Librarians Use of Interpersonal Communication Skills for Effective Reference Services in Academic Libraries in Southwest Nigeria

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Abstract— The study examined interpersonal communication skills as a catalyst for effective reference in service in academic libraries in southwest Nigeria. The use of verbal and non-verbal behaviour in reference interactions was investigated. A survey research design was adopted for the study using a total enumeration technique. The questionnaire was drawn on One hundred and sixty-five Librarians (respondents) covering states and Federal University libraries, out of which One hundred and thirty-three (133) questionnaires were returned and analyzed. The rate of return was 80.6%. Four research questions were developed and tested using Simple percentage, mean and standard deviation. The study found that the indiscriminate use of non-verbal cues in reference interaction posesa serious challenge to the success of reference service. The study also confirmed that inadequate acknowledgement of users is a bane to effective reference service. The study also found that eye contact, facial expression, body movement and use of hand to gesticulate during reference interaction extremely influence the effectiveness of reference service. Eye contact was highest among other forms of non-verbal cues, with a mean of 2.95. The study recommended that reference librarians must be approachable to encourage users seeking assistance; Librarians should be mindful of how they use verbal and non-verbal behaviour in communicating with users. The study concluded that the management of libraries should expose librarians to periodic training to improve their interpersonal communication skills.

Index Terms— interpersonal communication, reference service, academic libraries, librarians, non-verbal communication, library user, reference interview, reference sources.

1. Introduction

Academic libraries support the learning, teaching and research activities of their parent institutions. Consequently, no university library can claim academic excellence without an effective library. University libraries provide services such as lending, reference, user education, interlibrary loans, and database and consultancy services, among others. In all the services mentioned above, users or patrons are encountered. It is imperative to state that reference service is of great importance in libraries since they entail assisting library patrons in finding the required library resources. Reference service is an important branch of librarianship which every librarian grasp properly. Librarians cannot jump to finding required information resources for users without first engaging the user in interaction. It is during this process that the need is ascertained, and frantic effort is made to provide relevant sources of information. The existence of a good library is not sufficient to make reference service happen. Communication plays a vital role in university library service delivery. Adekunle (2004) stressed that communication and effective reference service are coterminous. Good use of reference staff and interpersonal communication skills will go a long way to influencing interaction between users and library staff.

Etebu (2010) stressed that library patrons need communication to achieve information-seeking goals. Communication in this regard, is the exchange of information between the patron and the librarian to satisfy an information need. The reference librarian is, therefore an assistant, and a translator of diverse information sources, who queries patrons on what their needs and feeds them with the desired resources. The circulation desk which occupies a prominent position is a place where significant communication takes place between librarian and patrons. Patrons approach librarians with issues concerning borrowing and returning of information materials among others. Nothing in the form of effective service can take place in the library without effective communication. For instance, reference service has been aptly described as a responsive, interactive and user-oriented business (Okwilagwe 2000). Reference librarians at the interpersonal level interact with many different people during the course of their daily duties, and such people include administrators, academic staff, students and other categories of staff. This rapport and communication are especially important to avoid friction. Without effective communication, conflicts are bound to happen, which can be destructive to the smooth running of a library. (Adesola, 2004). The success or otherwise of reference transactions will depend largely on interpersonal communication skills.

2. Statement of Problem

The relationship between Librarian and library clientele depends on keeping open lines of communication between the people concerned. The reference librarian's ability to

successfully and quickly connect library patrons with their preferred resources depends on how well they can communicate. Non-verbal and verbal signals are both necessary for reference service. It includes in-person meetings and Competencies on a virtual level for services that are effective. It has been noted, nonetheless, that many reference service users in academic libraries get irritated as a result of their inability to utilize the library resources of their choosing. Could a deficiency in the reference librarian's people skills be the cause of the lack of effective and efficient reference service? What degree of awareness do librarians have about the significance of verbal and nonverbal communication behavior in carrying out their responsibilities? Therefore, the purpose of this research was to investigate how interpersonal communication abilities affect academic librarians' ability to provide successful reference services.

3. Objective of the Study

The objective of this study is to investigate interpersonal communication skills as factors influencing Reference services that are efficient in university libraries.

The research will assist in:
- examine the problems hindering effective reference service
- determine the level of awareness of librarians of verbal and non verbal stimuli in interpersonal communication
- determine how the use of verbal communication skills by librarians influences reference services
- examine the extent to which the use of non-verbal communication behaviour influences reference services.

4. Research questions

- What are the problems hindering effective reference services?
- To what extent are librarians aware of verbal and non-verbal behaviour in interpersonal communication?
- What are the verbal and non-verbal skills used by librarians in reference interaction?
- To what extent does the use of non-verbal behaviour influence interaction in the reference section?

5. Review of Related Literature

Reference service effectiveness is measured in terms of how successfully libraries achieve their missions through their resources. If one then considers the roles of university libraries in the present age as information facilitator, one will realize that university libraries have to be effective in order to justify their existence. Though studies such as Nwokedi, Ogundale and Tukur (2008), Iyiade and Ajani (2008), Ezeala (2009), and Baro (2009) have examined the effectiveness of services rendered in university libraries in Nigeria, Edem et al. (2009) claimed that for any university library to be effective, patrons are not only seeking to keep abreast of new technological advances but are also looking for highly trained and motivated professionals who

are flexible, enthusiastic, have good stress management skills, services oriented and excellent interpersonal skills. The reference service process does not take place in a vacuum. It is necessary to state that users, services needed, service environment, reference librarian, reference sources and workplace opportunities for service delivery are important in reference service.

A major component of reference service delivery is the personal interaction between the user/patron and the library staff. The academic libraries, in rendering these services, should show proper levels of customer care and ensure that the information given to the users is timely and useful. Although virtually all librarians recognize the vital importance of information transfer in reference work, there is, at the same time, a long tradition of concern for interpersonal dimensions of reference work (Rehman, 2011).

In reference service, the following steps of the reference service process are identified.
- Encouraging users to get in touch with the library when they need information (outreach)
- Identifying the actual information needed via a reference interview
- Locating the information that will satisfy the need (reference search)
- Verifying that the customer's requirement has really been addressed.

The reference section pivot to all activities in the library as the entire library activities revolve around it. Kamari (2009) asserted that "Reference is to library service what intelligence is to military". Academic libraries acquire different types of learning resources to meet users' needs; among these are reference sources. Onifade (2006) posits that the reference services rendered in a library should complement the curriculum, research programs, method of teaching and the objectives of the university. One of the important functions of a library is the use of its resources, such as references and information sources, to provide information to users on request. Ifidon (1997), Clark (1997), Aina (2004), Ugwanyi (1998), and Ruteyan and Akporhonor (2007) have variously defined reference services.

University libraries aim to support independent learning by providing resources which students can study at their own pace. Adeogun (2008) persists that self-paced resources enable the customization of learning which enables the student to direct his learning while the teachers and Librarians work in partnership to facilitate and guide the student. Bopp et al. (1995) posit that reference service in academic libraries is designed to facilitate access to information sources. Reference service has been variously defined. The following web definitions are in line with current trends.

Joseph (2005) submitted that in depth reference interviews on graduate and faculty studies throughout the spectrum of potential knowledge disciplines are one kind of reference service offered by academic libraries, while "ready-reference queries" are another. However, the service must meet customer expectations for speed and cost to accommodate unique situations. The value of reference services to the user is related

to this understanding of the users' requirement for speed and price-to-price. According to S. R. Ranganathan in Sharma et al. (1987),"Reference service is the supreme and ultimate function of a library and the hub of all library activities. All other activities such as book selection, acquisition, accessioning, classifying and cataloguing are only the means of this end to make reference service possible and effective.

For a positive reference interview to take place, the Librarian must listen carefully to the user and ask clarifying questions as necessary. Negotiation of the user's query is important in the reference process; thus, interpersonal communication cannot be separated from negotiation, for it is through interaction that the Librarian delimits the user request. Yusuf (2011) posits that relationships between librarians and users requires effective communication. The reference librarian is expected to have good interpersonal skills with which users can be successfully linked to desired information resources. Interpersonal communication in reference services which would facilitate the understanding of users' questions and enhance the articulation of answers to questions. One of the problems associated with the provision of an effective reference service is that some library users do not properly form reference queries. In such scenario, the user's reference question will not reveal the desired information need (Fields, 2006). Poorly formed reference questions usually lead to user frustration, with the user being dissatisfied with the outcome of the reference interview. Many techniques deployed in the reference interview are, therefore geared towards eliciting information from the user until a sense of the true information need is achieved. A great deal of care must therefore, be taken when assisting users to develop their reference queries as anything from anxiety from an approaching deadline to a lack of confidence in language can get in the way of a successful reference interview (Murphy, 2005).

Interpersonal communication skills are abilities to accept others without prejudice. While this does not always portray a liking to the person, it does entail overcoming ones' to achieve a task (Smith, 2009). Interpersonal Competent interpersonal communication skills include self-disclosure, one's own feelings and thoughts, and descriptiveness and support. (Robinson, 2006). Effective interpersonal communication skills are essential to social interaction and to the building and maintenance of all relationships while poor interpersonal skills can cause damages, affect satisfaction and productivity

(Unange passé, 2008). Pellack (2003) conducted a study on interpersonal communication and concluded that reference librarians are to interact with patrons using a variety of skills using both verbal and non-verbal cues. It should be noted that the library as an institution, regardless of its nature, is an agency of communication. Information handling, which encompasses the organization, storage and retrieval of documents with the aim of communicating the same to its clientele, is a fundamental function of the library (Yapa, 1990).

Melvil et al. (1992) pointed out that the problems faced by librarians in a face-to –face interaction are fourfold: attitudinal, procedural, intellectual and interpersonal. These problems come to light when the librarian feels superior to the library user, fails to listen to the users' questions or fail to develop the skills needed for a successful reference transaction. Developing interpersonal communication skills is vitally important in today's workplace. Effective communication is imperative in the reference service process. The reference librarian and the patron must interact during the reference encounter for a meaningful result to be produced (Communication-skills-4confidence.com, 2008. It is, therefore, imperative to note that the communication skills of reference librarians cannot be negated in reference service. If well-tailored towards the needs of users, there is a high probability to obtain the best possible results. Pellack (2003) admitted that most of the literature on reference effectiveness has been highly critical of the accuracy of answers supplied to inquiries made at the reference desk, either in person or by telephone while noting that little has been written about methods required for making positive changes to raise the accuracy rate.

6. Methodology

This study adopts the survey research design. The total enumeration technique was used to cover a population of One Hundred and sixty-five (165) professional and paraprofessional librarians working within the study area. The sample was selected through purposive simple random sampling. From the total of thirty-two university libraries covering Federal, State and Private Universities, Eleven University Libraries were selected. Using this sampling technique, questionnaires were administered to reference staff, and Hundred Thirty-Three (133) were returned, leaving the response rate at 80.6% of the total sample.

Table 1
List of university libraries selected for the study

S.No.	University Libraries	Librarians/Paraprofessionals
1	Osun State University, Osogbo	7
2	Ladoke Akintola University, Ogbomoso	11
3	Lagos State University, Ojo	15
4	Olabisi Onabanjo University, Ago Iwoye	15
5	Ekiti State University, Ado Ekiti	8
6	University of Ibadan, Ibadan	29
7	University of Lagos, Akoka	16
8	Adekunle Ajasin University, Akungba Akoko	7
9	University of Agriculture Abeokuta	21
10	Federal University of Technology, Akure	13
11	Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile Ife	23
	Total	**165**

Source: Nigeria National Universities Commission, http://www.nuc.edu.ng/pages/universities.asp

7. Data Analysis and Discussion of Findings

Table 2
Demographic distribution analysis

Years of service	Frequency	Percentage
1-5	56	42.1
6-10	27	20.3
11-15	29	21.8
16-20	11	8.3
21-25	9	6.8
26-30	1	.8
Total	133	100

Table 2 shows the number of years respondents have put into service. The Table revealed the following. 56(42.1%) respondents 1-5 years, 27(20.3%) 6-10 years, 29(21.8%) 11-15 years, 11(8.3%) 16-20 years, 9(6.8%) 21-25 years and 1(0.8%) 26-30 years.

Table 3
Educational qualification of respondents

Educational Qualification	Frequency	Percentage
BLIS	33	24.8
MLIS	98	73.7
Ph.D.	2	1.5
Total	133	100

Table 3 shows the academic level of the respondents who took part in the study. Revealed from the Table that 33(24.8%) of the respondents were BLIS holders, 98(73.7%) had MLIS degrees, and 2(1.5%) were PhD holders. The majority of the respondents were master's degree holders.

Table 4
Distribution of the respondents by subject background

Subjects	Frequency	Percentage
Arts	19	14.3
Sciences	26	19.5
Librarianship	63	47.4
Law	1	.0
Social sciences	15	11.3
Others	9	6.8
Total	133	100

Table 4 shows the subject background of the respondents. The table revealed that there are 19(14.3%) respondents with subject background in the arts, 26(19.5%) were in the sciences, 63(47.4%) Librarianship, 1(0.8%) had law background, 15(11.3%) were social sciences, while 9(6.8%) indicated other subjects.

Question 1: What are the problems hiding effective reference services?

The result in Table 5 shows the responses of librarians to problems hindering effective reference services in university libraries. Use of non-verbal cues indiscriminately, users not adequately acknowledged during reference interaction, not listening (thinking ahead about search strategy), interrupting users at inappropriate times, making assumptions/ premature diagnosis, not asking follow-up questions, Librarian is not familiar with the subject of the query, the query takes more time than necessary, amount of information needed by users is not specified, the answer to the query is not recorded in the literature, Librarian is hostile.

Question 2: What is the extent to which librarians are aware

Table 5
Problems hindering effective reference service

S.No.	Items	SD	D	A	SA	Mean	S.D.
1	Indiscriminate use of nonverbal cues	14 10.5%	24 18.0%	66 49.6%	29 21.8%	2.83	.89
2	Users are not adequately acknowledged during reference interaction	14 10.5%	42 31.6%	67 50.4%	10 7.5%	2.55	.78
3	Not listening (thinking ahead about search strategy)	9 6.8%	31 23.3%	69 51.9%	24 18.0%	2.81	.81
4	Interrupting users at inappropriate times	12 9.0%	44 33.1%	56 42.1%	21 15.8%	2.56	.85
5	Making assumptions/premature diagnosis	11 8.3%	36 27.1%	60 45.1%	26 19.5%	2.76	.86
6	Not asking follow-up questions	10 7.5%	39 29.3%	60 45.1%	24 18.0%	2.74	.84
7	The Librarian is not familiar with the subject of the query	38 28.6%	43 32.3%	39 29.3%	13 9.8%	2.20	.97
8	The query takes more time than necessary	22 16.5%	47 35.3%	57 42.9%	7 5.3%	2.37	.82
9	The amount of information needed by users is not specified	15 11.3%	42 31.6%	60 45.1%	16 12.0%	2.58	.85
10	The answer to the query is not recorded in the literature	27 20.3%	42 31.6%	50 37.6%	14 10.5%	2.38	.93
11	The Librarian is hostile	41 30.8%	49 36.8%	25 18.8%	18 13.5%	2.15	1.01

Table 6
Awareness of non-verbal behaviour in interpersonal communication

S.No.	Items	No Extent	Little Extent	Moderate Extent	Very Great Extent	Mean	S.D.
1	I am aware of the significance of nonverbal behavior in disrupting communication.	9 6.8%	11 8.3%	48 36.1%	65 48.9%	3.27	.88
2	I understand the distinction between non-verbal and verbal behaviours in interaction	3 2.3%	5 3.8%	63 47.4%	49 46.6%	3.38	.67
3	I am sensitive to the use of non-verbal cues in interaction	12 9.0%	9 6.8%	63 47.4%	49 36.8%	3.12	.89
4	I communicated more and listened more carefully	9 6.8%	4 3.0%	46 34.6%	74 55.6%	3.39	.84
5	Non-verbal behaviour is an essential component of communication	10 7.5 %	13 9.8%	55 41.4%	55 41.4%	3.17	.89
6	Awareness of non-verbal behaviour allows me to become a better communicator	11 8.3%	17 12.8%	53 39.8%	52 39.1%	3.10	.92
7	Non-verbal cues regulate the relationship between the interactants	8 6.0%	13 9.8%	64 48.1%	48 36.1%	3.14	.83
8	Non-verbal behaviour enhances verbal communication	7 5.3%	14 10.4%	61 45.9%	51 38.3%	3.17	.82
9	I can learn specific interpersonal communication skills that will help me to negotiate effectively with user	6 4.5%	8 6.0%	52 39.1%	67 50.4%	3.35	.79

of non-verbal behaviour in interpersonal communication?

Table 6 shows the librarians' awareness of non-verbal behaviour in reference interaction. The Table revealed different levels of responses to the nine questions asked to test the awareness of non-verbal behaviour in reference. I communicated more and listened more carefully (Mean = 3.39), ranked highest.

Question 3: what are the verbal and nonverbal behaviours used by librarians in reference interaction?

The use of verbal behaviour in reference interaction is summarized in Table 7 above on the statement "librarian has strong expression." The following responses were indicated: 71(53.4%) Strongly Agreed, 49(36.8%) Agreed, 7(5.3%) Disagreed and 6(4.5%) Strongly Agreed. Among others, the analysis also confirms that Librarians communicate in a receptive, cordial, encouraging manner, with 59(44.4%) indicating Strongly agreed, 57(42.9%) Agreed, 9(6.8%) Disagreed, and 8(6.0%) Strongly Disagreed. The Mean of Librarian has strong expression ranked highest (Mean 3.39), and asking follow-up questions (Mean 3.04) ranked lowest.

The use of non-verbal behaviour in reference interaction is summarized in Table 8 above. On the statement "Librarian use hands and arms to gesticulate while interacting with user", the following responses were indicated: 12(9.0%) Strongly Agreed, 21(15.8%) Agreed, 60(45.1%) Disagreed, and 40(30.1%) Strongly Agreed. Librarians appeared to strongly disagree, with 72 respondents indicating 54.1% Strongly disagree. The Mean

of the responses on the use of non-verbal behaviour is indicated as follows: I use my hands and arms to gesticulate while interacting with users (Mean 2.96) ranked highest. I smile when I talk to people (Mean 2.92), and I always appear overdressed, ranked lowest with a Mean of 1.57.

Question 4: To what extent does the use of non-verbal behaviour influence librarians' interaction with library users?

Table 9 above shows the extent to which the use of non-verbal behaviour influences reference interaction. The Table revealed that the use of eye contact influenced interaction with respondents indicated the following. 35(26.3%) Extremely, 65(48.9%) Very, 24(18.0%) Somewhat and 9(6.8%) Never. Body movement was admitted as influencing interaction with 29(21.8%) indicated Extremely, 58(43.6%) Very while 34(25.6%) indicated Somewhat and 12(9.0%) Never. Touch in interaction was noted to affect interaction somewhat, with 41 respondents representing 30.8%, indicating that it somewhat influences interaction. The Mean of eye contact ranked highest (2.95), while space between Librarian and user ranked lowest (2.38). This confirmed the position of Casell (2006) that users react to the manner in which a reference interview is conducted, paying special attention to both verbal and non-verbal cues. The study also found that 67(50.4%) Agreed that when users are not adequately acknowledged in the reference service, it can pose a threat to the success of the reference service. Weiss (1976) asserted that librarians who are tuned in to the non-verbal messages of both the user, who is perhaps hesitant, of

Table 7
Use of verbal behaviour in reference interaction

S.No.	Use of verbal skills	S.D.	D	A	SA	MEAN	S.D.
1	Has strong self-expression	6	7	49	71	3.39	.79
		4.5%	5.3%	36.8%	53.4%		
2	Speaks the language fluently and correctly	6	7	64	56	3.28	.76
		4.5%	5.3%	48.1%	42.1%		
3	Convey ideas clearly and considerably	10	9	59	55	3.20	.87
		7.5%	6.8%	44.4%	41.4%		
4	Have clear self-expression	5	11	59	58	3.28	.77
		3.8%	8.3%	44.4%	43.6%		
5	Ask following-up questions	12	18	56	47	3.04	.92
		9.0%	13.5%	42.1%	35.35		
6	Communicate in a respective, cordial and encouraging manner	8	9	57	59	3.26	.83
		6.05	6.8%	42.9%	44.4%		

Table 8
Use of non-verbal behaviour in reference

S.No.	Use of non-verbal behaviour	S.D.	D	A	SA	MEAN	S.D.
1	I use my hands and arms to gesticulate while interacting with the user	12	21	60	40	2.96	.91
		9.0%	15.8%	45.1%	30.1%		
2	I converse to the user while touching their arm or shoulder.	29	63	34	7	2.14	.82
		21.8%	47.4%	25.6%	5.3%		
3	I look over or away from them while talking	27	77	21	8	2.08	.77
		20.3%	57.9%	15.8%	6.0%		
4	I have a relaxed body position when I talk to people	23	33	56	21	2.56	.96
		17.3%	24.8%	42.1%	15.8%		
5	I avoid eye contact	45	70	14	4	1.83	.73
		33.8%	52.6%	10.5%	3.0%		
6	I have a monotone or boring voice when I speak to people.	66	51	14	2	1.64	.73
		49.6%	38.3%	10.5%	1.5%		
7	I move closer to people when I talk to them	21	24	75	13	2.60	.87
		15.8%	18.0%	56.4%	9.8%		
8	I smile when I talk to people	13	16	72	32	2.92	.87
		9.8%	12.0%	54.1%	24.1%		
9	Display bad speech mannerisms	61	61	8	3	1.65	.70
		45.9%	45.9%	6.0%	2.3%		
10	Always appear overdressed	72	50	7	4	1.57	.73
		54.1%	37.6%	5.3%	3.0%		

Table 9
Influence of non-verbal behaviour on reference interaction

S.No.		Not at all	Somewhat	Very	Extremely	MEAN	S.D.
1	Body movements	12	34	58	29	2.78	.89
		9.0%	25.6%	43.6%	21.8%		
2	Gesture – use of hands, beckons	15	34	59	25	2.71	.90
		11.3%	25.6%	44.4%	18.8%		
3	Facial expression	7	33	59	34	2.90	.84
		5.3%	24.8%	44.4%	25.6%		
4	Eye contact	9	24	65	35	2.95	.85
		6.8%	18.0%	48.9%	26.3%		
5	Touch	31	41	36	25	2.41	1.05
		23.3%	30.8%	27.1%	18.8%		
6	Space	30	42	41	20	2.38	1.00
		26.2%	31.6%	30.8%	15.0%		

themselves, who may present an aloof appearance, can offer more appropriate help.

8. Summary

The study is about exploring interpersonal communication and reference services in academic libraries. The study found, among other things, that the problems hindering reference service bother communication. A substantial number of respondents indicated that the use of non-verbal cues indiscriminately is one of the problems of reference service. The problem was ranked highest by the respondents, among others. The study also found that librarians in the states and federal universities in southwest Nigeria are aware of the importance of nonverbal behaviour in communication. These confirm the position of Komolafe (2004) on Librarians' use of non-verbal behaviour in reference.

9. Conclusion

Although research work on interpersonal communication is not new, more is yet to be done in Library and information studies. The knowledge level variable that this study added has made the research examine the tough task of actually providing effective reference service. Librarians, through this study, are aware that without communication, reference service is not possible. The aspects of interpersonal communication skills which this study focused on are the nerve centre that determines the success or otherwise of librarian and patron interaction. Effective use of verbal and non-verbal and nonverbal skills in interaction has been noted to drive the wheel of effective service. The findings of the study confirmed the earlier observation of Adekunle (2004) that communication is coterminous with effective reference service. Librarians in university libraries need to adopt effective communication measures that would sustain harmonious relationships with users in the interest of assisting them in locating information sources to meet their needs. Without operating at an adequate level of knowledge and experience, most of the needs expressed by users would not be met.

From the results of the data analysis, the following conclusions are drawn:

1. Indiscriminate use of verbal and nonverbal cues in interaction hinders effective reference service
2. Understanding the distinction between verbal and non-verbal behaviour can enhance effective communication with user
3. Nonverbal communication is an essential component of communication in reference service
4. Librarians admitted that communication is vital in reference to the interview

Based on the findings of this research work, the following are recommended.

1. Reference librarians should be chiefly responsible for giving assistance to library users. They must be approachable to encourage users to seek assistance.
2. Librarians should be mindful of how they use verbal and nonverbal behaviour in communicating with users. Librarians are to adopt adequate care methods for users and make sure that the environment is friendly for interaction.
3. The management of university libraries should endeavour to expose librarians to periodic training on communication through seminars and presentations organized in-house. Staff can also be sponsored to attend important seminars and workshops and every other programme that will enhance the development of communication skills.

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