

ABA SOUTH EMPLOYERS' ASSESSMENT OF EMPLOYEES LANGUAGE AND COMMUNICATION SKILLS: THE CASE OF ABA METROPOLIS

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Abstract

This paper examines how employers of labour in Aba metropolis view their employees' language and communication skills. The paper adopts Human Capital Theory to assess language and communication skills and its potency in Nigeria labour market. Data for analysis were elicited through a structured questionnaire to one hundred employers of labour in Aba South Local Government Area selected by purposive sampling technique. This is necessary as research studies on the level of employability of Nigerian graduates show that language and communication skill top the list of the skills requisite for advancement of employability. Results from data analysis show that about 50% of the respondents were of the view that their employees lacked good communication skills while about 70% said their workers lacked the language specific to their profession. More than 50% of the respondents agreed that their employees' communication skills advance attainment of their organisational goals while about 40% of them disagreed to it. Most importantly, 100% of the respondents said they would not employ candidates that lacked communication skills. The paper, therefore, concludes that lack of good communication skill is one of the problems that advance youth unemployment in Nigeria.

Keywords: communication skills, employers of labour, language,

Introduction

In the recent past, the quality of Nigerian graduates has raised concern among government, employers of labour, educational institutions and other stakeholders. According to the National Bureau of Statistics (2017), about 55% of Nigerian youths were unemployed in 2017. This is based on the fact that many of them did not possess the requisite skills which would enhance their employability on graduation (Dahunsi, 2017; Akinbode and Opeyemi, 2020). Although it has been pointed out that the Nigerian labour market is characterized by unavailability of job vacancies, yet many employers of labour who are willing to employ and pay well complain that candidates who apply for jobs are unemployable even when there

is certificate evidence that they are professionally and technically qualified (Sodipo, 2014; Asuquo and Agboola, 2014). Many factors have been considered by previous research as to the cause of graduate unemployment in Nigeria. For instance, Anho (2011) observes that despite federal government's measures through the National Assembly (Senate) to ensure that quality of education in Nigeria is improved, maintained and monitored, still great inadequacies exist in staff facilities, managerial quality, infrastructure and equipment maintenance. Similarly, Chukwu and Osuala (2016) reveal that graduates' unemployment stems from students not being exposed to language of their occupation. In addition, the general lack of reading culture in

Nigeria, low standard of education and the emphasis on certificate acquisition instead of knowledge and competence coupled with bad leadership, insufficient finances and distractions from information and communication technologies, make the average Nigerian student not to be up-to-date and up and doing in academic activities (Akinyemi, Ofem and Ikuenomore, 2012; Uddin and Uddin, 2013). Akinyemi et al (2012) add that decline in staff quantity also contributes to graduate unemployability in Nigeria. This results from migration of lecturers to other countries that offer better conditions of service. The effect of the aforementioned factors is that many Nigerian graduates possess paper qualifications without corresponding knowledge and skills.

Acquisition of some skills in addition to professional and technical knowledge has been identified as being necessary in enhancing graduates' employability. Such skills include language and communication skills, cognitive skills, numeric skills, managerial skills, computer literacy, etc. These skills are among what Becker (1994) calls "general human capital" which is needed by all employers of labour. The focus of this paper is employers' assessment of employees' language and communication skill because previous researches have observed that language and communication skill is an indispensable factor in enhancing a graduate's employability status (Akinyemi, Ofem and Ikuenomore, 2012). This means that language and communication skills top the list of the skills graduates should acquire in order to enhance their employability. In addition to enhancing interpersonal relationships, language and communication is vital in the acquisition of other skills. Acquisition of good communication skill and proficiency in the official language is imperative for creating and maintaining better relations at any level (Bharathi, 2016). Language as a means of communications helps in linking organisations to the outside world and also enhances interpersonal relationships within the organisation. It is based on the above that this research sets out to examine how Aba South employers perceive their employees' language and communication skills.

Objectives of the Study

The objectives of the paper include the following:

- to determine if Aba employers of labour are satisfied with their employees' language and communication skill,
- to ascertain if Aba employers of labour would employ graduates who lacked good communication skill even if such graduates were technically and professionally qualified, and
- to ascertain if the employees' language and communicative competencies affect their attainment of the organisational goals.

Research Problem

Previous research works such as Aluko (2014), Abiodun-Oyebanji (2014) and Akinbode and Opeyemi (2020) have studied Nigerian employers of labour's perception of their employees' communication skills, but none has focused on Aba metropolis. The research, therefore, targets to fill this gap. In addition, employability of the youth is an aspect of labour sustainability and human capital development which in turn affects national development. Unfortunately, the speaker of the House of Representatives, Femi Gbajabiamila, reports that the country's (i.e. Nigeria) tertiary education system dangerously and severely lacks the capability needed to build a nation (The Punch, 2019). He adds that the above situation results from the quality of scholarship and academic output and of the graduates coming out from the institutions (The Punch, 2019). In the same vein, Prof Chris Onalo, president and Chief Executive Officer, Postgraduate School of Credit and Finance Management, says that about 95% of Nigerian graduates are not employable as they are deficient in the skills that would advance their employability (The Guardian, 2018).

Akinbode and Opeyemi's (2020) study shows that out of 100% employability of [Nigerian] fresh graduates, skill deficiency alone contributes 66.7%. Bharathi (2016), on the other hand, says communication skill is one of the judging parameters, while Dahunsi (2017), Akinbode and Opeyemi (2020) say Nigerian graduates are deficient in communication skill. It

is, therefore, necessary to investigate employers' perception of employees' language and communication skills because it affects national development.

Research Methodology and Instrument of Data Collection

One hundred (100) employers of labour in both private and public sectors in Aba South Local Government Area formed the population of the study. The study adopted purposive sampling technique based on the fact that not all the employers of labour in Aba South had the opportunity to be selected. For instance, small scale business employers and market men and women who had employees under them were not considered as most of them would not understand the meaning of proficiency in language and communication. The research focused on corporate organizations and senior personnel in public sectors. Data were elicited from the respondents through a four-item Likert-scale questionnaire. Data were analysed statistically using simple percentages. The analysis procedure is based on the objectives of the study and responses from the respondents.

Theoretical framework

This research is hinged on Human Capital Theory which refers to the "stock of knowledge, habits, social and personality attributes, including creativity embodied in the ability to perform labour so as to produce economic value" (Wikipedia, p.1). The theory of Human Capital as propounded by Theodore Schultz, Jacob Mincer and Gary Baker is hinged on the assumption that human abilities (whether innate or acquired) which are valuable can be improved by appropriate investments. The basic theme of the theory is that the most essential and valuable of all capital is that invested in human beings. This means that the "essence of Human Capital Theory is that investments are made in human resources so as to improve their productivity and therefore their earnings" (Sweetland, 1996,p.43). Formal education is one of the key factors of Human Capital Theory because formal education is highly instrumental and necessary to improve productive capacity of a people (Almendarez, 2011). Formal education is expected not only to help individuals to acquire certain vocations/professions but also to

acquire other necessary skills such as computer literacy, language and communication skills, numeric literacy, etc. that would help them gain and maintain employment. That is why in Nigerian tertiary institutions courses that would expose students to the above skills are made compulsory to all students irrespective of their courses of study.

Human Capital Theory is relevant to this study because it is important to check from time to time if the investment made on acquisition of necessary skills that would enhance Nigerian graduates' employability and consequently help them build a nation is yielding positive economic and social results. By so doing, government can checkmate factors affecting (positively or negatively) the nation's socio-economic development. In addition, Almendarez (2011) affirms: "in order to enhance human development in the general society, it is necessary to apply the theory of human capital to education system. By such means, productivity is enhanced and sustained based on an increased and diversified labour force."

Conceptual Clarifications

Aba is the commercial hub of Abia State. It is made up of Aba North, Aba South, Osisioma, some parts of Obingwa and Ugwunagbo LGAs. In Aba, there exist government owned and private owned companies, tertiary institutions, corporate organisations and industries. In fact, it is famous for the production of goods such as shoes, underwear, bags, cloths, machines, wine, soaps among others, hence Aba is known as the "Japan of Africa". Therefore, Aba employers as used in this study constitute government and private owned companies, corporate organisations and industries.

From the above scenario, it is evident that human capital thrives in Aba as the city is characterised by an upsurge of labour mobility. From the lowest to the highest cadre of labour, all have a place to fill in. However, the focus of this paper is employers' perception of the communication skills of middle level manpower (polytechnic graduates) and the upper level manpower (i.e. university graduates).

Employability

Employability has been defined in

different ways. Yorke and Knight (2006) for instance see employability as acquisition of skills, personal attributes and understanding which enables individuals gain employment and be successful in their chosen profession or occupation. From the above definition, it means that employability is not limited to the mastery of an occupation or profession. In addition to the mastery of a course of study or vocation, the individual should possess some skills or personal attributes such as language and communication skills, cognitive skills, numeric skills, computer literacy skill, understanding, etc. It is based on the above that Oliver (2015) in Pitan (2016) modifies Yorke’s and Knight’s definition by observing that employability means that the individual involved should discern, acquire, adapt and continually enhance certain skills, understanding and personal attributes that would enhance his chances of finding and maintaining meaningful paid and unpaid work. It implies that for an individual to be employable he needs special skills and personal attributes among which are language and communication skills. Pitan (2016, p.1) adds:

There is a concern worldwide that the curriculum is not producing graduates with the kind of professional and lifelong learning skills that they require to be successful in their jobs. This shortcoming has put increasing pressure on universities to enhance the employability of graduates by ensuring that learning experiences translate into a fulfilling transition to the labour market.

The above observation shows that there is a gap between formal training and labour requirements, hence employability of Nigerian graduates has been a recurrent theme in research.

Language and Communication Skills

Language and communication skills refer

to one’s ability to read, write, listen and speak effectively. Language as a means of communication is paramount in every individual’s life and day-to-day interactions. They are the basis for all forms of interaction: co-habitation, business and social transactions, education, team work, etc. Wey (2001) is of the view that acquisition of language and good communication skills is man’s first occupation. This is based on the fact that from cradle man is occupied with the task of learning how to use language to impress, express, demand, manipulate, share, etc. In such a case, the mastery of language and communication skills is beyond knowing the rules of grammar; it includes manipulating grammar to suit the context of discourse and manipulating elements of context to make the interaction beneficial. In the same vein, acquisition of communication skill is not limited to the mastery of reading, writing, speaking and listening, but also includes manipulation of communication variables such as role, power, environment, tenor, mean, mode, etc. so as to achieve set objectives. In essence, if one should have occupation and maintain employment, one should possess good communication skills because in any form of occupation, language is indispensable.

Olaoye (2013) asserts that “language is the bedrock of nation building because it is hardly possible to talk of national development without including language. In fact, the relationship between language and communication and national development is mutual and synergistic. Wey (2001, p.25) observes that “language and occupation comprise the essential processes through which humans gain mastery over the world around” To be employable, one must possess both language and occupation.

Data Presentation

The data presented in Tables 1 and 2 represent items in the questionnaire administered to the respondents and statistical evaluation of their responses in simple percentages.

Table 1: Employers Assessment of their Employees’ Language and Communication Skills

S/N	Items in the questionnaire	Total population	SA %	A %	SD %	D %
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1.	Your employees communicate effectively on employment	100	9	31	4	56
2.	Many of your employees possess language specific to their occupation on employment	100	5	22	23	50
3.	Your employees' communication skills advance attainment of your organisational goals	100	15	40	13	32

The results in Table 1 represent Aba South employers' assessment of their employees' communication skills. Over 55% of the employers disagreed that their employees communicate effectively on employment, while only about 40% (i.e. the result in SA and A) agreed to it. On Item 2 on the table above which verified employees' possession of language of their occupation/profession on employment, 5% of the employers strongly agreed, 23% strongly disagreed while 22% and 5% of the employers agreed and disagreed respectively. The implication of the above results is that the respondents feel that majority of their employees did not possess the language peculiar to their vocation on employment.

Item 3 in the above table presents a near marginal result: about 40% of the respondents agreed that their employees' communication skills advance attainment of their organisation's goals while 32% and 13% disagreed and strongly disagreed respectively. The implication of the results in Item 3 is of two-fold. First, the sampled

Aba employers accepted that effective communication advances attainment of organisational goals; second, they also accepted that many of their employees now possess good communication skills which would have been attained on the job. It has earlier been observed that the respondents' response on Item 1 on Table 1 shows that many of the employees did not communicate well on employment. The implication of the above is that the staff involved had opportunities to improve their communication skills while on the job. Note, however, that the number that disagreed to the statement in Item 3 is very significant. The result from Item 3 agrees with Anho (2011) findings that Nigeria employers of labour rate their employees' skill high. Similar observation was made in Lowden et al (2011) and Jackson (2015) cited in Pitan (2016) that work experience helps students and graduates to have better understanding of their roles and expectations of their occupation because they have the opportunity of engaging with professional practitioners of their vocation.

Table 2: Aba Employers' Opinion on Communication as a Determinant Factor for Job Placements

S/N	Items in the Questionnaire	Population	SA %	A %	SD %	D %
1	You would retain employees that lacked good communication skills even if they were technically and professionally qualified	100	20	23	35	12
2	You would retain employees that communicate well instead of those that lack communication skills	100	90	10	Nil	Nil

Table 2 represents the respondents' opinion on using communication skill as a determinant factor for selection of employees. On Item 1 in Table 2 which sought to know if employers would retain staff that lacked communication skills even if the staff was technically and professionally qualified.

About 35% and 12% of the respondents disagreed and strongly disagreed to it respectively while 20% and 23% strongly agreed and agreed respectively. This shows that about 47% objected to retaining staff that lacked good communication skills while about 43% would retain such staff. But for Item 2

in Table 2, 100% of the respondents said they preferred employees with good communication skills. This finding agrees with Pitan's (2016) observation that communication and analytical skills are the two generic/core skills required by Nigerian employers of labour; it also agrees with Bharathi (2016) who notes that language and communication skill is one of the judging parameters for employment and job retention.

Data Analysis

The data presented in Table 1 show that over 50% of the respondents observed that their employees lacked good communication skill on employment while Item 2 on the same Table 1 shows that about 50% of the respondents noticed that their employees did not possess the language specific to their occupation on employment. Their response to Items 1 and 2 of Table 1 shows that Aba employers of labour were not ignorant of their employees' poor communication skill on employment. Their response to Item 2 of Table 2 which tried to ascertain if they would retain those that communicated well instead of those that did not communicate shows that Aba employers of labour expect their employees to communicate well. None of the respondents accepted to retain employees that lacked good communication skill. This shows that even though the respondents were aware of their employees' poor communication skill on employment, they expected that the employees should improve their communication skill while on the job.

On the question that tried to ascertain if Aba South employers of labour would retain staff that lacked good communication skill even if such staff were technically and professionally qualified, about 20% and 23% of the respondents strongly agreed and agreed respectively to do so while 35% and 12% strongly disagreed and disagreed respectively to do so. This result proves that majority of the employers considered good communication skill as a strong factor in appraising their employees' employment status. Also, all the respondents either agreed or strongly agreed to retaining staff who possesses good communication skill over those who lack it; it means that staff who are technically and professionally qualified and possess good communication skill are valued more than those

who are technically and professionally qualified but lacked good communication skill.

Another objective of the study is to ascertain if the employees' language and communication competences affect their attainment of organisational goals. On this, about 40% and 15% of the respondents agreed and strongly agreed respectively that communication advances attainment of organizational goals while about 13% and 32% strongly disagreed and disagreed respectively. This result shows that majority of Aba employers feels that staff communication skill could impact on their organizational goals. This result notwithstanding, it could be seen that a significant number of the respondents (32% who strongly disagreed and 13% that disagreed, totaling 45%) did not believe that good communication skill could produce any impact on the organisational goals. The question that may come up at this point would be: why did they accept to retain staff that lacked good communication skill? This may mean that their response on Item 2 of Table 2 is a wish which is unattainable.

Summary of Findings

First, about 50% of the Aba employers of labour sampled said their employees lacked good communication skills on employment. The implication is that many of the graduates were not adequately prepared to communicate effectively before graduation and therefore not adequately prepared to function effectively in places of employment.

Second, above 70% of the respondents said their employees did not possess language specific to their occupation on employment which could be as a result of not being sufficiently exposed to the registrar of mode of communication in their vocation during their tertiary education.

Third, over 50% agreed that their employees' communication skills advanced attainment of their organisational goals while above 40% disagreed to it. This also shows that majority of the employers recognised the need of employees possessing good communication skill and the fact that effective communication is the wheel that drives organisational activities.

Fourth, over 30% of the respondents accepted to retain staff that does not possess good

communication skill even if such staff is technically and professionally qualified while above 45% said they would not. This finding is in tandem with Sodipo's (2014) and Asuquo and Agboola's (2014) observation that employers of labour complained that many candidates applying for job were not employable as a result of not possessing necessary skills that would make them function effectively on the job they applied for.

Finally, 100% of the respondents agreed that they preferred to employ candidates with good communication skills. This also shows that communication is one of the necessary skills that would enhance candidates' suitability for job openings.

Conclusions

From the results obtained from data analysis, the study concludes that majority of Aba employers of labour were not satisfied with their employees' communication skills as about 50% of them said their employees lacked good communication skills and language specific to the various vocations. It also concludes that Aba employers of labour would not employ candidates that could not communicate effectively. This conclusion was drawn from the result in Table 2, Item 2 which shows that about 90% of the respondents indicated that they preferred employees that communicate well. Finally, the paper also concludes that communication advances organisational goals as all the employers accepted it to be so.

Recommendations

Based on research findings, the following recommendations are made:

- i) more attention should be given to teaching and learning of language and communication skills in Nigerian tertiary institutions as a way of increasing the students' employability status on graduation;
- ii) employers of labour should as a matter of necessity hold workshops and seminars for their staff on language and communication skills with special focus on language for occupation purposes; the Human Capital Theory believes that human beings are at the centre of every developmental agenda, based on that serious attention should be given to those skills that will enhance the usefulness of graduates when they leave school.
- iii) English for occupational purposes should be included in tertiary institutions' curriculum. Unlike English for Academic purposes which its curriculum generalises course contents, English for Occupational purposes will expose students to registers, expressions and writing system peculiar to their field of study. This is an effective way of ensuring that employees possess language specific to their occupation on employment.
- iv) Further studies should be carried out to ascertain the factors responsible for students' inability to acquire good communication and language skills.

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