

The Bridge to Economic Prosperity: The Role of English Language Communication in Entrepreneurship

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Abstract

Entrepreneurship is crucial for the development of any country because of its ability to drive economic growth. Economies flourish because entrepreneurs adapt to changing times to supply the needs of their communities through the application of information, imagination, and initiative as they strive to derive greater or different values from a country's human and natural resources. In doing so, language, the most important communication tool at the disposal of human society, is employed to articulate business ideas, to set up enterprises and to interest the public in the products or services that arise from them. The following takes a close look at what is meant by communication, it delineates the steps involved in the communication process before looking at three communication theories that entrepreneurs utilize in their attempts to achieve entrepreneurial success. The role of the English language is examined in some detail and factors responsible for its dominance in the business world are scrutinized for the implications it has for the development of effective entrepreneurship in the emerging economies in Africa.

Keywords: Entrepreneurship, Entrepreneur, Communication, English, Language

Introduction

There is a growing interest in the role entrepreneurship plays in economic growth and social development particularly among the emerging economies of Africa, Asia and South America. Countries in these parts of the world are increasingly challenging the dominance of European and North American economies and in many ways appear to be driving the current worldwide economic recovery (Harper, 2003:15). In Africa, low-income but high growth nations such as Nigeria, Ghana, Senegal, Uganda, Kenya, Botswana and South Africa exhibit high levels of entrepreneurship which have resulted in the creation of business ventures that have opened up new sectors and industries. Heavily reliant on economic liberalization for their growth, and in their attempts to combat poverty and widespread unemployment, much emphasis is placed on entrepreneurship especially as it appears to attract foreign direct investment (FDI) which brings in increased capital, exposure to new business practices, improved productivity, and enables greater access to foreign markets.

However, the competitive advantages gained through entrepreneurship cannot be achieved without effective communication skills, in particular, through the use of a language such as English. Ideas, products or services arising from entrepreneurship generate interest and assume economic value only when they are brought to public attention through the use of a language that has world-wide appeal. Indeed the economic security of most countries in Africa depends on their negotiating and marketing skills in English. The extent to which they possess these skills often determines the effectiveness of their participation in bilateral and multilateral negotiations. Therefore, the ability to command the attention of diverse groups of people through the use of English has become a critical factor in the success of any enterprise. Consequently, as they strive to find a place in global commerce and trade, most entrepreneurs in Africa adopt English as their preferred language of communication. According to Crystal (1997), Peters (2004), and Graddol (2006) about 80 per cent of the world's trade and financial business is transacted in the English language. Hence, enterprises worldwide have noted the necessity of having a workforce that is able to communicate in English if they are to take advantage of the opportunities in the global marketplace (Mckay2002).

There is undoubtedly a link between entrepreneurship as a concept and communication as a tool for managing it. Originating from Latin, the word “*communicare*” (‘to make common’ or ‘to share’), communication refers to the natural human desire to express ideas and feelings to others (Wikipedia). Different scholars have variously defined the act of communication as the process by which meaning is exchanged through a common system of symbols, signs or behavior (Pearson, J. C. et al, 2003). Heath and Bryant (2000) see communication as giving, receiving or exchanging ideas, information, signals or messages through appropriate media enabling individuals or groups to persuade, seek and give information. It is a two-way process of reaching mutual understanding, one in which participants not only exchange (encode-decode) information but also create and share meaning. Thus according to Varey (2002), it is any act by which one person gives or receives information about needs, desires, perceptions, knowledge and affective states. Communication can be said to have taken place when information is transferred from one person to another in an attempt “to establish a commonness of thoughts or feelings with other people” (Littlejohn and Foss, 2008). It may take on spoken, written or paralinguistic forms and require interpersonal, presentational, and interpretive skills. However, the most important purpose that communication serves is the changes it brings about in the perceptions and behavior of those involved in the process. This is especially significant in situations where understanding and cooperation between individuals or groups is required. As such, the entrepreneur cannot succeed without communicating with the human elements in and outside his organization. For one, it is this interaction that informs his decision-making, and secondly, it is by communicating his vision that he is able to affect followers’ outcome. Success in business is greatly impacted for better or worse by communication hence it can be seen as requisite not only for the articulation of new concepts or innovations but also for the survival or continued growth of any enterprise.

While the terms “innovation” and “entrepreneurship” are often used interchangeably, perhaps because they share some of the creative characteristics that are required to develop new products or services, for the sake of clarity, it is pertinent to define innovation as a new idea, device or process that can occur in a number of contexts such as business, government, academics, or organizations that offer better solutions, “meet new requirements, unarticulated needs, or existing market needs” (Maranville, 1992). Innovative concepts are groundbreaking ideas that have the potential of sparking great social change just as the mobile phone has done in recent times with its myriad uses as a radio link, a camera, a library, and banking services among other things. However, while new products, business models, customer experiences and so on may emerge from innovations, they do not necessarily translate into new businesses or markets. Instead, it takes the risk taking actions of the entrepreneur to transform those innovative ideas into concrete products or services that will impact on the economy.

On the one hand the word “entrepreneur” is defined by the French as one who undertakes, organizes, manages and assumes the risks of a business or enterprise with the aim of solving social problems or effecting change. While he may sometimes rely on the innovator’s revolutionary products, technologies or ideas, he goes further to employ his own ingenuity to translate them into goods or services for which customers are willing to pay. Thus Drucker (1985) insists that “innovation is the specific function of entrepreneurship....it is the means by which the entrepreneur creates new wealth-producing resources or endows existing resources with enhanced potential for creating wealth”. An example is the innovative idea of the internet which has captured the attention of the public. However this happened because entrepreneurs have set up search engines like Yahoo or Google that enabled ordinary people to embrace what is after all a highly technical information system. Entrepreneurs mostly focus on finding ways to satisfy the consumer base by offering improved quality, good service, durability and affordable prices. They have an inherent capacity of bringing together the funds, raw materials, manufacturing facilities, labour, buildings and so on required for creating products or services. This sets them apart from innovators. In establishing business ventures and in directing their resources towards making the products a reality, they often bear great risks but ultimately also stand to gain the most financially and otherwise. Entrepreneurs constantly search for change and exploit it for advancement, however, Shane (2000), Dearlove (2000), and Baum et al (1998) all agree that for entrepreneurs to be successful in what they do, it is imperative that they are able to effectively communicate their vision not only to those who work for them but also to potential consumers. Similarly, Hackman and Johnson (2009) and Kouzes and Posner (1987) are of the view that communicating a vision adequately to others may well be the most important skill the entrepreneur needs because it is ability to do so that helps to create a shared sense of purpose, encourage commitment, and energize those involved in the enterprise.

The Communication Process

To a great degree, success in entrepreneurship hinges on communication the substance of which is information, that is, knowledge of information and access to it that is designed to create understanding of ideas or points of view towards eliciting change or generating actions that will result in desired organizational outcomes. Therefore the entrepreneur relies heavily on his communicative competence whether spoken or written as he initiates a process that begins with a thought, an idea, information or feeling that exists in his mind (as the sender). This is encoded in a language and sent to a receiver who decodes the message by interpreting the words or symbols into an intelligible concept or information that is acted upon. According to Kouzes and Posner (1987:7) communication is a two way interaction because it is a process where the parties concerned are required to understand each other and be active participants in reaching agreements and in solving problems, In order to set goals or standards and to build bridges between present and future best practices, the entrepreneur needs to acquire a level of expertise in the skills of speaking, listening and writing. During the transmission of the message, two elements, content and context, combine to affect how the information is received. The content, that is, the actual words or symbols of the message is couched in a language that is either spoken or written with words or phrases that make grammatical and semantic sense. However, keeping in mind the fact that words can be interpreted differently, it is possible that even simple messages may be misunderstood. The use of ambiguous or complex words can therefore poses a problem in establishing a communication link between individuals or groups whether internally within an organization or externally with potential end users. Context on the other hand, is the way the message is delivered through nonverbal elements such as timing, tone of voice, the look in the sender's eyes, body language, gestures, and the state of emotions and so on. If this is not appropriate to the message, misunderstanding and mistrust could similarly arise (Barret, 2006).

Good communication skills is therefore a valuable asset that enables the entrepreneur establish and disseminate the goals of his enterprise, develop plans and organize human and other resources in the most effective and efficient way. It enables him validate his efforts especially during difficult times which in turn affects his relationships with others and decide the outcome of the enterprise. By examining the purpose of communication, clarifying ideas before attempting to communicate, considering the content and overtones of messages, using unambiguous words and sentences, expressing thoughts logically and in straight forward manner, following up messages with actions, and approximating actions with goals of the organization, the entrepreneur is better able to control the performance his business. Always a continuous process whether it is intended to be so or not, it is important is that a desired reaction must result from the information shared for the communication to be effective. Whensituations arise where personal opinions, attitudes, beliefs and prejudices distort the message or act as stumbling blocks, these not only disrupt interpersonal relationships but also could pose a challenge to the management of a business enterprise. Certainly the various aspects of running a business such as soliciting employee engagement, public relations, brand management, customer relations, advertising and so on can be managed through appropriate communication. Hence adopting a proactive and accessible style of communication that engages the interest and commitment of others becomes a necessary skill for the entrepreneur. According to Drucker (1985), this is best achieved when the entrepreneur also possesses negotiating and consensus-forming abilities. To be successful in his efforts to win the support and cooperation of those who work for him, or to persuade others to buy his products, he needs to adopt strategies that allow him communicate effectively. In so doing, the entrepreneur could be guided by the three communication theories that have stood the test of time to achieve successful outcomes both in and outside his enterprise:

Communication Accommodation Theory

This theory focuses on the role of conversations or dialogues in interpersonal interactions. At the same time, it acknowledges the possibility of conflict between communicators. Having observed the complex nature of conversation, Giles (1985) the proponent of this theory, took into consideration the reasoning behind as well as the consequences of what happens when two speakers alter their communication styles. According to him, the concept of "convergence" takes into account how people adjust what they say or accommodate what they hear in their attempts to adapt to the thinking of others, Giles explains that convergence signals approval or agreement which creates rapport between people while on the other hand, "divergence" occurs when people choose to ignore adapting strategies. Where the entrepreneur is concerned, it is essential that he understands that he may need to converge or diverge in order to persuade people to accept his ideas or to dissuade others from a course of action.

Intensify and Downplay Theory

Developed by Hugh Rank (1976), this employs two strategies known as “intensify” and “downplay”. As a model of persuasion it can be employed usefully in a market driven economy particularly in winning the support of venture teams, for sales or the distribution of products or services. At first glance, the theory appears simplistic but the ability to intensify the positive aspects of products or services and to adequately downplay disadvantages can serve the entrepreneur well in his business venture.

Face Negotiation Theory

First proposed by Stella Ting-Toomey (1985), this refers to the subtle nuances embedded in cross-cultural communications that may have implications beyond the immediate encounter. It has much to do with crisis management as it has with influencing perceptions and attitudes particularly in times of conflict when communicating parties need to negotiate away out of disagreements and still maintain “face” or mutual respect. According to this theory, entrepreneurs operating in an increasingly global market economy will need to learn how to manage conflict negotiations and to take into consideration how people from different cultures maintain “face” (self-image). Therefore, being aware of cultural notions of polite behavior among different nationalities, and in particular, the concept of “saving face” among people such as the Japanese and Chinese can help or hinder the achievements of entrepreneurial goals.

Communication Technology

While the strategies mentioned above can be usefully employed by entrepreneurs because they take into account the crucial role played by persuasive language which utilized appropriately could further the ambitions of an entrepreneur, in present times, communication has taken on a strong technical slant. It is not now possible to speak of communication without taking into account the transformative power of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT). The surge in the use of electronic systems such as telecommunications, computer network technology and the internet for the sharing, transmission, processing, storing, retrieving and use of information in research, business and in social life has greatly altered the nature of communication between individuals and groups. Rather than the slower forms of letters, memos, and newsletters, the current preference is for fast, interactive, result-oriented forms of communication such as through the use of voicemail, email and teleconferencing. These new forms are being harnessed to improve services and to drive economic growth and has consequently led the researchers for the European Monitor (2010) to conclude that the importance of ICT is not the technology itself but the rather its ability to create greater access to information. Significantly, less technologically advanced countries are given the opportunity of bridging the economic gap between them and the rest of the world.

Where entrepreneurs are concerned, the impact of ICT is both immediate and far reaching as personal computers make access to information on economic trends, financial policies, and business opportunities a lot easier thereby enabling them acquire the knowledge and skills needed to synthesize, evaluate, predict, plan, and control their businesses. However, the merits of technical knowhow aside, the ability to analyze and prioritize information gathered as well as to explain complex data in a simple and familiar style are also essential skills for successful entrepreneurship to take place. At this point, a shift occurs whereby linguistic communication skills begin to gain ascendancy over technical and professional skills. Availability of resources and technical abilities notwithstanding, linguistic competence, that is, the possession of appropriate language skills is vital for successful entrepreneurship. These linguistic skills include the ability to present facts or information in the form of proposals, reports or manuals in a language that has universal appeal and reach, and for now, that language happens to be English.

English Language: The Bridge to Entrepreneurship

Language is undoubtedly the life blood of entrepreneurship. As the most effective communication tool available to human beings, Knapp and Daly (2002) assert that “the use of language to formulate messages and to perform social actions is the paradigm case of communication” (213). Certainly whatever strategy the entrepreneur chooses to adopt in pursuing his goals must involve the use of language. Because of its power to sustain or to erode relationships, the acquisition of effective linguistics skills becomes a necessity for the entrepreneur who wants to succeed.

As Giles and Weimann ((1987: 77) point out, “the functions of language in individual, relational, and multiple group identities...feature in the interface between the ways language reflects, builds upon, and determines social reality as well as highlight the dynamic ...communicative qualities we all share”. Therefore, Phillips on (2003:108) asserts that language is important not just because it reflects reality but because it serves as a conceptual filter through which we see the world. A view shared by Clarke (2001:76) who similarly notes the role of language in the conceptualization of entrepreneurial opportunities or activities as well as in influencing stakeholders to accept new ideas and ventures. Not only does language provide the means by which the entrepreneur formulates a business idea, it is in addition, the means by which he goes on to articulate the idea to others. Indeed the modern preference for team work which necessitates the building of a cooperative spirit among stakeholders is best achieved through the effective communication of ideas. In addition as Giles and Weimann(1987)explain pertinently, communication ‘involves the adjustment of multiple sociolinguistic situations including the fact that we operate in an English speaking context’(77). The latter point made he redirects our attention to the English language and to an urges an examination of the implications it has for effective entrepreneurship.

Numerous scholars have alluded to the prevalent use of the English language in the modern world. Crystal (1997),Essen (2004), and Stevenson (1994) attribute this apparent dominance of English to a number of reasons. Historically, over the course of four centuries or so, the British Empire successfully introduced the English language to far flung corners of the world including many parts of Africa, Asia, Australia, New Zealand and America where it became the medium of communication in schools, government, banking, business, and research. Interestingly, for the majority of speakers in the old British colonies it is rarely seen as a means of cultural expression imposed on them by colonialism but rather as the language for wider communication. English appears to have become a universal link language that allows different people to communicate with one another, to share ideas and ways of doing things. Enjoying the status of the lingua franca of the modern world it has become the language of choice of a global community of experts in education, medicine, law, science, technology, business, finance and so forth. Frequently the inherent qualities of the English language such as its enormous range of vocabulary acquired over several centuries of interaction with other cultures demonstrated in its willingness to adapt and borrow from a number of other linguistic sources are given as reasons for the eminent position it occupies among world languages. It is these characteristics that allows it adapt in a rapidly changing world that led Widdowson (1997:144) to conclude that English “would not have spread, otherwise it would not regulate itself as an effective means of global communication”.

But while British imperialism is mainly responsible for the wide spread use of English, according toNeil lands (1997:6), that fact alone does not account for its high status among languages. Instead,it is most likely the economic clout wielded by English speaking world that has helped it to expand and retain its premier position. It is not only the language of England, the leading power of the industrial revolution of the 19th century,but it is also now the language of the United States, the modern day technological and economic superpower where a large percentage of multinational corporations continue to be based and from where they spread their influence throughout the global community. The ascendancy of English over other languages can therefore be attributed to the fact that it has become the preferred language of science and technology. Consequently aspiring professionals in most fields, particularly in the natural sciences are quick to recognize it as the language of intellectual and academic discourse. Essen (1998:113) emphasizes the same when he claims that98% of all physicists in Germany strive to be proficient in English as they use it as their working language. When articles are rejected by professional journals because of “poor” English, a lack of competence in the language becomes an obstacle for those who aspire to garner attention for new products or ideas in the world of scholarship, scientific research, or business.

As globalization becomes a dominant feature of post-modern industrial society, many business enterprises led by the example of multinational corporations such as high tech companies like Apple and automobile manufacturers like General Motors, strive to overcome trade and regulatory boundaries in order to sell their wares through the free markets. Here again, communication in English plays a pivotal role as fluency in it opens the doors to numerous opportunities. This is further demonstrated by the use of English as the language of choice on the internet. The dominance of English on this foremost means of communication and information is evident by the fact that most foreign language websites provide translation services into English.

Consequently, for many of the growing numbers of internet users worldwide, the English language is not viewed in the limited sense of “English” that is, of relating to England or its people, but is rather seen as a useful tool of communication between people of varying backgrounds in a variety of communicative contexts (Mckay, 2000:5). But the most persuasive argument for the importance of English where entrepreneurship is concerned, are the indications that good English language skills attract more of the foreign investments which underpin the growth of individual and national wealth. The research conducted by Euro monitor for example, shows that although economic performance is a key attraction for Foreign Direct Investment (FDI), nonetheless, there appears to be a strong link between language and investment. FDI flows from English-speaking countries like the United States and the United Kingdom are typically highest in countries where English is the *lingua franca*. For instance from 2005-2008, the level of FDI increased by an average of 6% in English speaking countries such as Nigeria, Bangladesh, and Pakistan. In these developing economies, the share of FDI that originated from English-speaking countries was 41%, 35%, and 33% respectively while in contrast, largely French speaking countries such as Cameroon and Rwanda seem to lose out, with only 2%, and 15% of their total FDI inflows coming from English-speaking countries. Even when other wealthy countries such as the United Arab Emirates choose to invest in Cameroon and Rwanda, the preference still is for communication in English. Not surprisingly, university degrees from English speaking countries generally have a higher status in the world of business. In the countries mentioned above, most students prefer to study abroad in UK, USA, Canada or Australia partly because of historical relationships but also because of the status of English as the international language of academics, business and technology. It could therefore be argued that developing economies in Africa could profit from an overhaul of educational policies that will bring about increased investment in the sector.

In particular, education that raises the level of competence in English among the population will eventually yield economic dividends. For example, Nigeria’s vision 2020 initiative aims to make it one of the world’s largest economies by the stated year and in order to achieve to a higher degree of competitiveness in the world market and to reduce its heavy reliance on oil, diversification through increased entrepreneurship is seen by many as the way forward. Entrepreneurial studies have therefore become a compulsory graduation requirement in all Nigerian universities. However, in spite the historical coincidence that brought about the prevalent use of English in Nigeria, as well as the fact that it is taught from primary school up to university level where the Use of English is an obligatory one year course, investment in the quality of teaching and learning of the language is severely inadequate. Yet if handled properly, graduates would acquire good communication skills in English that will enable them effectively operate profitable businesses.

Conclusion

In the fight against unemployment and poverty, the importance of an economy composed of business enterprises cannot be overemphasized. Neither can the centrality of communication in the process be ignored. From the conceptualization and formulation stages to the articulation of a business idea, the entrepreneur needs good communication skills because it is what enables him to establish mutual understanding between all stakeholders and to gain a competitive edge. Through it, he is able to coach, coordinate, evaluate, and supervise those who work with him as well to elicit and maintain the interest of shareholders/investors and the purchasing public. A lack of good communication skills will result in poor commitment to his ideas at production levels as well as when marketing products to potential consumers and may eventually lead to its demise.

Similarly as mentioned before, the prevalent use of the English language for communication on the internet is to a large extent reshaping many aspects of the world’s economies. One can only imagine the difficulties there would be if no effort has been made to establish a cohesive way by which businesses can communicate. With the information revolution brought about by the internet, the entrepreneur’s field of operation is almost unlimited if he possesses a good grasp of the English language. He therefore needs to be aware the role of English and to fully exploit it for the benefit of his business. Indeed the need for a good command of English should arise not only from a country’s language policy but also from outward – looking economic developmental strategies that include attracting foreign investors or selling products abroad. The economic security of African countries depend on negotiation and marketing skills, this means that their effectiveness or otherwise in the global market may be determined by the extent to which their entrepreneurs possess a good command of English. Consequently, entrepreneurial activity as well as better communication in English can boost economic prospects and open the doors to the world market.

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