



# Impact of the Digital Age on the Teaching and Learning of English and Communication Skills (Ecs): Exploratory Observations from a Nigerian University

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## Abstract

*The pace of increasing globalization in the 21<sup>st</sup> century has been facilitated largely by development in information and communication technologies (ICTs). A recourse to the use of such technologies in the language classroom will go a long way to resolve some primary concerns in relation to overcrowdedness, inadequacy of resources and challenges of classroom management. These problems among others, are peculiar to developing nations. This paper elucidates the impact of the digital age on the teaching and learning of English and Communication Skills (ECS) in Nigerian Universities drawing from the example of the Federal University of Agriculture Abeokuta, (FUNAAB). Electronic communication with its distinctive style full of abbreviations and deviant use of language has evolved as a contemporary phenomenon. This, some believe, is promoting a decline in basic literacy and affecting effective language usage and communication. This trend calls for a pro-active effort on the part of teachers to be more versatile and proficient in digital and information technologies; and the mastery of the skills of language and communication for effective management of the English language and ICTs. Though bereft of challenges, experience at FUNAAB revealed that ICT-Mediated teaching and learning stimulates interest and enhances both acquisition and performance in language classes. The paper further recommends adequate provision of infrastructural amenities, availability of requisite soft and hard ware packages and workable policy to sustain interest and enhance motivation for greater performance.*

## 1. Introduction

The study of human communication has attracted the use of electronic media in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Information Communication Technologies (ICTs) have become a fundamental part of our everyday lives in this technological age [1]. The influence of ICT has permeated all facets of our lives, including educational settings. This phenomenon has been hailed by many as the wave of the future in which language instruction will be driven by new advances in computers, the internet, and mobile technologies [9]. An objective assessment of the impact of technological innovations is its consistent experiences of change in the manner of communication in education, work, business and entertainment coupled with the growth of the English Language.

Electronic communication has only been around for a few decades, it has managed to have an impact on people's writing habits and people's everyday use of language. Some people do not seem to mind this at all, and some people are very concerned that the written standards will decline because of the electronic communication language phenomenon, with all its abbreviations and nonstandard spellings. Ong [12] has earlier noted succinctly that writing as a medium of communication has greatly impacted the transformation of human consciousness when contrasted with any other invention. With the development of writing, printing and computer, Ong argued that these three have worked together as "ways of technologizing the word"[12]. In spite of this integration, writing communication like its counterpart, the speaking aspect, have been facing greater challenges in recent times. Tomita writing on "Text Messaging and Implications for its use in Education," drew a comparative occurrence of change between this age and Dewey's era [16].

### 1.1 Background Information

Electronic communication has evolved as a twenty-first-century phenomenon with its own distinctive graphic style, which is full of abbreviations and deviant use of language which some believe is fostering a decline in literacy and basically harming language as a whole [9]. This situation has definitely generated a sense of moral panic in many countries. It has also generated great debates



[16] but some scholars, the likes of Crystal [8]) and Baron [4] do not share such fears. As far as Crystal and Baron are concerned, the same kind of fear was exercised with the arrival in the Middle Ages of printing which was thought by many to be the invention of the devil because it would put all kinds of false opinions into people's minds. And the arrival of the telegraphs, telephone, and broadcasting also generated short-lived fears that the fabric of society was under threat [4].

Crystal and some others were able to argue that the graphic distinctiveness of electronic communication is not a totally new phenomenon. One thing that no linguist would counter is the statement that all living languages change. They expand to accommodate names for new items that are introduced from other cultural or geographical venues. Baron says that trying to standardize language once and for all is like trying to stop the tides. Language itself has developed immensely since its origin and until the 21st century, it has gone from sounds, signs and symbols to complex sentences governed by grammatical rules [13].

## 1.2 The Focus and Thrust of this Presentation

Reports of advances in e-learning applications in some quarters have prompted researches, discussions and interest in blended learning and teaching to facilitate communication through collaboration, interaction and community building. It is therefore expedient to utilise 21<sup>st</sup> century opportunities to support traditional classroom practice.

All over the world, the concern is very high on the impact that electronic communication is having on language development in general. This presentation is on the impact of electronic communication on English language learning and teaching focusing on the need to harness its benefits. It draws evidence from our local good practice, at FUNAAB, in e-Learning that has enriched the English language learning experience of our students.

## 1.3 Integrating ICTs into Language Teaching: The Problem

There has been a great deal of efforts, in the last one decade, on researching and documenting of the impact of ICTs in education. Andrews [1] for instance, documents a review of such impact on English language teaching and literacy learning between 1990 and 2003. Similarly, researches on implementing ICT integration have continued at great pace across the globe. Therefore, bridging the gap between highly developed educational systems and developing ones like Nigeria and the larger parts of Africa calls for an evaluation of what is available and how these developing educational systems might leverage the ICTs for their good [1].

Spargo and Larkins [15] recently reported that SMS has fast become one of Australia's most popular forms of communication, especially amongst teenagers. Figures from the Australian Bureau of Statistics show that students in years 10 and 11 spent an average six hours a week using SMS or computer instant messages. Sadly but true, this is fast becoming the fad in Nigeria. In fact, Nigerian children are beating this record [6]. Again, Crystal [3] gave a very interesting but unconfirmed example of a widely reported story of a teenager who had written an essay entirely in textspeak, which her teacher was 'totally unable to understand':

My smmr hols wr CWOT. B4, we used 2go2 NY 2C my bro, his GF & thr 3:-@FTF.  
ILNY, it's a gr8 plc.

When translated it reads:

My summer holidays were a complete waste of time. Before, we used to go to New York to see my brother, his girlfriend and their three screaming kids face to face. I love New York. It's a great place.

Clough [5] has observed that this younger generation's extensive use of abbreviations to communicate quickly in text messages may be a sign of a major change in the English language.

To buttress his observation, Clough [5] presented a very amusing television commercial to show the extent to which current communication technology is having an impact on the way people speak. Acronyms, or words formed from abbreviations, are becoming routine in current language. At first, they were just written in text messages. Now, these same acronyms are becoming new words in spoken language:

*... a mother asks her daughter who she has been texting so much and the girl responds in textspeak: 'IDK MBF Jill (I don't know, my best friend, Jill.)*

## 1.4 The e-learning Experiment at FUNAAB

This section recounts the report by Aduradola and Bodunde [2]. For four consecutive sessions, 2009/2010 to 2012/2013, electronic media has been used in teaching the Use-of-English (GNS 101)

and Writing and Literary Communication (GNS 201) courses covering aspects of Grammar, Listening, Speaking, Reading and Writing skills. For GNS 101 and 201, students are grouped into a size of between 10 and 15.

### **Objectives**

A general objective set for the courses is to improve the communicative ability of the learners. The specific objectives include:

- improvement of learners' performance,
- promotion of individualised and interactive learning,
- management of large classes, and

The mode of operation includes the following:

- members of each group went online and consulted books and journals for information on their topics,
- responsibilities were shared among group members,
- pieces of information were collated on the given topics,
- sourced information were prepared into power point for group presentation,
- any member of the group was called to make the group presentation,
- two- three groups presented per lecture of 2 hours duration,
- observations based on presentation were made by the class members,
- presenters were taken up on their presentations,
- questions and observations were harvested for response
- any of the specified group members was called to respond, and
- course lecturers explained all the knotty issues/areas.

### **Lecturers' Observations**

- Students participated actively in information sourcing, preparation of presentations and reading from the screen.
- The students' attitude to the learning of GNS 101 and 201 was positive
- Active participation of 85 % of the class members was recorded.
- PowerPoint and class presentations enhanced the art of public speaking thereby removing stage fright/fear from students.
- The presenters were able to present with partial reliance on the prepared slides.
- All the group members paid attention to presentations, questions and discussions.
- The few students that failed to contribute did not participate in the preparation of the document for presentations.
- Such students obtained low scores.
- Students' performance in message delivery and examination was very encouraging.

### **Students' Opinion about the Method**

- The students confessed that they were challenged and highly motivated to participate in preparing for the presentation. Initially, they perceived the method as tedious but after the first two groups' presentations, they were encouraged.
- They also learnt the power-point preparation and presentation from each other because any of the members of the group could be called to present. The system thereby encouraged collaborative and individual learning thereby aiding self-development.
- They felt fulfilled because the impossible was made possible. They were able to retain better what they read and presented.
- Projected presentations made other groups' presentation accessible to class members thereby facilitating understanding and assimilation.
- A positive transfer of knowledge from GNS 101 and 201 learning methodology to other courses was experienced.

## **1.5 Conclusion**

According to Aborisade [1], the reasons for teachers' inability to integrate technology in their practice are many and complex, ranging from inadequate ICT skills of teachers and institutional ICT-readiness, to attitudes towards technology and knowledge of the technologies and the know-how of integration. The situation in Nigerian institutions is that intricate blends of these factors play out, but for the English language teacher aiming for success in the 21<sup>st</sup> century no one can be let off the hook.

Technological innovations have gone hand-in-hand with the growth of English and are changing the way in which we communicate, work, trade, entertain and learn. Obviously, the growth of the internet has facilitated the growth of the English language and that this has occurred at a time when computers are no longer the exclusive domain of the dedicated few, but rather widely available to many [11].

Therefore, electronic communication is changing the English language usage partly because it gives rise to new vocabulary, but more importantly because the medium and its users drive the language in certain directions [11].

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