

Developing Language Skills for Effective Global Partnerships

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Abstract

The concept of celebrating differences reached humanity rather late in the stream of human endeavours; yet that notion also probably underscores current efforts to legitimise spaces to rectify past attempts at socio-cultural displacement. Recognising differences as shared phenomena rather than a weapon for patronage might have spared the ancient and modern worlds the unpleasant experience of colonisation. That recognition is yet to be fully grasped even by the contemporary world. Globalisation is a commendable human endeavour and worth attention. All countries are affected by this global phenomenon. Through globalisation, humanity is making strides to bridge hitherto seeming insurmountable gaps, thus ensuring a certain amount of acceptance of others. That language is a unifying factor in these human endeavours cannot be overemphasised. This paper discusses English language from three perspectives: The first section locates language in the centre of past socio-cultural discord among written and oral cultures. The second part discusses the major breakthroughs in human relations due to improved communication channels. The final part considers the crucial need for developing effective language and communications skills within the global relations and how the Ghanaian educational system could aid technical graduates to maximise their marketability through language.

The concept of celebrating differences reached humanity rather late in the stream of human endeavours, yet that notion also probably underscores current efforts to legitimise spaces to rectify past attempts at socio-cultural displacement. Recognising differences as shared phenomena rather than a weapon for patronage might have spared the ancient and modern worlds the unpleasant experience of colonisation. That recognition is yet to be fully grasped even by the contemporary world; nevertheless, it is from those perspectives that current globalising efforts are commendable human endeavours and worth attention. All countries, big and small, rich and poor, are in one way or the other affected by this global phenomenon. Globalisation allows partners to occupy their natural or geographical spaces whilst assuming some autonomy over international socio-cultural and economic relationships, as opposed to the past when cultures crossed over to others' spaces, annexed territories and established economic systems that mostly served the covetous thirst of the annexing parties (Said, 1994). Diverse groups are now

enabled to work together in spite of barriers, language included, because dignified communication facilitates harmonious coexistence.

Globalisation has not eradicated worldly unfairness or inequalities; in fact, in many ways, it replicates colonialism's infantilising of other cultures. Cross (2004) sums it up well: 'Globalisation...sets great cultures against small ones' (p. 46). Yet it cannot be denied that through globalisation, humanity is making strides to bridge hitherto seeming insurmountable gaps, thus ensuring a certain amount of acceptance of others. That language is a unifying factor in these human endeavours can also not be overemphasised. Undoubtedly, the huge success of contemporary global processes is possible only because cultures have made vast strides in communication; nations can dialogue either through a first language or through a dominant language serving as a common medium of expression. Dominant countries opt for bilateral and multilateral talks rather than force their will on the minority. Yet the central role of language in the current globalising efforts might not be fully appreciated without looking into the history of colonization.

This paper does not attempt to define the phenomenon of globalisation; there is voluminous literature on that. Instead, writing from postcolonial perspectives, the writer highlights the role of language in de-emphasising physical barriers among cultures. The paper thus discusses English language from three perspectives: The first section locates language in the centre of past socio-cultural discord among written and oral cultures. The second part discusses the major breakthroughs in human relations due to improved communication channels through which dominant and minority nations relate, albeit, in unparalleled levels regarding accessibility and maneuverability in (inter)national dealings. The final part considers the crucial need for developing effective language and communications skills within the global relations being pursued by states and how the Ghanaian educational system could aid technical graduates to maximise their marketability through language.

The Turbulent History of Language

Though language has always been a powerful means of human communication, its history is heavily interspersed with turbulence. Naturally, people from different backgrounds would do things differently; such differences

would extend to their languages. If language plays a central role in human communication - oral, written, technological in recent times, then frustrations would set in if there is no common channel for people with different languages trying to work together. Human reaction to such differences in the past has been destructive rather than constructive. Cultures with certain material advantages misinterpreted their inability to understand others' languages to mean the inferiority of such languages, which erroneous sentiment led to the annexation of said cultures, thus effectively placing them in a silencing environment. Language differences thus served as the greatest barrier to harmonious co-existence, one result of which is the global situation where certain languages are currently considered either dominant or minority. Globally, dominant languages enjoy monopoly in the areas of education, economics, entertainment, to mention three. In view of the historical turbulence of language, the writer considers globalisation as one of contemporary attempts to bridge gaps created over the past centuries through the silencing of others' languages and cultures.

A brief reminder of the relevance of language to humanity may help readers appreciate the need to constantly revisit one's stand towards effective communication. Language serves multiple purposes in the lives of all people and cultures, ancient and modern. A very crude definition of language might be the sounds that human beings articulate to effect communication. Bonvillain (1993) stresses the communicative relevance of language to human beings: it is the primary means of interaction between people' (p. 1). In other words, language allows human beings from all spheres of life to communicate with one another. If this were the only function of language, it would suffice for a great role in the lives of human beings, but there is more. Bonvillain extends the role of language when she describes it '[as] an integral part of human behaviour' (p. 1). More than simple human behaviour is being alluded to. According to Chomsky (1966), 'it has always been clear that the normal everyday use of language involves intellectual abilities of the highest order' (p. ix). Chomsky's statement underscores the intellectual characteristics of language. It also presupposes the intelligence of the human beings who use language. The ability to formulate thoughts in one's memory and voice such thoughts in linguistic and non-linguistic terms that others can relate to in various aspects of life must clearly involve some form of human intelligence (Amankwah, 2002). That all cultures practise such communica-

tion, diversely, therefore places all human languages on a certain intellectual wavelength. Other linguists and theoreticians reiterate the importance of language to society.

For linguist Ferdinand de Saussure (1916), what is fundamental to human nature is the ability to construct language or social systems. Saussure's concept of language involves more than mere articulation of words. In his theory, language (*langue*) is both a social product of the faculty of speech and a collection of necessary conventions that have been adopted by a social body to permit its members to use that faculty. This creates a firm relationship between society and language. Society empowers individuals with language; inversely, individuals acquire their language from society. In other words, society endows individuals with language, and individuals use language to promote and preserve society. Thus Saussure removes language from the physical realm and makes it an intrinsic and a reciprocal process. In fact, he makes it heterogeneous — a multi-faceted concept which simultaneously functions on the physical, psychological and intellectual levels.

Recognizing differences as shared phenomena rather than a weapon for patronage might have spared the ancient and modern worlds the unpleasant experience of colonisation.

The versatility of language appears to emanate from the constant human capability in managing language for diverse endeavours. Perhaps that is partly what Bonvillain (1993) alludes to when she writes: 'Language is enriched by the uses that people make of it' (p.1). When people are able to make diverse use of language, they create meanings that render language highly productive cum proactive. The process of globalisation underscores one such diverse use of language. Here, language refers to both dominant and minority tongues; regardless of its status, every human language is endowed with the intellectual and social functions described above, hence, must be accorded equal respect. Historically, however, all languages have not been regarded with equal importance, socially and intellectually; for centuries, rather than use it to secure social harmony, language was used as a manipulative tool with which various societies and cultures were silenced. Some cultures simply refused to accord others' languages the respect and dignity owed every tongue. Reading the accounts of European explorers offers an insight into the crucial role language can play in creating discord among societies.

The examples cited below mainly juxtapose English and other languages, the cultures of which were colonised by England, but it must not be assumed that the British culture is solely responsible for the discord language has created over the centuries. The friction currently existing among many cultures originated with certain groups' disdain for others' languages. Nichols' (1989) critical study of European exploration narratives highlights the underlying political, economic as well as the social implications of the initial interaction between African and European cultures. The coloniser magnified his culture by trivialising African languages:

[N]ineteenth-century attitudes towards the native population of Africa produced interpretations centred on the verbal silencing of a potential source of power, the discrediting of any language use that might threaten a dominant authority, and the marginalisation of silenced individuals because of their supposed lack of verbal sophistication. (p. 1)

Ostracising African languages would be an effective means to silence the cultures inhabiting the continent. Language has the potential to either authenticate or invalidate a culture. Considering the contemporary acknowledged bond between language and worldviews (Ermine, 1995), undermining African languages was strategic in the complicated process of annexing such cultures.

If language authenticates cultures it also empowers the individuals who make up various cultures. European explorers apparently sought to disempower Africans by taking away their language; to that effect, they created a silencing environment by rendering Africans speechless: 'European travellers characterised Africans in terms of silence or inarticulateness' (Nichols, 1989, p. 2). Nichols refers to a fourteenth-century explorer's report: 'African tribesmen have no speech, but rather grinning and chattering' (anonymous pamphlet, as quoted in Nichols, 1989, p. 2). The same pamphlet mentions 'a people without heads'. If the latter expression symbolized non-intelligibility, it would not be difficult to connect it to the 'grinning' and 'chattering' Africans without speech. The combined expression would create an image of imbecility, a condition that would anticipate intervention by a higher intel-

ligence, or to use Said's (1994) words, 'render [Africans] problems to be solved or confined or as the colonial powers openly converted their territory-taken over'. (Said, 1994, p. 207)

Nichols (1989) has also reported of a 'seventeenth-century chronicler shipwrecked on the coast of South Africa' (p. 2) who claimed that for the five months that he spent on the coast, he never understood a word the people said. The chronicler gave the reason he could not understand the Africans: '[T]heir speech is not like that of mankind' (D'Almeida, as quoted in Nichols, 1989, p. 2). These are not isolated quotations, for Nichols asserts: This tendency to evaluate Africans in terms of incomprehensibility of their language appears throughout many early narratives' (p. 2). Language is not very useful unless it is understood; hence, the explorers' initial reaction to African languages might be considered normal if they had not mistaken their lack of understanding to mean that African languages lacked intelligence. Undoubtedly, Africans found the European languages just as incomprehensible, but as to how baffled the former may have been, their descendants may never fully discern because Africans, by the nature of their culture, then lacked the means to independently document their impressions of their visitors.

The belief that oral cultures did not have languages was taken for a fact among some groups (Beattie, 1997; Richardson, 1994). If Africans had no language, they could not have any identity. They could neither have a culture nor constitute a society. The coloniser, by implications, then reduced Africans to a sub-culture level before moving in to impose his culture on Africa. The same procedure was used to colonise oral cultures on other continents. A few examples from North America substantiate this claim. Mainstream United States declared war on Aboriginal languages for their supposed lack of sophistication. Gurza (2000) has provided evidence for the antagonistic stance taken by mainstream American society against Aboriginal languages: 'Their barbarous dialect should be blotted out and English substituted' (p. 2). In Canada, Aboriginal children were forbidden to speak their own language: 'The use of Aboriginal languages was discouraged and severely punished by the missionaries' (Perley, 1993, p. 123). Similar situations occurred on all the con-

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tinents on which colonisation occurred. In such a hostile environment, there could only be a patronising relationship between the 'civilised' coloniser and the 'heathen' colonised. The colonisers started a process of globalisation in those centuries, but their strategy bordered on condescension rather than co-operation.

Writing, which then served as the main channel of documentation, was not utilised for its fairness. Though it served the very useful purpose of recording and preserving information for latter generations, 'European travelers in the 16th-19th centuries functioned as primitive ethnographers whose written observations are invaluable historical resources' (Conceptual history, 2007), it did not serve oral cultures as well as it did the written cultures because one group did the recording. Nichols has explained the contrast: 'The explorers' words, particularly written words, become synonymous with organization, control, power' (p. 3), but '[t]he absence of written words in Africa become synonymous with disorganisation, lack of control, and powerlessness' (p. 3). He has emphasised the unfairness of the situation: 'Seldom do explorers consider the possibility that Africans may have equally elaborate — if not literate — systems of social and personal organisation' (p. 3). Since Europeans neither valued African languages nor considered Africans as intelligent beings, there could not have been any possibility of negotiations for equal partnerships.

It is from that historical perspective that contemporary globalisation has advanced more than the previous ones. The grounds are still uneven (Pan-nekoek, n.d.); yet it is gratifying to find the languages of minority groups and other non-Europeans listed on various information websites. African languages such as Swahili and Hausa, and Oriental languages such as Japanese, Chinese and Korean, to mention these, are now used in some international transactions. This is a major accomplishment considering the Internet's crucial role in globalisation (Argenti, 2007). Additionally, over the years there has emerged the concept of 'African literature' (Simonse, 1982, p. 451). Granted, the concept refers to Africans writing in the former coloniser's language (Simonse, 1982), yet Nichols believes that is a positive sign: 'The writings of Achebe, Ngugi wa Thiongo, Emeta... Soyinka and others have finally given words to voices that have been silenced for over a century' (1989, p. 19). Furthermore, linguists from the former colonising cultures



have studied some oral languages and found such to be complex and just as intelligible as dominant ones (Alomele, 2007; Leavitt, 1993).

All three developments mentioned above have the same implications for both dominant and minority cultures - improved communication. Both former coloniser and the former colonised have travelled far from the point where there existed a civilised-heathen relationship (Gurza, 2000; Perly, 1993) to the current situation where both operate as partners in nation building, development and implementation of democratic processes, in socio-economic relationships, even to supranational levels (Coleman & Porter, 1999; UN Millennium Development Goals, 2007). Improved communication is a result of access to common languages. From their respective dominant and minority positions, cultures dialogue and initiate policies of apparent mutual benefits. Granted, the minority cultures are disadvantaged in many of these transactions due to inequalities in economic strength but that is one of the major challenges that need to be addressed.

Major Breakthroughs

The unique feature of globalisation is its ability to submerge borders. Coleman and Porter (1999) see it as a process of erasing barriers: 'Globalisation refers to processes whereby the boundaries and imagination of social relations become more autonomous from physical location, and time and distance become less of an obstacle to building human relationships in these new spaces' (p. 4). Argenti (2007) has attributed the 'disintegration' of physical boundaries in the global process to technology: 'Technology has strengthened communication channels around the globe, disintegrating national borders...' (p. 6). Insightful ones had actually predicted a 'Global Village'. The definitions above all have implication for human communication. Whereas in past attempts to relate socio-culturally and economically, nations had had to travel physical distances, covering physical spaces is not as crucial in contemporary (inter)national dealings as it is in effective dialogue, as evidenced in contemporary bilateral and multilateral talks among nations desiring to partner one another in various fields of endeavour.

Camp and Satterwhite (2002) have explained how technology makes it possible to work effectively together in spite of geographical boundaries.

Currently, instant virtual travel is possible for many without having to leave one's desk or chair. Through video and teleconferencing, people can communicate across continents from the convenience of their homes or offices. And where an actual journey occurs, thanks to advancement in technology and communication, '[p]eople can travel to almost any part of the world in a matter of hours' (Camp & Satterwhite, p. 71). They add that e-mail messages travel across the world even faster, 'in a matter of minutes, seconds — even nanoseconds!' (p. 71). It is equally possible for one or a few representatives to negotiate for nations, supranational agencies and major corporate bodies and achieve success. Any stride being made in globalisation would not be possible if the parties involved were not communicating well and through one common language or another.

From apparently polarised angles, human cultures must have more in common than any particular culture could be aware of. Perhaps the fact that we all inhabit the same earth gives us something in common; it could also be that we are all affected by the same issues — health, poverty, human rights and relationships — or their absence, (mis)management of power, the environment — or its degradation — to name these, regardless of geographical, cultural, social or racial location (Amankwah, 2002). Since what happens in one location could have spiralling effects in other places, nations are leaning towards

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collective solutions to issues 'by pooling sovereignty' (Coleman & Porter, 1999). That 'pooling' occurs among rich and poor nations, dominant once civilised as well as minority — once heathen — cultures and is achieved through negotiation. To communicate effectively, the parties involved must not only be aware of appropriate channels of communication — oral, written, electronic (Senn, 2004) — but be adept in their usage as well.

Communication on both interpersonal and intercultural levels is probably one of the most beautiful aspects of human life; the beauty in language, the major communication link among humans, can be easily attested to by the diverse ways in which socio-cultural groups utilise language to similar effects. Of the shared human elements, language appears to be one of, if not, the most paradoxical. The same act that engenders general human

communication simultaneously creates the most seemingly insurmountable barriers among groups that cannot speak one another's language. Different languages effectively alienate one socio-cultural group from another.

Remarkably, as soon as these different groups make efforts to learn one another's language, the barriers that hitherto existed among them begin to be visibly lowered. It would appear then that cultures begin to have things in common once they start operating in a common communicative medium. However, once effective communication begins, it can be surmised that human conduct, aspirations and concerns are not too dissimilar from one culture to another. It is probably upon that realisation that certain cultural gaps begin to narrow. Thus through improved communication, contemporary globalisation has brought nations together at a more respectable level than previous attempts. Yet the struggle for equal recognition continues (MDG Report, Goal 3, 2010).

The Technical Graduate and the Challenges of the Global Workforce

The relevance of stable economic conditions as a prerequisite for socio-cultural success and the desire for manoeuvrability within international communities increase the practicality of acquiring (dominant) language skills, or at least, learning to utilise them beyond the average speaker's level. Global trends have made it imperative that people in the workforce acquire effective communication skills for both local and international purposes. Rapid advancement in technology and its relevance in day-to-day performance of the ordinary worker make it crucial for employees to heighten their marketability across borders and cultures in order to avoid being declared redundant on the job. That Ghanaian local 'businesses [are] adapting to international standards' (Outsourcing 2007, p. 47) gives evidence that small nations are also struggling to keep pace with the global phenomenon. Employees who endear themselves to employers are those who can adapt to the rapid changes occurring on the job and apply acquired knowledge under challenging circumstances.

Camp and Satterwhite (2002) have discussed the need for competent communication skills and extended it across inter-cultural business relation-

ships. The need for such competency constantly increases in the 21st century due to changing modes of communication (Senn, 2004). Businesses are mostly communicating through the computer rather than the typewriter; electronic communication is increasingly being preferred to hard copy ones, mainly due to speed and convenience and environmental issues. Employers expect employees to be adept in both forms of communications, especially, the former. However, acquiring such competency does not happen by chance; it starts by providing instructors and students with the needed tools to foster an effective teaching and learning environment. Technical graduates need to be firmly grounded in communication skills. This covers speaking, reading, spelling, writing, listening, grammar. Additionally, such employees must be aware of cultural diversity in global corporate communication, ethics and non-verbal communication.

Thus technical students in Ghana striving for competency in the English language have several challenges. English is their second language so it must be learnt alongside the mother tongue. Until 2007, technical students in Ghana did not have the benefits of the full language syllabus; they were taught an abridged version.

The situation has been rectified in the 2007 educational reforms. Vocational and technical institutions now cover the same language syllabus as all other students. Additionally, an access programme has just been instituted to deal with the language problems of technical people on the job. But there are many technical personnel who have serious communication problems because they did not get a good foundation in language skills. Such graduates might not reach the height of performance because of communication handicap. Poor performance has created the situation whereby some employers treat polytechnic products as second best, in spite of their valuable practical skills, thus raising the unemployment rate among polytechnic graduates (Amankwah & Omari, 2009). Poor communication skills play a key role in that situation.

One of the findings of a research study conducted among polytechnic graduates to evaluate polytechnic education was that 'respondents exhibited ex-

tremely poor skills in spelling, semantics, grammar, sentence construction, understanding and responding to simple questions' (Amankwah & Omari, 2009, p.19). That raised concern about respondents' maximum effectiveness at their jobs if they cannot communicate well in English, the formal language of the country. Consequently, the study has cautioned: 'For polytechnic education to be better appreciated, products must be able "to communicate meaningfully with others in their communities and workplaces" (p. 18). But language instruction must be effectively handled to enable polytechnic products communicate ably.

However, the situation is not always bright for the language instructor in the polytechnic system. In pursuit of the human resources needed for the nation's industries and to advance our development, polytechnics are directed to concentrate on Information and Communication Technology (ICT) and the sciences. A 2007 call for proposals for teaching and learning materials was limited to the sciences and ICT. The Social Sciences and Liberal Studies which, among other courses, cater for language studies were not given opportunity to participate in the exercise, as had previously been the practice. Funding for further studies and professional development is sometimes science biased. Certain research topics might not attract funding if it focused on language and not on the sciences or ICT and such situations do not augur well for effective language instruction.

Additionally, there is teacher apathy, which sometimes contributes to student handicap in language studies. In view of the poor foundation at the basic level school and the mounting technological challenges, language teachers in tertiary institutions need to be innovative in the classrooms in order to reach their students. Sometimes, due to lack of qualified personnel, polytechnics are compelled to employ language teachers who do not meet the required standards of tertiary employment. And there is always inadequate language instruction materials, which hamper teaching and learning for technical students.

Consequently, for non-speakers of a dominant language, and for the technical students

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whose English language instruction has not been well grounded to achieve effective communication skills, the challenges are numerous indeed. To attain such competency, they must start from the first language since secondary languages are learnt through the primary ones, overcome first language interference before embarking on competency in international or dominant languages. Also failure to offer technical and vocational institutions the full complement of the language syllabus has resulted in many technical graduates possessing minimum language skills. Some are severely handicapped in all aspects of communication; in many cases, independent work is impossible because of poor language skills. It could also affect initiative on the job.

Fortunately, policy makers have recognised the harm caused by such lapses in the curriculum; they have realised the need for strong language skills among technical people and have put in remedial measures to address such problems. Meanwhile, there are technical graduates who cannot attract local employers or if employed are placed below the university graduate. Systematic training on language competency at workplaces would help such people to overcome their problems. Ghana has entered into several bilateral and multilateral negotiations with other nations. Foreign partners undertaking projects in the country must have confidence in the Ghanaian workforce to supply the human resources needed to implement projects. In other words, the technical graduate should be well-equipped to meet international demands. If our industries were filled with technical people who could communicate ideas and skills effectively, our partners would get maximum results for their investing efforts. Thus adequate language instruction for the technical graduate has relevance for the national development agenda.

Effective communication also implies appreciable knowledge in technological communication skills. This goes beyond the ability to use computers. Classroom knowledge must reflect technological trends. It would be impossible for institutions working with 'antiquated training equipment' (DIT, 2006) to produce graduates who can handle modern equipment in industries, unless employers retrain them. Marketable employees are those who are well-equipped for jobs. Employers are disappointed if they have to retrain employees before assigning them to their positions. Polytechnics must therefore make it their objective to produce 'balanced, adjusted graduates

who are able to communicate and work effectively with other people, [modern machines and equipment as well]' (Rossbacher, 1998).

It is appropriate to reiterate the crucial role of language in building human relationships. The desire for advancement in the sciences, and industrialisation must not be an excuse to neglect social sciences else we fail to produce versatile personnel the calibre of whom the nation needs for rapid and sustainable development. Research must be encouraged among all the disciplines in order not to sacrifice certain study areas for others. Qualified personnel must be recruited to handle language instruction. Knowledgeable people who cannot communicate their ideas to others are handicapped in all aspects of life, but those who possess excellent communication skills are real assets, both on the job and in their communities. Imparting effective language skills must go hand-in-hand with technical training, if we desire all-round technical personnel. When we improve language skills at the local level, we prepare graduates for the global community. We can expedite our development if we communicate well orally, in writing and with technological expertise.

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