those generally referred to as labourer are usually people with less formal education or for some no education at all. This category of workers has less understanding of the formal Standard English language and yet need to communicate on construction site. Also those that are more skilful handling more specialised areas such as mason, carpenters, welders and the likes are made up of some with formal education up to secondary school level, some without formal education beyond primary school and some with none at all. This category makes up a very large proportion of construction workers and as part of the general society, majority of them speak the easier Pidgin English for effective communication within the society and also on site. Therefore it is important to assess the current trend in communication modes adopted among construction site workers in Abuja where people from all over the country and beyond converge in search of work. To this end answers are sought to the following research questions:

1. How do these people communicate effectively despite differences in educational background and language?
2. What are the strategies that can be adapted to bridge communication gap on construction sites?

Literature review

Nigeria is a highly multi-ethnic state of about 177 million inhabitants according to the CIA world fact book (2014), and the 8th largest country in the world Okala (2014). Roger (2012), findings show that there are about 550 different languages in Nigeria. Communication in such an environment like this is a complex one because of the extent of this diversity. It is worthy of note that the coming of the colonial era brought about the use of the English language and since everyone cannot and will not be fully involved in the mastery of the English language, there has to be a way out of the complexity of learning such a language, thus the emergence of a mixture or transformation that brought about the pidgin English.

The dynamic and generative abilities of Nigerian Pidgin to generate from a finite set of lexical items have maintained to foster communication process and interaction among Nigerians. The Nigerian Pidgin English has brought about mutual interest and understanding between foreigners and indigenous citizens. Nigerian Pidgin has become known as the most widely spoken language of intra and inter communication among Nigerians and across various ethnic groups that do not share a common language. But quite disappointedly, some people display negative attitude towards this language, not accepting it as viable means of communication among dissimilar tribes that should receive formal endorsement by the Government (Balogun, 2013).

All humans no matter how isolated they are or how primitive their society is have language, and the languages of primitive societies are not more complicated than those of more technologically advanced cultures (Michael, 2006). Generally, looking at language, it is important to note that language enables us to make our needs, opinions and ideas known. Without language we will not have the raw materials needed for thinking and reasoning, social interactions among people is highly dependent on effective communication and language ability. Language is very necessary for regulating our responses and behaviour (Westwood, 2003).

English language is a prominent language today and it is widely spoken in many countries all over the world (McAuthur, 2002). It is the language of the English people, that is, the people of England of the United Kingdom (Simpson, 1989). The age of exploration of the earth eventually ushered in massive migration of people across the world and the colonial era played a major role in bringing the English language to Africa in general and Nigeria in particular.

English language itself has experienced a lot of transformation from one form to the other. The pre-historic era of the English language has its root in the Germanic language which belongs to the Indo-European languages. Then came the era of the primitive old English which features between 450-700AD, this was followed by the old English era between 700-1100 and then middle English era between 1100-1500 and finally the modern English from 1500-till date (Deutschmann, n.d). There has been a lot of transformation or evolution of the English language from one era to the other, in fact the modern English is a combination of other primitive languages and adjustments for acceptable suitability (Deutschmann, n.d)

Words were coined from Latin, Greek, French and so on to make up for the current Standard English (Algeo, 2010). There seem to be no end to transition of language (Joseph, n.d) for ease and more comfortable communication among people from one place to the other. The American seeking a unique identity transformed the original British English to what is now known as the American English (Jackson, 2007) with lots of changes especially to spellings. So also Pidgin English is a modern localised transformation of the English language for ease of communication among people of dissimilar tribes. Going down memory lane, Balogun (2013) found various schools of thought that coined the word “pidgin” firstly, that it arises from business interaction between the West Africans, the Chinese and European traders while the Chinese were trying to pronounce the word “business”. Secondly, from the Portuguese word ocupacao this means occupation and lastly from a Hebrew word Pidjom which means bater. It is very important to understand that pidgin is a product of trade or business, contact of migration of two hetero-cultural sets of people.

In the world generally communication between people of tribe with no common language ground has been a great problem to the people and organisations that employed them. Lots of efforts have therefore been made on the part of organisations to bridge this communication gap. Some organisations engaged the use of language facilitators (interpreters), while others

trained their workers on use of common language (Jaselskis, Strong, Aveiga, Canales, & Jahren, 2008). America Construction firms are not left out of this communication problem between the educated and uneducated sites workers (The Hispanics workers). This necessitates some kind of training on communication skills for the supervisors and the Hispanics workers to bridge the communication gap (Jaselskis et al, 2008). In bridging the communication gap many people in organisations have resorted to an informal way of communication among themselves for ease of communication. This has given birth to the use of Pidgin English on sites; a reflection of what is obtainable in the larger society. Many countries of the world such as in West Africa, speak Pidgin English. Although the tone may differ from one tribe to the other. However all have the same object of simplifying the English language to the form that can easily be communicated among them (Igboanusi, 2008).

The Nigerian Pidgin English came about from the coming of the British to Nigeria and the subsequent colonisation of the later (IIIah, 2001). The need for communication between the duo cultures despite the wide gap in language and culture necessitated a bridge. Pidgin English was formerly known as broken English as it deviate from the Standard English and was initially prominent in Edo, Delta axis but today it has spread to other parts of the country (Onuigbo, 1999).

Examining the Nigerian Pidgin English, it varies from one place to another with one form of adjustment or the other (Igboanusi, 2008). For example the Igbos have their adjustment adding some Igbo words to it. The Yorubas also have their own version of addition and adjustment to it. There are other adjustment using French words and so on, the point is anyhow and with any form of adjustment the language is well understood and accepted. The Pidgin English removes the complexity of rules of the Standard English and is more flexible and easier form of communication in our society today (Ifeyinwa, 2014). It can be learned naturally like any local language through listening and speaking without any speciality of learning. Somehow the society found it easy to learn and speak and it is growing. Before now Pidgin English is pre-dominantly regarded as an oral language, but now it is gradually becoming a written language with research focusing on its literary potentials (Ifeyinwa, 2014).

Pidgin has reached a level of recognition among many Nigerians in formal and informal organisational settings, despite it is not being officially ratified (Akande and Salami, 2010). Virtually all governmental advertisements and campaigns have Pidgin English version of it; this shows the informal official approval of it and an easy way of communicating to the masses at the grassroots level. Nigerian Pidgin English promotes peace and unity as well as reveals national identity of the country (Akande and Salami, 2010). It is an inter-ethnic code available to Nigerians, who have no other common language (Akande, 2008).

Examining organisations set up such as construction firms the mode of communication among diverse workforce depends on their organisational structures operating at the

particular point in time which could either be formal or informal organisational structures. Nonetheless organisations are established on formal organisational structure but subsequently informal organisational structures sprang up indefinitely in which workers creates their own ways of life, and ways of communications (Saritha, 2015) based on culture and conveniences. The resultant effect is that an atmosphere of cordial relationship which promotes informal interactions between the low cadre and high cadre is created (Saritha, 2015). Such informal languages such as their tribal languages and or Pidgin English are being used by many diverse workers at sites.

Research Methodology

This research used qualitative methodology which involved unobstructed observation of ten sites, and interview of ten managers with the use of purposive sampling technique. Ten construction sites in Abuja were observed for about 20 minutes each; the observation checklist was used as a guide basically to know how the diverse workers interact at site and their mode of communications. This instrument seems appropriate for this study because the researcher was able to observe the interactions among the diverse workers as it is in reality on the selected sites without any bias from both ends leaving no details out. Ten managers of ten selected construction sites in Abuja were interviewed for about 45 minutes accordingly. The managers were selected based on their experience on sites coupled with their close interactions with the diverse workers were deemed in good position to disclose the condition of the diverse workers in terms of communication issues. Content analysis was undertaken to analyse this qualitative research and results presented in tables.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Site Observation and interaction

The form of communication commonly used whether official or vernacular was observed on the selected multicultural sites. It was discovered that the main, connecting common language of interactions among the diverse workforce was Pidgin English. There was also little of English language during communication with member of dissimilar tribes, Hausa and other local dialects such as Tiv, Ebira. The interaction in local languages was conspicuous during break time; Most of the tribes especially the Hausas segregated in group to interact among themselves in their language. Nonetheless in spite of this social identity, there was cross cultural friendly interactions among the tribes.

The Interviews

Interaction between managers and the other site workers that constitute the majority on most sites was done in Pidgin English. A site manager said use of Pidgin English is being enforced at site meetings involving all site workers for all to understand. Interactions among the site workers themselves are mostly in Pidgin English.

Opinions of selected Managers/Supervisors were sought on the mode of communication and interactions among the diverse workers. Although their presentations differ their views were related. The following views are culled from the interview conducted for the Managers/supervisors on the ten selected sites:

Manager one: “Basically English language and Pidgin language are the mode of communication but then most of the site workers communicate among their tribal workers in their local languages”.

Manager two: “We speak English language and Pidgin English language here on the site. Those that understand Hausa among the site workers revert to Hausa language when interacting with the Hausas; most of the Hausas cannot communicate in any language other than their own language which poses a challenge to other tribes that could not speak Hausa language”. Often times someone has to serve as an interpreter between the Hausas and other tribes.

Manager three: “Means of communication is Pidgin and Hausa language, majority of the Hausas cannot speak English/Pidgin language. As far as this part of Nigeria is concerned you cannot really make a good head way in construction work without an understanding of Hausa language because you need them most and their services are cheaper compared to other tribes”.

Manager four: “English language, Pidgin and Hausa with a bit of Chinese language are the mode of communications on this site.

Manager five: “English language is the means of communication among the workers and interpreters are engaged to interpret to the workers that can neither speak nor understand English language”.

Manager six: “English language and Pidgin English are the two general languages of interactions on this site”.

Manager seven: “We speak mainly Benin republic tribal language on this site. Workers were recruited from Benin republic because of their expertise.

Manager Eight: Nine and Ten: The diverse workforce communicates in English and Pidgin language outside their tribal clique.

Table 1.0: Communication gap

Interviewees	Communication Bridge
Manager one	English language, Pidgin English, Hausa, other local languages.
Manager two	English language, Pidgin English.
Manager three	English language and Hausa.
Manager four	Mix of English language, Pidgin English, Hausa and Chinese work language.
Manager five	Pidgin English and Hausa.
Manager six	Pidgin English and Hausa.
Manager seven	Speaks mainly Benin republic tribal language.
Managers eight, nine & ten	Pidgin English, Hausa and English language.

Source: Field survey (2013)

Table 1.1:

Interviewees	Organisation Structure
Manager one, Manager two, Manager four to six, and Manager eight to ten	Formal
Manager three	Informal
Manager seven	Semi-formal

Source: Field survey (2013)

Findings from the field survey show that 71% of selected construction firms operate formal organisational structures; this implies that communication in such sites is more or less in Standard English language, and the possibility of loss in original information being disseminated through an interpreter (language facilitator) to site workers that do not understand English language is high. The organisational structure as claimed by many of the managers was formal organisation structure, by comparative analysis, majority of them are in real sense operating informal organisation structure where informal communication among the workers is allowed. This therefore agreed with the findings of Saritha(2015) who stated that although organisations are established on formal organisational structure, but, subsequently informal organisational structures sprang up indefinitely in which workers created their own ways of life, way of doing things, and communications based on culture and conveniences. Despite the fact that the workforce has been able to informally adopt

Pidgin English to bridge the communication gap on sites, the study revealed that majority of the Hausas cannot communicate in language other than their own language. Although most times Pidgin English is mixed with English language and other languages for ease of communication. This research reveals that Pidgin language is one of the major bridges in communication gap on construction sites in Abuja for those that cannot relatively communicate in English language.

Conclusion

Effective communication is vital for organisations such as construction firms with diverse workforce, whose ultimate aim is productivity. Communication is said to be effective and complete when there is transverse encoding and decoding of information between people. There are flow of languages at sites among similar tribes but bottled necked during interaction with dissimilar tribes creating gap which necessitated a bridge. Pidgin English apparently is used virtually in the society and organisations such as construction firms to bridge this gap especially among the low cadre workers. The bridge is still insufficiently used among all the tribes; not all the tribes at site can communicate in Pidgin English, thus such breeds misunderstanding, misinformation which impact negatively on the work and self-esteem of the those that cannot communicate well with the other tribes. Suffice to say that the effective communication channel culture that will foster cohesive language independency among all the category of workers at construction sites in Abuja is lopsided since the majority of the Hausas are still cut off from mutual interactions with others because of language barrier.

Recommendation

People of different cultural background irrespective of their status interact in Pidgin English with ease; the days of belittling the Pidgin English and looking down on it as the language of the uneducated and low people in the society is over. Today all categories of people use it. It is therefore recommended that the Pidgin English be further developed and transformed into written form to make it more useful among workers in the construction industry. And also the Hausas should be encouraged to master the Pidgin English as this have come to be acceptable means of communication among diverse workers at sites. Therefore priority should be given by construction firms to the workers (Hausas) at this stage on communication proficiency training in Pidgin English.

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