



**THE IMPORTANCE OF EFFECTIVE INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION IN  
REFERENCE INTERVIEW IN ACADEMIC LIBRARIES IN NIGERIA**

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**ABSTRACT**

*This study sets out to determine librarians' possession of interpersonal communication skills, and the attendant challenges, as well as establish ways of improving interpersonal communication skills among librarians in academic libraries in Nigeria. It adopts the descriptive method, and covers all the 48 Librarians in three university libraries (Delta State University Library, Ambose Ali University Library and Federal University of Petroleum Resources Library). A questionnaire was used to elicit data for the study, with the analysis revealing that the Librarians possessed interpersonal communication skills. Findings further showed inadequate interpersonal communication skills, the use of English language as lingua franca, culture relate issues, among others, as challenges hindering effective interpersonal communication in reference interview in among the Librarians. It also revealed the inclusion of interpersonal communication skills and public speaking courses respectively into library and information science programmes in library schools, developing of asking question skills, and using of the best channels of communication as ways of improving interpersonal communication skills among the Librarians. Arising from the findings some recommendations were made.*

**Keywords:** *Interpersonal communication, Communication skills, Reference services, Reference librarian*



## **Introduction**

In our homes and places of work, we communicate with one another, taking the forms of directing in the offices and expressing of our feelings about a prevailing situation among our friends and family members in our homes. On the whole, communication is the exchange of information, ideals, knowledge, etc between individuals, friends, families, nations, regions and at the international level (Madzingira, 2001). Ojomo (2004) defined communication as the process of sharing ideas, feelings, thoughts and messages with others. Communication is important in all phases of management, by every individual within the system and is particularly important in directing and leading any system (Knoontz & O'Donnell, 2005). Communication is the chief means through which an organization or its members influence or interact with one another. The success of any organization depends not only on having qualified personnel but also on effective interpersonal communication among its members.

Interpersonal communication is of importance to library particularly in reference interaction between a reference librarian and a library user. Academic library is an educational institution where effective communication is prerequisite to the achievement of its educational goals and as well the effective provision of library services. Reference section of the library is a well-established section that is designated to provide reference services. The provision of reference services in academic libraries is very important, particularly with the present challenges of information explosion in higher institutions of learning. A situation, where users of information find it very difficult to locate and use information of their own interest. In academic libraries, every day reference librarians interact with library patrons to understand their information needs in order to provide the needed information. The ability to communicate effectively in interpersonal levels goes a long way to meet the information needs of the library patrons. Interpersonal communication involves sending and receiving messages between two or more people (Yusuf, 2011). DeFleur and Dennis (2002) conceptualized interpersonal communication as a process of using language and non-verbal cues to send and receive messages between individuals that are intended to arouse particular kinds of meaning.

Interpersonal communication can be seen as the process of interacting simultaneously with one another and mutually influencing each other, usually for the purpose of managing relationships (Akor & Udensi, 2013). The accuracy in meeting the information needs of researchers and other categories of users of information depends on effective interpersonal communication between the two parties involved. If the communication process is faulty then the result will also be faulty. Obviously, such situation can lead to lack of confidence in the reference librarian and the entire library services. Effective communication is about more than just exchanging information. It's about understanding the emotion and intentions behind the information. As well as being able to clearly convey a message, you need to also listen in a way that gains the full meaning of what's being said and makes the other person feel heard and understood. More than just the words you use, effective communication combines a set of 4 skills: Engaged listening, nonverbal communication, managing stress in the moment and asserting yourself in a respectful way (Robinson, Segal & Smith, 2018). They further stated that, when communicating with others, we often focus on what we should say. However, effective communication is less about talking and more about listening. Listening well means not just understanding the words or the information being communicated, but also understanding the emotions the speaker is trying to communicate.

## **Review of Related Literature**

### *Possession of Interpersonal Communication Skills*

Interpersonal communication skills are critical for the learning of a job, receiving a promotion and performing effectively in the workplace. Skills in interpersonal communication are some of the factors that distinguish a reference librarian from any other librarian. Interpersonal communication in reference service facilitates understanding of users' queries and enhances articulation of answers to users' inquiries (Rothwell, 2004). Walsh (2002) outlined some communication skills to include: starting the interaction,



asking questions, active listening, empathy and handling emotion. Every conversation has a beginning and, the first impression is so important in human communication. Asking question is very important in communication and such questions are usually open or close. Question help to clarify issues and make communication to be very effective. Both the sender and receiver will have a clear understanding as they involved in question and answer. According to Payne (2001), asking question seems to be the easiest thing in the world. Asking question, just as any other interpersonal task, requires skills. These skills include assertiveness, tact, courtesy, specificity, relevance and sincerity. As asking question requires skills, so also active listening requires skills that enable the listener to have understanding of the interaction.

Active listening involves attentive skills in which, by both verbal and nonverbal cues, you indicate to the speaker that you are receptive and paying attention to what she or he is saying. Active listening also involves conscious and responsive participation in the communication transaction. Such active and complete participation encompasses active mindfulness, selective attention, sensorial involvement, comprehension and retention. However, several factors can intervene to prevent effective active listening. The most common obstacles to active listening are physical conditions, cultural differences, personal problems, bias, connotative meanings and anxiety (Scott & Brydon, 2005). Other communication skills include guilt, anxiety and fear which are very common in humans' life (Scott & Brydon, 2005).

Akor and Udensi (2013) examines the functions of interpersonal communication in rendering reference services in two university libraries (Federal University of Technology Minna, and Ibrahim Badamasi Babangida University, Lapai) in Nigeria. The aim of the study was to find out the extent to which interpersonal communication affect provision of reference services in the two university libraries. The survey research method was employed. Questionnaires are the main instrument for data collection. Face to face interview was used to verify the information given in the questionnaire. Frequency, tables, percentages is the main statistical tools used for data analysis.

Results of the analysis showed that services enhanced facilities in the reference section of the libraries were effectively communicated to users, teaching people how to find information and getting and getting users information needs satisfied thereby keeping the user abreast of the current information materials available in the libraries. It was also discovered that the communication skills of the reference librarians were inadequate due to language barrier, stereotype, semantic barrier, and the reference library users possess inadequate communication skill. Some recommendations were proffered to enhance the communication skills of reference librarians and their patrons for better service delivery.

#### *Barriers of Interpersonal Communication in Reference Interview/Interaction*

There are several factors that may affect communication process in reference services in the library. Anyim (2018) investigates the application of interpersonal communication in reference and information services in university libraries. Four research questions in line with the objective of the study were formulated to guide the study. The study adopted descriptive survey research design with the total population of 1,116. The sample size of the study was 330 students while 16 reference staff were studied without sampling due to their manageable size. Data was collected using questionnaire. A total number of 346 copies of questionnaire distributed were correctly filled and returned by the respondents who comprised entire reference staff, postgraduates and undergraduates' library users of university of Nigeria, Nsukka; Michael Okpara University of Agriculture, Umudike and Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka. Data were analyzed using mean scores.

Result shows that face to face communication, simplified language, customer relations were among the major interpersonal communication patterns in reference services in university libraries. It was found that interpersonal communication to a great extent contributes to effective reference and information services in university libraries by making exchange of message easier, and enhancing understanding of users information needs. Major hindrances to effective application of interpersonal



communication in reference and information services include inability to frame queries correctly, lack of adequate listening skills, stereotype and interiority complex of librarians, etc. Strategies for enhancing interpersonal communication include carefully listening, right framing of reference queries and many more. The study recommended effective user education program while reference staff should be well educated to be able to communicate effectively with users of different background.

Similarly, Li (2006) found that differences in communication styles can often create barriers to have the messages understood correctly. As a result, the information conveyed does not necessarily reflect the intention and may even cause misunderstandings. Owwoye and Dahunsi (2014) examine the role effective service delivery in library and information centres in Ekiti State University Library. Survey research design was adopted. Out of the 70 copies of questionnaire administered, only 64 copies were returned, with about 91.4% response rate. Frequency distribution, percentage tables, mean and standard deviation were used to analyze the data. The findings show that information flows from the University Librarian down the hierarchy and that the ideas of senior staff are taken into consideration in taking decisions, written form of communication is majorly being used for official matters. It also found that communication is a veritable tool in service delivery in the library and that poor educational background among others is barrier to effective communication; proper communication promote job effectiveness and services delivery in the library.

Robinson, Segal and Smith (2018) reported some common barriers to effective communication to include: stress and out-of-control emotion, lack of focus, inconsistent body language and negative body language. They further stated that, when you are stressed or emotionally overwhelmed, you are more likely to misread other people, send confusing or off-putting nonverbal signals, and lapse into unhealthy knee-jerk patterns of behavior. You cannot communicate effectively when you're multitasking. To communicate effectively, you need to avoid distractions and stay focused. You do not have to agree, or even like what is being said, but to communicate effectively and not make the other person defensive, it is important to avoid sending negative signals.

#### *Ways of Improving Interpersonal Communication Skills among Librarians*

The ability of a librarian to improve on his/her interpersonal communication skills may determine the relevance of such librarian in reference section of a library. According to Allison (2014) reported that one of the most effective ways to improve your interpersonal skills is to imagine how you would like to be treated by others. Interpersonal skills are not just important at the workplace, in school, and in life. They are critical regardless of what level you are on in the social or workplace hierarchy. Jacobs (2016) study the need for consistent improvement of interpersonal communication in services delivery in academic libraries in Namibia. The study adopted descriptive design, with 73 librarians drawn from six university libraries were sampled. Questionnaire was used to elicited data from the librarians. The data collected were analyzed using arithmetic mean and t-test statistic. The study reveals good educational background, indulging in public speaking art, reading wide, getting feedback from patrons as some of the strategies adopted in improving interpersonal communication skills in the libraries.

The study also revealed no significant relationship between gender and ability of improving interpersonal communication skills. It also reported significant relationship gender and effective communication skills among the librarians. Based on the finding recommendations were made to improve interpersonal communication among the librarians studied. Brand and Bar-Gil (2014) investigated on how to improve interpersonal communication through music. This research described an intervention where parallel activities in music and social interaction were used to improve interpersonal communication among children aged 4-6. All children in the study, in both the experimental and the control group received the same number of weekly hours of music instruction. The intervention included specialist music teaching, training of preschool teachers in music and in conflict resolution, creating an awareness of the connections between music and communication, and provision of a rich musical environment



within which children could participate in music activities throughout the day, independently of adult involvement.

Both the experimental and the control groups showed increased participation in musical activities and improved interpersonal communication in the post-intervention tests, but the gains were significantly higher for children in the experimental group. This research indicates that music has the potential for improving interpersonal communication, using the intervention programme described here. The study describes a framework for making connections between music and communication, and contributes to a field where there is little previous research. Vertino (2014) reported that developing communication skills starts in the classroom, where students can study techniques in more depth. Coursework covering professional interpersonal communication, including both verbal and written, is ideal ways of improving communication skills.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Reference librarians are expected to have interpersonal communication skills and knowledge that are fundamental to effective reference services and reference interview. They have a major role to play in facilitating high levels of communication and understanding of patrons information needs. However, cursory observation revealed that most librarians posted to reference section of the library usually find it hard to conduct effective and efficient reference interview due to inadequate interpersonal communication skills. Thus, this study investigated the interpersonal communication in reference interview.

### **Research Questions**

The following research questions were designed to guide the study:

1. What interpersonal communication skills do the librarians possess?
2. What are the barriers of interpersonal communication in reference interview/interaction?
3. What are the ways of improving interpersonal communication skills among librarians?

### **Hypotheses**

HO<sub>1</sub>. There is no significant difference between gender and possessing of interpersonal communication skills.

HO<sub>2</sub>. There is no significant difference between gender and challenges of interpersonal communication in effective reference interview/interaction.

### **Methodology**

The study employed the descriptive survey method to investigate interpersonal communication in reference interview/interaction in academic libraries. The population consisted of all the 48 librarians in Delta State University Library, Ambrose Ali University library and Federal University of Petroleum library. A total of 48 librarians were studied. The researcher decided to investigate all the librarians in the institutions because by the virtue of posting all the librarians have served in the reference sections in the various libraries under investigation. A questionnaire entitled “Interpersonal communication in reference interview questionnaire (ICRIQ)” was used to elicited data from the respondents.

Copies of the questionnaire were administered to the respondents in their offices through assigned research assistants in the institution libraries. The data collected from the 48 librarians were analyzed using arithmetic mean for the research questions, while the hypotheses were tested with chi-square at 0.05 levels of significance. The item with mean score 2.50 and above was regarded as agreed while, items with mean score less than 2.50 was interpreted as disagreed.

### **Data Analysis and Presentation of Results**

**Table I: Interpersonal Communication Skills of the Respondents**

Statement	Mean	Remark
Possession of active listening skills	3.60	Agreed
possession of asking questions skills	3.46	Agreed
possession of empathy and emotion handling skills	2.92	Agreed
possession of interpretation of message skills	3.53	Agreed
Possession of public speaking skills	3.43	Agreed
Grand total	17.26	
	3.45	Agreed

Cut off= 2.50

The research question sought to establish whether the librarians actually possess interpersonal communication skills. The data presented in table 1 indicates that all the respective items mean score of 3.60, 3.46, 2.92, 3.53 and 3.43 were greater than the cut-off mean score of 2.50. On the whole the total mean score of 3.45 was greater than the cut-off mean score of 2.50. This simply implies that the librarians possessed interpersonal communication skills such as active listening, asking questions skills, empathy and emotion handling skills, interpretation of message skill and the art of speaking in public.

**Table 2: Challenges of Effective Interpersonal Communication among the Respondents**

Statement	Mean	Remark
Lack of confidence	3.42	Agreed
Lack of politeness	3.42	Agreed
Culture related issues	3.39	Agreed
The use of english language as lingua franca in Nigeria	3.39	Agreed
Fear of embarrassment from patron	2.85	Agreed
Inability to remember patrons' message	3.13	Agreed
Inability of librarian to understand patron personality	2.65	Agreed
Grand total	22.25	
	3.17	Agreed

Cut-off = 2.50

The research question sought to establish the challenges of interpersonal communication in reference interview. The data presented in table 2 indicates that all the respective items mean score of 3.42, 3.42, 3.39, 3.39, 2.82, 3.13 and 2.65 were greater than the cut-off mean score of 2.50. On the whole the total mean score of 3.18 was greater than the cut-off mean score of 2.50. This simply implies that lack of interpersonal communication skills, lack of politeness, the use of english Language as lingua franca in Nigeria, culture related issues, fear of embarrassment from patrons, inability to remember patrons' messages and inability of librarian to understand patrons' personality style respectively are some of the challenges of interpersonal communication between librarians and patron.

**Ways of Improving Interpersonal Communication among the Respondents**

Statement	Mean	Remark
Introduction of interpersonal communication and public speaking courses in library and information science school	3.35	Agreed
Training of developing asking of question skills	3.28	Agreed
Using of appropriate channels of communication	3.57	Agreed
Developing of listening skill	3.50	Agreed
Conducting in-house meeting and training to gather feedback	2.85	Agreed
Follow-up of users for their reactions and perceptions of reference interview	3.23	Agreed
Grand total	19.78	
	3.29	Agreed

Cut-off= 2.50

Finally, the study sought to improve interpersonal communication in reference interview/ interaction. The data presented in table 3 indicates that all the respective items mean score of 3.35, 3.28, 3.57, 3.50, 2.85, and 3.23 were greater than the cut-off mean score of 2.50. On the whole the total mean score of 3.29 was greater than the cut-off mean score of 2.50. This simply implies that introduction of interpersonal communication skills and public speaking courses in library and information science institutions, training of developing asking question skills and using of the appropriate channels of communication, developing listening skills, conducting of in-house meeting and training to gather feedback from patron regarding the success of the reference interaction and follow-up of users for their reactions and perceptions of the reference interview are the ways of improving interpersonal communication skills among librarians.

**Testing of Hypotheses**

**Table 1: Respondents’ Gender and Possession of Interpersonal Communication Skills**

Gender	Strongly agreed	Agreed	Disagreed	Strongly disagreed	Total
Male	172 (163)	69 (79)	10(9.9)	5(3.9)	256
Female	156(164.9)	90(79.9)	10(10)	3(4)	259
Total	328	159	20	8	516

Note:  $\chi^2$  calculated = 4.078;  $\chi^2$  critical = 7.83; df= 3, level of significance = 0.05

This hypothesis was tested statistically with t-test of significance. From the result presented above, the null hypothesis of no significant difference is accepted. This is because the t - calculated value of (4.078) is less than the t-critical value of (7.83). This implies that there is no significant difference between gender and possession of interpersonal communication skills in the academic libraries under investigation.

**Table 2: Gender and Challenges of Interpersonal Communication in Reference Interview**

Gender	Strongly agreed	Agreed	Disagreed	Strongly disagreed	Total
Male	96(97.5)	75(73.1)	6(6)	2(2.8)	179
Female	128(126.4)	93(94.8)	8(7.9)	3(2.8)	232
Total	224	168	14	5	411

Note:  $x^2$  calculated = 0.146;  $x^2$  critical = 7.83;  $df= 3$ , level of significance = 0.05

This hypothesis was tested statistically with t-test of significance. From the result presented above, the null hypothesis of no significant difference is accepted. This is because the t - calculated value of (0.146) is less than the t – critical value of (7.83). This implies that there is no significant difference between gender and challenges of interpersonal communication in reference interview in the academic libraries under investigation.

### Discussion of the Findings

The investigation aimed to ascertain whether librarians in the institution under investigation possess interpersonal communication skills. From the analysis of data collected, the study established that the librarians possessed interpersonal communication skills. Interpersonal communication skills are essential tools used by librarians to understand users query and meet their information needs. This finding is in agreement with that of Rothwell (2004) which opined that communication skills are critical for the learning of a job, receiving a promotion and performing effectively in the workplace. Skill in interpersonal communication is one of the factors that distinguish a reference librarian from other librarians.

On the challenges of interpersonal communication in reference interview, it was discovered that lack of interpersonal communication skills, the use of English Language as lingua franca in Nigeria, culture related issues, etc. are challenges prohibiting effective interpersonal communication. In follow-up questions the study further established that due to the lack of interpersonal communication skills, culture related issues and fear of embarrassment made students to avoid using the reference librarians. Majority of the students felt inferiority complex which eventually leads to the abandoning of the reference sections of the libraries.

Finally, on the ways of improving interpersonal communication in reference interview, it was established that the introduction of interpersonal communication skills and public speaking courses respectively into library and information science programmes in library schools, developing of asking question skills, using of the best channels of communication, etc. are some of the ways of improving interpersonal communication skills among librarians.

### Conclusion

Communication is a vital tool in reference and information services delivery. Arising from the findings conclusion was drawn that a majority of the librarians possessed interpersonal communication skills that enhance their reference services/interview. In spite of the skills, several challenges is still impeding interpersonal communication between librarians and their clients such as lack of interpersonal communication skills, the use of English Language as lingua franca in Nigeria, culture related issues, etc. It was discovered that the inclusion of interpersonal communication skills and public speaking courses respectively into library and information science curriculum in library schools, developing of asking question skills, using of the best channels of communication, etc. are ways of improving interpersonal communication skills among librarians. Effective and constructive reference interaction build cordial relationship between reference librarians and clients, as well facilitate understanding and provision of





precise answers to their queries but this can only be achieved by the librarians' possession of interpersonal communication skills.

### Recommendations

Arising from the findings of this study, the following recommendations are made:

- i. Library schools reference courses should be updated to include instruction related to interpersonal communication skills and the art of public speaking.
- ii. Training programmes and workshops should be organized on quarterly bases for all categories of librarians regardless of the sections they are serving to enable them develop asking question, active listening skills and other relevant skills of interpersonal communication.
- iii. Librarians should use follow-up method to regularly elicit feedback from patrons that will help them to build their interpersonal communication skills.
- iv. Librarians should ensure that they use the best communication channel that suits their environment to facilitate understanding, and as well provide timely and accurate information to users.

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