

MAKING PROFESSIONAL ETHICS COUNT IN LANGUAGE TEACHING AND LEARNING IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

This paper examines the role that professional ethics play in enhancing language teaching and learning. Language teaching and learning are like two sides of the same coin. Language learning is better enhanced with effective language teaching/lecturing. Both are in turn affected by a myriad of factors, including the cultivation and maintenance of professional ethics. That language teaching and learning have suffered serious setbacks in Nigeria is evident by the low level of proficiency of language graduates, especially that of English, as well as the perennial poor performance of students at the various levels of education in the country. The paper notes the role that professional ethics would play in arresting the trend. It concludes that the cultivation and maintenance of professional ethics by language teachers/lecturers and students would enhance productivity, restore declining public confidence in teaching as well as promote the level of proficiency of, especially, English language graduates.

Introduction

One of the most challenging domains of decision-making could be located within the sphere of ethics. Issues bothering on ethics have been with man right from the beginning. For instance, it is believed that the point where man was required to choose between good and evil marked the origins of ethics. "Since then, it has continued to define and re-define the basis for analyzing the conduct of mankind" (Obiudo 2).

The 21st century has come with its unique opportunities and challenges, while the professional is under increasing pressures to perform in order to prove his worth and or justify his reward. Key factors affect performance and professional ethics have proven to be part of these. The professional must not only show demonstrable competence but must also be known and seen to be guided by high ethical standards,

Ethics pervade all human disciplines and are critical in delivering value. In an age of increasing knowledge, fast-paced globalization and the advent of the internet, the dividing line between ethical and unethical conduct continues to thin out or disappear altogether. The challenges inherent in these realities are clearly enormous.

In the light of the foregoing, the paper examines the issue of professional ethics as they concern language teaching, especially at the tertiary level of education in Nigeria. They make a case for the cultivation and application of high ethical standards in the process of language teaching in the country. This is also with particular reference to the teaching of the English language, which is a second language to many Nigerians. This will not only add value to teaching but also serve to curb the perennial poor performance in the language in the country. Since to be educated was (and still is), in the eyes of many, to be educated in the English language (Baldeh 3), the outcome would go a long way in improving the level of education in the country.

Defining the Problem

The use of language is indispensable in every field of human endeavour. In Nigeria, for instance, the English language is a second language to many Nigerians as well as the official language of government business in the country. By its nature, to be educated was (and still is), in the eyes of many to be educated

in the English language (Baldeh 3). It is, however, well-known that its teaching and learning in the country are bedeviled by several challenges. The consequence could be seen in the low level of proficiency in English of typical English language and other graduates, and the widespread view that the level of education has fallen in the country.

The non-adherence to professional ethics in this important field of learning could well be one of the major contributory factors to this predicament. Thus, the need for the cultivation and maintenance of professional ethics becomes paramount. In other words, in what ways and to what degree does the observance of professional ethics contribute to enhancing language teaching and learning in the country? This provides the background for the paper.

Objectives

The paper seeks to achieve the following objectives:

- To create awareness on the need to embrace professional ethics in language teaching and learning in Nigeria, especially as they pertain to the English language.
- To highlight the ways in which professional ethics could enhance language teaching and learning.
- To make a case for the development of a Code of Ethics for language teaching and learning.
- To make recommendations in line with the stated objectives of the paper.

Methodology

The analytical method of research provides the framework for the paper. The issues under discussion are well-known, even to the casual observer of the nation's educational system. The essence is to bring salient issues to the fore, while advocating for the ways of improvement in the highlighted areas.

The Concept of Professional Ethics

According to the Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English, ethics refer to "moral principles or rules of behaviour for deciding what is right or wrong" (466). It is the moral principles or values that generally govern the conduct of an individual or a group "Ethics can be viewed as the standard of behaviour by which conduct is judged" (Lamb, Hair and McDaniel 45). While profession relates to a job that needs a high level of education and training, professional ethics concern moral values relating to a particular profession.

The Need for Ethics

In order to help employees make right ethical choices, many organizations, including trade associations, have created formal codes outlining what management views as ethical or unethical in the course of discharging their responsibilities. "Over 90% of 1 000 largest firms in the United States are known to adopt ethical codes for their employees to make better decisions" (Stanton 604). In a recent national study, 60% of companies maintained Code of Ethics; 33% offered ethics training, while 33% employed ethics officers (45).

Like other similar institutes and associations, the American Marketing Association has developed its own Code of Ethics. In the preamble to the Code, it states: "Members of the A-M.A. are committed to ethical professional conduct. They have joined together in subscribing to this Code of Ethics, embracing the following topics": (Bovee and Thill 57). It then goes on to list the topical issues covered. In concluding, the Code notes that "any A.M.A. member found to be in violation of any provision of this C.O.E may have his or her Association membership suspended or revoked" (57). In Nigeria, the National Institute of Marketing of Nigeria (NIMN), like similar institutes, has its own similar Code of Ethics for its members.

- Essentially, a Code of Ethics helps in the following ways:
- ✓ It helps employees/managers (educators inclusive) to identify what their organizations (or institutions) view as acceptable professional practices.
 - ✓ Written codes enable employees avoid confusion when deciding whether their decisions are ethical or not.
 - ✓ A Code of Ethics serves as an effective internal control mechanism on behaviour, which is preferable to external controls, such as government intervention.
 - ✓ The process of formulating such a Code encourages a healthy interaction among employees concerning what is right or wrong.
 - ✓ Such a code helps to arrest declining public confidence in the various professions involved.

Code of Ethics for Educators

Paramount in formulating a Code of Ethics is to decide beforehand the various individuals and interest groups that would be affected by a teacher's or an educator's actions/decisions. Typically, it is difficult to please every conceivable interest group. However, formulating and abiding by a Code of Ethics by professional teachers/lecturers would help to ensure equity, justice and fairness in dealing with the various groups. As a matter fact, the concept of social responsibility enjoins individuals, institutions and organizations, especially those engaged in one form of business or the other, to weigh their actions or decisions in terms of their overall impact on the society as a whole. Failure to take cognizance of this has, more often than not, attracted government intervention/regulations.

Perhaps, in line with this realization, the Association of American Educators (AAE) developed a Code of Ethics designed to guide educators, both in the public and private educational institutions in the United States. In its overview, the Code notes:

- ✓ The professional educator strives to create a learning environment that nurtures to fulfillment the potential of all students.
- ✓ The professional educator acts with conscientious effort to exemplify the highest ethical standards.
- ✓ The professional educator responsibly accepts that every child has a right to an uninterrupted education free from strikes or any other work stoppage tactics (Code of Ethics for Educators).

The Code then went on to unveil a list of what is ethically expected of each educator in dealing with such interest groups as students, professional colleagues, practices and performance as well as parents and the community.

Similarly, the state of Florida, in the same United States, came up with a Code of Ethics for professional educators in the state, with a provision that "violation of any of these principles shall subject the individual to revocation or suspension of the individual educator's certificate or the other penalties as provided by law" (principles of Professional Conduct for the Education Profession in Florida). It is apparent that these codes were developed in order to ensure high level of professionalism in the teaching profession.

Ethics for Language Teaching in Nigeria

Besides the Teachers Registration Council, which was set up not long ago to standardize and regulate the teaching profession, there is not much in the literature to indicate the existence of a Code of Ethics for teaching, particularly the teaching of a language or languages in Nigeria. As such, there are varying degrees of language teaching experiences in higher institutions in the country, depending on the particular institution and the disposition of its management and the teachers/lecturers. This could substantially account for the perennial poor performance of

students in languages, especially English, since most of the teachers are graduates of these higher institutions. There is no doubt that cultivating and abiding by a Code of Ethics can go a long way in improving both teachers and students' competence and performance in the language.

Observations/Findings

Professional Competence

The starting point for developing professional ethics is the cultivation of professional skill and competence. It is the foundation for professional ethical conduct. To make professional ethical demands from an incompetent professional is likened to erecting a giant building using inferior or poor quality materials. The various incidences of collapsed buildings in the country demonstrate the consequences of erecting structures on faulty foundations or with poor quality materials. Professionalism entails that an individual must be willing and ready to:

- ✓ Undergo the necessary training in order to acquire the relevant qualifications, skills, knowledge and attitudes necessary to excel in the chosen (teaching) job.
- ✓ Abide by professional ethics set down by the relevant authorities.
- ✓ Fulfill his/her statutory obligations.
- ✓ Be socially responsible and responsive (Obiudo 337).

There is no doubt that a language teacher possessing this kind of background would be more disposed to abiding by set ethical standards.

Regular Attendance to Classes

Professional ethics demand that language teachers should show a high sense of commitment to their job and students' welfare by attending scheduled classes promptly and taking deliberate steps to effectively cover the specified syllabuses. Inability to attend

classes regularly without justification would portray the affected teacher as irresponsible and uncaring.

Availability of Standard Texts

It has become customary for a teacher/lecturer to make available his/her sponsored publication(s) for students to buy. At its face value, there is nothing wrong with this. However, such texts should meet certain specified standards approved by the relevant authorities and also be offered to the students in a humane manner expected of a dignified academic environment. In some institutions, such texts are submitted to established committees, which recommend or decide whether texts should be sold, including their prices. Some even direct that such texts be placed in the bookshops where students could buy them if they so desire.

Exchange of Grades for Money

The practice of exchanging money for grades, popularly known as "sorting", has gained currency in many higher institutions of learning in the country. This is a height of unethical conduct, and everything must be done to discourage and or eliminate it. Sometimes, grades are awarded for other considerations apart from merit. All these are unethical and should be discouraged.

Victimization of Students

Sometimes, some teachers/lecturers victimize their students based on sentiments or unresolved personal issues. Such behaviour is not healthy for proper teaching and learning and must be discouraged as well.

The list is a long one, and there is no deliberate attempt to enumerate all of them. The point being made is that high ethical standards are essential for healthy teaching and learning. As such, deliberate efforts should be made to develop a Code of Ethics for teaching where it does not exist. For the teaching and learning of a second language such as English, the stakes are even higher.

Model of Ethical Decisions

It is not always easy to arrive at ethical decisions. The following criteria are, however, suggested as a guide for arriving at ethical decisions:

- ❖ Identify the various decision options and the likely consequences of each course of action,
- ❖ Identify all the individuals and groups that will be affected by such a course of action.
- ❖ Do a cost-benefit analysis of each option from the point of view of the affected parties, taking into consideration their needs and interests.
- ❖ Rank the costs and benefits of each option and make decision(s) (Stanton 604).

The personalized model takes the form of the following questions:

- ❖ Would I do this to a friend?
- ❖ Would I be willing to have this done to me?
- ❖ Would I be embarrassed if the action is publicized nationally?
- ❖ How fair is the action to the parties concerned? (Stanton 604).

Conclusion

Ethical issues will continue to take the frontline in all spheres of human discipline, especially teaching. While making ethical decisions could be quite challenging, the willingness and readiness to be ethical, supported by an enabling environment, can go a long way in making the difference. It will enhance productivity, promote good teacher/student relationship, restore declining public confidence in teaching as well as promote the image of the individuals and institutions involved.

Recommendations

1. Conscious and deliberate efforts should be made to develop a Code of Ethics to guide language teaching in the various institutions of higher learning in Nigeria, where it does not exist. This must be backed by enforcement in order to make it meaningful. There should be a national Code of Ethics for all higher institutions in the country on identified common issues, while individual institutions should be encouraged to develop their own Codes peculiar to their own local environments. For instance, "sorting", sexual harassment, sale of sub-standard texts, incompetence, etc. cannot be justified in any higher institution in the country. However, the syllabi to be covered as well as the means of covering them are the prerogatives of individual institutions.
2. Besides the Teachers Registration Council, there should be a professional institute or association to regulate language teaching in Nigeria. Such an agency plays vital roles in formulating a Code of Ethics and enforcing it among members.
3. There should be continuous training and re-training of language teachers in order to constantly remind and keep them updated on what are expected of them.
4. The government and management of the various institutions should provide the enabling environment for teachers of language to embrace and uphold ethical standards. For instance, teachers should be well remunerated, while incentives should be extended to those who uphold high ethical standards in their jobs
5. Ethics officers should be appointed to enforce ethical standards among teachers of language in the various higher institutions in the country.

6. Compliance with set ethical standards should form part of the criteria for staff appraisal, especially when the issue of promotion is under consideration.
7. Ethics should be incorporated into the teaching and training curricula.

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