
ADVANCING VOCATIONAL EDUCATION: LANGUAGE AS A VERITABLE TOOL FOR NAVIGATING CHALLENGES AND UNLOCKING OPPORTUNITIES

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Abstract

This study explores the importance of language in advancing vocational education. Language is crucial in navigating challenges and unlocking opportunities for students pursuing vocational training. By effectively utilising language, individuals can enhance their communication skills, problem-solving abilities, and critical thinking, ultimately leading to greater success in their chosen vocations. This abstract highlights the significance of language as a tool for empowering students to overcome obstacles and excel in the ever-evolving landscape of vocational education. This study recommends that: Future research should focus on measuring the impact of language training programs on vocational students' success in the workplace. Implementation of innovative teaching methods and technology to improve language learning outcomes in vocational education can be explored for better results.

Keywords: Vocational education, language, challenges, unlocking opportunities

Introduction

Vocational education, also known as career and technical education, focuses on providing individuals with the practical skills and knowledge needed for specific trades or occupations. It aims to prepare students for careers in various fields, such as health care, engineering, automotive, culinary arts, and information technology. Vocational education programs typically equip students with hands-on training, industry-relevant skills, and certifications to enter the workforce or pursue further education in their chosen field. Merriam-Webster (2002) defines vocational education as a training for a specific occupation in agriculture, trade, or industry through a combination of theoretical

teaching and practical experience provided by many high schools in their commercial and technical divisions, and by special institutions of collegiate standing (as a college of agriculture, a school of engineering, or a technical institute). Wikipedia also defines vocational education as education that prepares people for a skilled craft as an artisan, trade as a tradesperson, or work as a technician. Vocational education can also be seen as that type of education given to an individual to prepare that individual to be gainfully employed or self-employed with requisite skills. Vocational education is known by various names, depending on the country concerned, including career and technical education or acronyms such as TVET (technical and vocational

education and training) and TAFE (Technical and Further Education).

Okoro (1993), defines vocational education as any form of education whose primary purpose is to prepare persons for employment in recognized occupations. In the same vein, Osuala (2004) observes that vocational education is: Education designed to prepare individuals for gainful employment as semiskilled workers, technician or sub-professionals in recognized occupations or to prepare individuals for enrolment in advanced technical education programmes. Also, Pace (2021) defines Vocational Education & Training as education and training which aim to equip people with knowledge, know-how, skills and/or competences required in particular occupations or more broadly in the labour market. Okorie (2001) opine that vocational education is designed to prepare skilled workers for industries, agriculture, commerce, etc., which is usually provided at the upper secondary level. The philosophical concept of vocational education, according to Okorie (2001), maintains that The occupational choice of an individual should be based on the orientation (interest, ability and aptitude) of the individual; each individual should have opportunities for employment in the occupation and that resources for education must be provided to develop all human resources needed in national economic development.

However, Nigeria as a developing nation requires young men and women as sole proprietors in the evolving small and medium scale industries in the country.

The type of Education that possesses such inherent ability to equip them with the required skills is vocational education, with acquisition of skills and competencies that can help individuals to function productively in industries, commercial occupations and even self-reliance and self-employment. Consequently, the scope of Vocational Education is multi-faceted ranging from occupations requiring a high degree of skill and scientific knowledge. Jobs requiring minimum training are not generally included in formal programme because the necessary skills can be readily learned on the job. Ezeagwu and Eze (1999) asserts that in any country where Vocational Technical Education (VTE) is adequately funded, properly organized and managed, its citizens enjoy very bright career prospects because of the numerous and varied employment opportunities that are created. Thus, the scope of coverage of Vocational Technical Education is examined here in terms of occupational areas classified into seven major divisions namely: Vocational Agriculture, Distributive Education, Home Economics Education, Health occupation Education, Trade and Industrial Education, Business and Office Education and Technical Education (Osuala, 1995). However, the process of formal education consists of education in primary and secondary schools, teacher training colleges, technical colleges, agricultural institutions and universities. While the process of non-formal education, referred to as out of school education includes all forms of training and institutions outside of the formal educational institutions ranging, from the individual apprenticeship, scheme

training programmes undertaken by NDE, PEP, and FEAP, to adult literacy programmes. Wenrich & Wenrich (1979) in Umuna (2003) remarks that Vocational Technical Education is concerned with the whole hierarchy of occupations including the whole spectrum of the labour force from semi-skilled worker to high-level technical profession. The National Policy on Education (FME 1981) stressed that the aim of Vocational Technical Education specially is to provide trained manpower in applied science, technology, commerce and other vocational disciplines. It is also aimed at providing technical know-how and vocational skills necessary for agricultural, industrial, commercial and home management, as well as economic development.

However, if the aim is taken properly, there would have been an increase in food production, an increase in middle-level technicians as well as an increase in home management and nutrition. Thus, the 6-3-3-4 system of education stresses the acquisition of the right vocational skills to fill the middle-level manpower needs of the 21st century Nigeria. Hence, the objectives and purposes of Vocational Technical Education as enumerated by the National

The Role of Vocational Education in the 21st Century

Language plays a crucial role in vocational education by enabling effective communication, facilitating understanding of technical terms and instructions, and enhancing collaboration among students and instructors. Proficiency in language skills

Board for Technical Education (NBTE) amongst others include:

- Provision of trained manpower in Engineering.
- Technology, commerce at the professional level.
- Provision of qualified and well-equipped personnel to apply scientific knowledge to improve and solve the environmental problems for use and convenience of man.
- To introduce professional studies in engineering and other technologies.
- To provide technical knowledge and Vocational skills necessary for Agricultural, industrial, commercial and economic development.
- To provide training and impart necessary skills leading to the production of craftsmen, technicians, technologists, engineers and other skilled personnel who would be self-reliant and enterprising.

The national board for technical education aims to regulate and coordinate technical education in Nigeria and also enhance the standard of technical education, facilitate workforce development and contribute to national development through skilled manpower.

helps vocational students better, comprehend course materials, communicate with peers and industry professionals, and succeed in the work place. Strong language abilities allow individuals in vocational education to navigate challenges, unlock opportunities, and advance their careers in various technical fields.

Oranu, (1998) asserts that the world is at the threshold of technical information explosion and microelectronic revolution which has created a new way of living and working which in turn makes new demands on the educational system. Vocational skills taught in schools and colleges provides abundant manpower for industries and provide the impetus for a technological take off, trade expansion, foreign exchange

Importance of Language Teaching and Learning in Vocational Education Programmes

Pace (2021) asserts that, it is a known fact that many learners who attend vocational education and training courses across the globe are motivated to acquire a set of vocational skills to access employment, but are much less motivated to improve the basic language skills that underpin the acquisition of these skills. They are often reluctant to either start or return to studying languages, which they may well associate with negative memories from their early school years due to various reasons like not finding them appealing to their interests, seeing them as not being relevant to their lives and future careers, lack of modern equipment, among others. Corroborating with the above assertion, Solodkova et al (2017) opined that, students following vocational courses look with a consciously negative attitude to the foreign language acquisition. This academic subject is perceived as unnecessary. Thus, the knowledge it provides is not considered as a future factor of competitiveness on the labour market. On the other hand, those

generation and above all, acts as the fulcrum upon which a nation's economy rotates. The proliferation of vocational technical schools or colleges in Nigeria since the 1970s shows that Vocational Technical Education is gathering momentum for rapid new ideas and skills for the labour force for optimal production of goods and services.

learners who do take language courses, very often find it difficult to transfer the language skills they have acquired from the classroom to the workplace. However, It seems as though they are unaware of the possible benefits of embedding, integrating or contextualizing basic language skills in vocational education and how this can give them a cutting edge at the workplace and on the job.

Therefore, the importance of language learning in VET is also confirmed by The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and International Labour Organization (ILO) (2002) which recommend that technical and vocational education and training courses for the twenty-first century should include the study of at least one foreign language of international use, which, while conducive to a higher cultural level, will give special emphasis to the requirements of communication, the acquisition of a scientific and technical vocabulary, and the need to prepare for international employment and multicultural working environments. One possible solution here is

the introduction of language courses for VET students which are a combination between Language Proficiency courses and Languages for Specific Purposes courses. Such courses, perfectly in line with the occupational field singled out in the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) as one of the major fields for language use, would provide a method of learning, teaching and assessing basic skills or abilities in the language, according to the particular needs of the students and the specific requirements of the vocational domain. In very practical terms this implies that such language courses need to be totally learner-focused, practically oriented and applied to professional contexts, addressing the immediate and very specific needs of the learners involved while demonstrating the practical importance of the knowledge being taught and the possibility to use it in future professional activities. These obviously presents a number of challenges which need to be discussed and analyzed from both the educators' and the students' point of view.

Umuna (2003) asserts that, these challenges include:

- **Lack of Language Skills:** Many vocational students struggle due to inadequate language proficiency, hindering their ability to comprehend technical terms, follow instructions, and effectively communicate with instructors and peers.
- **Communication Barriers:** Differences in language backgrounds

among students and instructors can lead to communication break downs, making it challenging to convey ideas, ask questions, or collaborate effectively in vocational education settings.

- **Misunderstandings and Mistranslations:**

Misinterpretations of technical terms or instructions due to language barriers can result in errors, confusion, and in efficiencies in vocational training, impacting students' learning outcomes and overall success in their chosen fields.

However, emphasis should not be on how much language one knows but rather on what can one do with the language learnt. From the learners' point of view, this implies making connections between new knowledge and experiences they have had, with real world contexts and knowledge they have already mastered. From the educators' point of view, they should strive to help learners understand linguistic concepts and forms in a situated and contextualized form, transforming simple things like food preparation, tools, technology into potential language teaching tools. This is by no means an easy task but such courses need to address the immediate and very specific needs of the learners involved, having as their driving force, both in the preparation stage as well as in the development stage, the needs analysis of the learners. For this reason, the starting point of any such courses should be a study of the learners' needs, objectives and expectations for the course,

which in turn should serve as the basis for informed curriculum practices, such as syllabus design, materials development and instructional design. This includes, among other things, forming a list of preferences of what the learners want and need to learn, as far as language and content are concerned.

This stage is of fundamental importance, given that the needs of a learner studying, for example, in a hospitality course are totally different from those of another learner studying in an agribusiness or an engineering course. Even the language skills required may vary considerably. As a matter of fact, the people studying for hospitality purposes will most probably need specific reading and writing skills in the language/s being studied – reading and understanding the contents of an email and replying to it; writing various letters of a different nature, be it a letter of complaint, of protest, of acceptance; taking minutes of an important meeting, etc. On the other hand, those studying the language to work in agribusiness would be more interested in listening and speaking skills, varying also according to the sector of agribusiness in which they would like to work. All this means that, to be able to perform holistic needs analysis, the language teacher also requires to gain knowledge of the respective vocational sector.

Having a realistic knowledge about the needs and expectations of the sector is essential for a successful curriculum design, making the cooperation between the educational institution and the sector of crucial importance. The advantage offered

by such a profession-oriented approach is that it enhances the use of a profession bound, purposefully designed methodology that gives the teacher clear clues as to what are the factual, most relevant and linguistically servicing ingredients that a student may utilise for an effective and fast acquisition of a vocation-oriented linguistic corpus. This implies that the teachers, besides fulfilling the role of curriculum designers, also have to design their own assessment measures that they are to use with their students, which in turn have to be verified for quality assurance purposes. All this has serious ramifications on the role of the language teacher.

The main role of the language teacher would be to help, to facilitate communication in class, to provide the tools for the learners to develop and acquire the skills they need and not to teach his/her students the rules of agribusiness or the regulations in the hospitality sector. The role of the language teacher is to equip the learners with tools and strategies that will empower them in a world where the teacher is only one of the many providers, or sources, of language exposure and communicative practice. In other words, the language teacher is to provide the learners with the necessary linguistic tools to be able to apply the concepts, interpret them, and above all communicate in the target language, not just with the particular jargon characteristic of that specific occupational context but also with the language of everyday informal talk, that allows them to communicate effectively regardless of the occupational context. This

is quite a challenging task given that in the same group individuals may vary considerably in education level, motivation, aptitude for languages, work experience, self-discipline, etc. It therefore includes getting to know their knowledge in the language, their past work experiences as well as their cultural and linguistic backgrounds.

All this implies that such courses cannot be taught according to any pre-ordained methodology. Rather than talking about a subject to be taught we need to think of which approach to adopt and this implies flexibility on the teachers' part, negotiating with the learners on how best to reach their objectives. In other words, the teacher needs to understand and be fully aware of the requirements of the particular trades or professions and they have to be willing to adapt to these requirements. They have to understand the context in which the language will be used as well as any specialist concepts and terminology. Only in this way can the teaching of languages become useful and relevant to the students in vocational education and training.

Lightbrown & Spada (2006) state, language teachers need to be flexible enough to adopt and/or adapt different teaching methods according to the demands of their immediate teaching context. And given that language in different situations varies, very often it is left up to the teacher to tailor-make not just the curriculum and the methods but above all the materials to be used in each and each course in accordance to its specific context and centered on its appropriate language

skills and discourse. In very practical terms, this can be achieved by following four basic steps, namely,

- (i) by consolidating basic grammar notions and rules,
- (ii) by becoming familiar with specific terminology,
- (iii) by introducing the kind of language to be used in their vocational domain, and
- (iv) by working on specific language skills pertinent to the employment.

Such language courses in Vocational Education and Training should have a threefold framework design. The first part should consist of an individual theoretical component of learning, which should include, among other things, revising some basic grammar notions and rules, becoming familiar with the most common terminology, introducing the kind of language students will encounter and use in their place of work and in their profession. The second part should consist of an individual practical component of learning, where, in collaboration with various companies in the specific field, each course participant is assigned several open-ended, supervised 'hands-on' tasks which can be performed at his/her level. The third part of the framework should provide the students the possibility to work in teams, pairs or groups – classroom discussions, role plays, etc.

It is important to note that, given the possible heterogeneity of the groups, most of the tasks assigned, both on an individual

level as well as in teams or group work are to be open-ended and the learners should be free to adapt them according to their needs and abilities. Furthermore, specific learning outcomes should be set at the start of each component, essentially describing what a student is expected to be able to do as a result of a learning activity. The students must know the anticipated outcomes that derive from the instruction given and the subsequent learning that takes place in classrooms, workshops, or even in precincts outside of schools. For the above to be achieved, co-operation is crucial. Teachers of the target language together with those from the particular vocational field, as well as (if and when possible) specialised workers, need to come together to plan and design a holistic programme of studies in accordance to the requirements of the specific professional practice. Such programmes should enhance teaching quality and proliferate student numbers opting for VET.

Needless to say that, although such interdisciplinary co-operation is not easy to achieve given that there might be many people involved and too many trades to relate to, with the right backing from authorities and a strong conviction from all concerned, such much-needed cooperation is not only desirable but doable. As stated in the VET4EU2 position paper on European Union policy after 2020 on Vocational and Educational Training (2019) the way forward is “integration of this cooperation into hybrid education involving companies and educational providers” given that

“education and training provide something that increases when it is share

Unlocking Opportunities in Vocational Education through Language

A. Enhanced Communication Skills:

Vocational education provides opportunities for students to develop strong communication skills, enabling them to effectively interact with colleagues, clients, and supervisors in the workplace, improving their overall job performance and career prospects.

B. Improved Job Opportunities:

Vocational training equips individuals with specialised skills and certifications that are in high demand in various industries, enhancing their job prospects and increasing their chances of securing well-paying and rewarding employment opportunities.

C. Global Work force Integration:

Vocational education prepares students to adapt to the global job market by fostering cultural awareness, language proficiency, and cross-cultural communication skills, enabling them to collaborate with diverse teams and pursue career opportunities worldwide.

Language as a Tool for Advancing Vocational Education

The following are ways Language serves as a tool in advancing vocational education.

A. Language Training Programs:

Language training programs can help vocational students develop crucial communication skills required in the work place. These programs can focus on

industry-specific terminology and practical communication scenarios to enhance vocational education.

B. Communication Strategies:

Effective communication strategies, such as active listening and clear articulation, can be taught alongside vocational training to improve job performance. Emphasising the importance of non-verbal communication and professional etiquette can also be beneficial.

Conclusion

Language plays a vital role in vocational education by enhancing communication skills, industry-specific terminology knowledge, and overall job performance. It acts as a tool for students to effectively convey ideas, collaborate with colleagues, and succeed in their chosen fields. Today language teaching and learning must go well beyond formal schooling, which does not necessarily provide the best context to motivate students to learn languages. Pace (2015) affirms that it stands to reason that students are more willing to work hard at something when they see how it connects to outside the four walls of the classroom and when they realize that they are able to take what they learn in school and apply it to real life. Thus this explains why language learning for vocational or employment-related purposes is still considered to be a sensitive and delicate subject, given that most language training courses on offer are still considered by students to be usually generic in scope and seldom specifically vocational, even though the authorities

C. Case Studies on Language Success Stories:

Case studies highlighting how language proficiency has contributed to the success of vocational students in various industries can inspire others to prioritize language skills. Sharing real-life examples of individuals who advanced in their careers through improved communication can demonstrate the impact of language in vocational education.

frequently acknowledge the need to take more account of the vocational aspect. The way forward is to create a situated language learning environment where learners could learn aspects of a particular language and a vocational domain whilst performing a real-world task. In other words, we need to move away from teaching to use the language to actually using the language to carry out tasks and actions in specific situations that are relevant and pertinent to the students' lives. It is only by using real-world settings as a basis for task-based and technology-assisted language learning that teachers can equip the trainers with skills to integrate the acquisition of vocational knowledge and related language skills at the same time. This implies reconciling the vocational dimension of training with that of linguistic training whilst producing a valid paradigm for the teaching of languages for vocational purposes.

Recommendations

This study highlights the significance of language in vocational education, how to

overcome its challenges in labour market and to seize new prospects in the realm of vocational training. It therefore recommends that there should be a future research focusing on measuring the impact of language training programs on vocational students' success in the workplace. The

government should implement innovative teaching methods and technology to improve language learning outcomes in vocational education which will enhance better results.

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