

Benefits of Communication Skills to female Muslim students at Tamale College of Education

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Abstract- *This study investigated the benefits that are accrued to female Muslims students of Tamale College of Education when they become proficient in communication skills. The study adopted qualitative approach, employed purposive and twenty – six female Muslim students were interviewed. As opposed to some traditional views that the best female Muslim students could do is bear children, cook and care for children and the aged. This investigative piece showed that when female Muslim students gain admissions into Tamale College of Education and study Communication skills, the following benefits accrue to them. One, female Muslims develop a lot of Communicative Competencies. The study also showed that female Muslims develop enhanced confidence. The study also showed that female Muslims have high expectation for job opportunities. The study again found that female Muslim students become liberated as a benefit of communication skills. The study showed that female Muslim students become more socialised and lastly, the study showed that female Muslims have their prospects in marriage enhanced.*

Keywords- *Communicative Competence; Enhanced Confidence; Expectation of Job Opportunities; Enhanced Marriage Prospects; Socialization and Liberation*

1. INTRODUCTION

The advocacy on the empowerment of women gained prominence since the "UN Declaration of the Decade of Women" in 1975. This led to increased attention and action on women's concerns, whether in the form of consciousness-raising or skills acquisition, (UNESCO Institute for Education, 1995). Dr. Kwagyire Aggrey, a Ghanaian educationist is reported to have said "when you educate a man, you educate an individual, but when you educate a woman, you educate a nation." This explains that educating a female has a trickle - down effect; it reduces both child and maternal mortality and improves the financial standing of women. Brookfield (2013, p. 6) argues; "The education of girls and women has been proven beneficial in a number of different aspects of life. An educated woman is more likely to have fewer children, who will most likely be healthier and escape child mortality." Education generally leads to the holistic development of all the domains of individuals. This suggests women have more of their prospects enhanced through education. Habib (2005) also suggests that Muslims perceive education to include any process of shaping the potentialities of the maturing organism, be it formal or informal. Women comprise almost half of the world's population - almost same in number as men. However, they are often discriminated against socially, politically and economically in many ways (Lambert, Elizabeth & Elizabeth, 2012). Some of these women who are often discriminated against, find their way into the tertiary institutions and eventually end up studying communication skills. How the study of communication impacts on the lives of female Muslim students is the concern of this paper.

2. PROBLEM STATEMENT

Literature on female Muslim students at Colleges in Ghana is limited. This study however, seeks to add more literature on the benefits of communication skills to female Muslims students at Tamale Colleges of Education in Ghana. Megan Elizabeth and Elizabeth (2012) postulate that female education progresses at a snail's pace in Ghana due to some factors: financial problems, cultural disposition, early marriages, unfair treatment in the classroom and sexual harassment. Bennett (2002), however, expressed that power relations in the educational institutions is responsible for the slow rate at which women advance in education and dilates further that the admission policies of educational institutions adversely affect women. The study explains that managers/manageress of educational institutions do not consider gender friendly policies in educational establishments within which women acquire knowledge. Atuahene and Owusu-Ansah study (2013) revealed that majority of the number of students who gain access into the colleges of education are males and this summarises why females record low numbers at the colleges of education leading to the gender imbalances in term of access into the college.

3. RESEARCH QUESTION

What are the benefits of Communication Skills to female Muslim students at Tamale College of Education?

4. IDENTITY NEGOTIATION THEORY (STELLA TING-TOOMEY)

Ting-Toomey (2015) conducted a research entitled Identity negotiation theory; Crossing cultural boundaries and

explained that when individuals maintain a sense of self noting the identities of others and allowing them to have their own sense of self - identities, then they are engaging in what is referred to as functional biculturalism and that when individuals are able to shift from their cultures mindfully and easily, then such an individual is considered as a cultural transformer (Littlejohn & Foss, 2011). The last issues Ting-Toomey (1985) notes in this theory are intercultural competence and negotiation skills. Under intercultural competence, she identifies knowledge, mindfulness and skills. Identity knowledge is an understanding of the importance of cultural/ethnic identity and the ability to see what is important to others. Mindfulness means being habitually and consciously aware of the identity of others, and negotiation skills refers to the ability to negotiate identities through careful observation, listening, empathy, nonverbal sensitivity, politeness, reframing and collaboration.

5. JUSTIFICATION FOR THE CHOICE OF THE THEORY

This study adopted the theory of Identity Negotiation to interrogate how female Muslim students mediate and negotiate their identities in the Colleges of Education; how the research participants observe the Muslim culture within the larger secular college culture and how they are able to mediate their identities within the college environment. The issues that confront Muslim women explicitly and implicitly constitute their experiences and how they manoeuvre their ways in the college creates their identities. What normally influences their choices and how culture affects their educational life will effectively be assessed using the above Theory.

6. METHODOLOGY

Qualitative research as an approach to human enquiry seeks to explore and understand individuals' meanings that are ascribed to social phenomenon or human problems (Creswell, 2014). Similarly, Adusah – Karikari, (2009) also discusses qualitative research as an effort to understand situations in their uniqueness as part of a particular context and the interactions that occur there. This study adopts Phenomenology as a design which nests well under qualitative research. Littlejohn and Foss (2011) explain that the primary defined objective of a phenomenological study is to explicate the meaning, structure and essence of the lived experience of a person, or a group of people around a specific phenomenon. Lindlof and Taylor (2002) argue that in phenomenological studies, researcher(s) gain insight into people's motives for action by engaging them through their acts - primarily, acts of speaking." This study has adopted phenomenology as its design because the issues that were interrogated bothered on the lived experiences of female Muslim students on the benefits of communication skills. The study engaged participants through interviews. According to Rapley (2004), interviews, are by their very nature, social

encounters where speakers collaborate in producing retrospective (and prospective) accounts or versions of their past (future) actions, experiences, feelings, and thoughts. Yin (2012) observed that interview is appropriate for data collection in which information is gathered through oral or written questioning. This study typically involves engaging the female Muslim students through question and answer. Creswell (2013) describes unstructured interviews as a form of interview that allows the research participants to express themselves into and also allows the researcher to seek clarification from interviewees to ascertain their feelings and experiences. According to Lindlof and Taylor (2002), persons as sampling unit is most obvious in interview-based studies because the researcher recruits persons who have experiences and possess knowledge important to the research topic.

The sampling technique the study adopted was purposive. Opoku-Amankwa (2009) explained that in Purposive sampling the sample is selected on the basis of specific characteristics and eliminates those who fail to meet such characteristics. Female Muslim students were the subjects in this study because they have lived experiences in college as Muslim students.

The study employed a sample size of twenty-six (26) female Muslim students of Tamale College of Education.

7. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

Communicative Competence

How female Muslim students communicate is the result of development in their communication skills. The study found that gaining entry into the college has contributed significantly to improving the communication competencies of female Muslim women in diverse ways. A significant number of respondents say they have developed the skills to communicate effectively with people within and outside the Islamic religion without any fear of offending sensibilities of others within or outside their group. Majority of respondents also affirmed that their speaking skills have appreciated magnificently. For instance, Ahmad (2013) argues that Formal Education enables Muslim women to communicate effectively in both speaking and writing. This findings therefore, corroborates Ahmad's (2013).

I respect the Islamic faith, the 'aqidah', the 'tawheed'(faith) and the 'fiqhihi' (devotion) and because of that I hardly interact with people who are new. But as time went on, I was able to learn their likes and dislikes, what made them happy and what made them angry. I also learnt what they liked most and what they will never tolerate. This gave me the opportunity to communicate freely with other Muslims and non – Muslims in the college (R1).

Sterts and Burke (2000) assert that identities are socially inclined, formed and sustained through social interactions with others in our environments. Tamale College of Education typifies a social environment where respondents indicate the improvement made in communication and how that has positively affected their communication within and across the Islamic religion. The respondents assert that it is part of the 'Sunnah' (practice) of the prophet of Islam (Peace Be upon Him) to relate well with people irrespective of their religion, ethnicity or language. The fact that respondents say they communicate effectively across their culture goes to confirm what Ting-Toomey (2015) referred to as functional biculturalism. She explains this term to mean a situation where individuals are able to maintain a sense of self, noting the identities of others and allowing them to have their own sense of self-identities. In order to describe communication as effective, then the interlocutors would have identified and respected each other's identities.

Enhanced confidence

Ahmad (2013) claims that Muslim women are able to stand on their own when they acquire university education and that university life impacts positively on the lives of Muslim women. All respondents of this study averred that after gaining entry into the college, one of their experiences is that of enhanced confidence. Respondents admitted during their interaction with the researchers that their confidence was heightened after they gained entry into the college as opposed to the traditional gender notion that an ideal woman should be submissive. R3 stated,

College life is something that I have not only admired but enjoyed. Many people think it is for the fun of it that we come to the college but I tell you there is more to it. Before I entered college, I must say that I couldn't speak in public. I was so shy especially in the presence of men but today, I can speak my mind and I can stand on my own and do a lot of things. Even though our 'deen' does not encourage close relationship with non-maharam men, we now move around with them.

The above syncs with the gender theory where Christodoulou and Zobnina (2009) suggested that a situation of the sort could be the result of Gender Awareness. In this case, the women become aware that the conception that women should be submissive and at the beck and call of men is a social construction. The state where the confidence level of the female Muslim students is enhanced, they are able to communicate across their social groupings – non – Muslims, men and other actors in the academic environment.

Expectation of Job opportunities

Brookfield (2013) explains that education leads to poverty reduction and by extension creates jobs and enhanced marketability for women. That is to say, when women

acquire higher education, their prospects in job acquisition become brighter. Atuguba (2007) also argues that when women attain higher education, they are able to secure jobs such as teaching and nursing. This study found that female Muslims enter college because of the expectation that job opportunities will abound at the time of their completion of the prescribed course of study. It is imperative to note that job opportunities become available to Muslim women when they go through higher education. The respondents of this study explained that one of the key phenomenon that they encountered before gaining entry into the college of education was the perception of job opportunities. The respondents explained that job opportunities was a pre-college experience each of them had encountered and that the drive to attain college education was anchored on the expectations that diploma in basic education will lead to job acquisition. They revealed that some of them wanted to be in the college because of the ready job market that was available. Here, the idea of Islamic feminism is expressed. The traditional Islamic duties of the Muslim woman is restricted to the home but in this instance, female Muslim students think that it within their rights to work outside the home without infringing on the Islamic jurisprudence. R5, shared her experience with the researcher during the interview session,

I must say that I have never heard someone say that College education does not bring work. Everybody says education brings work and there are a lot of examples in and around our homes about people who have attended college and how they are faring in their respective work places. The women who are teachers are happy with their work and one can see that they are encouraging us to also attend college.

There is always that force that drives individuals to enter into professions and it could be the pull or push forces. In this particular instance, the pull factor is what is at display. The quest for jobs appear to be the overriding factor that stimulates the interest of Muslim students to want to enter into the colleges of education. The following is the experience R10, shared during the interview,

We are all aware that when you succeed in college education, then you can be rest assured that you will get a job and that can even help you to climb further the academic ladder. As far as I am concerned, I decided to come to this college because I know I will get a job after completion. These days, there are no jobs and when you make the mistake of entering into the University, then you are most likely to wait for a job for God knows when. Teaching is good for me so why will I go searching for work that does not exist when I know the easiest way to getting a job is to enter college.

The college experience of the respondents confirms that education positively transforms the lives of individuals especially, women. The above revelations expose that even before female Muslim gain entry into Tamale College of Education, the idea of subversion is hatched. Females think that the traditional domestic roles such as working in the home which are assigned to them by virtue of their sex should be rewritten as they seek to acquire teaching jobs that will enable them work outside the home.

Liberation

Another benefit of college experience that emerged from the interviews was liberation. Respondents expressed the view that living free and independent life was a common phenomenon in adult educational institutions. They said that even though they had heard of restrictions with specific reference to liberties before they entered College, their lived experiences proved otherwise. The college environment has been a place where respondents are at liberty to associate and relate with others irrespective of sex and religion. The respondents further explain that College as an adult institutions was for adults and individuals were not strictly monitored like the basic and second cycle institutions in Ghana. In an interview, R4, had this to say,

As for me, before I came to this college, I heard students are free here, it's not like S.S.S. where you cannot do what you like. I also heard that Saturday nights were reserved for entertainment programmes and students used such time to interact with their friends and entertain themselves. And truly, we are enjoying all these things.

Another respondent, R3, said,

Yeah, my friends who were admitted into training college before me said some students dress in some ways that u can't do at home. Students do whatever they wanted provided they were not breaking the rules and regulations of the college. Now that am a student here, I have seen that life here is totally different from the other levels. For example, we dress the way we like and pick anybody we want as a friend.

Muslim parents believe that non-Islamic academic institution do not offer their wards the best of training as far as attitudes and behaviour shaping are concerned (Merry, 2015). This means that Muslim parents are of the perception that their wards may veer off the path of righteousness and, for that matter, their culture of living chaste lives before marriage. However, the actual experience at the college runs contrary to Merry, (2015).

Socialisation

Ashley, Adam, Mark, Janet, Chelsey and Christina (2011) in a study found that Non - Muslim students have inadequate knowledge and understanding of Islamic

teachings and therefore, conduct themselves in ways that make Muslim students feel alienated. However, the findings from this research run contrary to the above assertion by Ashley et al (2011). This study revealed that non-Muslims have some understanding of the Muslim culture and do not see Muslims as terrorists, uncivilized and dogmatic. This according to respondents enabled them to make friends from within the Islamic religion and outside the Islamic religion.

Respondents indicated that the relationship between them and other Muslim students is very cordial and they did almost everything together. The respondents also stated that non-Muslims equally had very good relationship with the Muslims students. This created the opportunity for them to make friends from within and outside the Islamic faith in the college. R4 stated,

I used to go to the mosque with Asana and we attended all school functions together. There had been times we went to town together to buy our things. Anytime, one of us could not go to the dining hall, the other will make sure she brings food for the other. We were doing things together and finally, we became friends unconsciously.

R6 also observed,

Being at the college was something I enjoyed so much. The new friends I made from my religion were so good to me. May be probably we are all Muslims and I missed them each time we went on vacation. We could eat each other's food and the feeling of togetherness was just amazing. I enjoyed college life because of my friends and I must say that we are more than blood sisters.

R7 also stated,

I couldn't believe the kind of relationship we had from our non - Muslim student colleagues. They were so nice and most of them were just good. The impression from other places that there is conflict between Muslims and non - Muslim students does not exist here. There is no bad feeling between us and we do things together. Sometimes, it's only our mode of dressing that differentiate us from the non - Muslim.

The responses from the research indicated that even though there exist that disparity in the culture of the Muslims and non-Muslims, respondents are able to negotiate their identities in ways that maintain peace and tranquillity between us and it is this feature of both the female Muslim students and non-Muslims that facilitates the crossing of the cultural barriers that might have existed between us. Excerpts of the responses above lend credence to Ting-Toomey's conception that after living together, individuals attain a state that is referred to as Intercultural

Competence and Negotiation skills. This explains a situation where individuals are able to cross cultural barriers that hitherto could have created some friction between groups of different beliefs and practices. The larger majority of respondents' ability to make friends from within and outside is as result of the identity knowledge they have acquired which makes them understand the importance of both cultural and ethnic identities of their Muslim and non-Muslim friends. Also, negotiation skills enables respondents mediate their identities through careful observation of their own behaviours and the behaviours of others: listening to them and showing empathy as and when it becomes necessary (Littlejohn & Foss, 2011). The respondents also, negotiate their identities using movement of their body parts, eye contact and show of politeness.

Enhanced Marriage Prospects

Ahmad (2013) revealed in a study that Muslim women experience a significant increase in their marriage prospects when they attain higher education. This research finding shows that the benefits communication and for that matter college experiences that respondents expressed during the interviews was increased marriage prospects. The respondents explained that before they came to the college, one of the issues that they encountered was the idea that seeking higher education delays marriage. This by extension delay child bearing which, according to them, is the primary reproductive responsibility of every Muslim and that any Muslim who holds the 'aqida' of the Islamic religion should not shirk any of such responsibilities. The Islamic belief and practice is that a woman after adolescence should marry, serve the husband and make children. However, respondents express that before their exposure to effective communication skills at the Tamale College of Education, they held the notion that climbing the academic ladder was something that could certainly defer their marriages. They further thought the phenomenon of delay marriages is something that will subvert the reproductive functions of women which is child bearing. However, Muslim parents as part of their responsibilities, reinforce the notion of marriage by encouraging the girls to marry when they attain adulthood. R9 had this to say,

One of the things that brought fear into my heart was the fear not to marry early but when I entered TACE, I realised that many men were ready to ask for my hand in marriage. As I speak now, I am happily married and that was because my man admired how I speak. I am not the only one who is married, many of my friends are married here in the college.

The fear for delayed marriages is experienced by all respondents as they expressed that a Muslim woman in Ghana, especially, those from the Northern Region are supposed to be married when they attain adulthood. If she does not marry and engages in any form of sexual

encounters, such a conduct is deemed sinful according to the dictates of the Islamic religion and her parents will partly share the sins. Her parents will share in the sins because she is still under their tutelage and they (parents) must facilitate the processes leading to her successful marriage. Marriage is mandatory in Islam and one's faith is called to question if he or she does not marry after attaining adulthood. In reiterating this, R5 observed,

Though my parents wanted me to attend a college, they equally wanted me to find a man of my choice before going to college. My brothers advised me to marry because college education may make me appear a bit complex. They say I will not want to allow any man who is not highly educated to marry me and to them, the period that I will attend college plus the period that I will spend searching for a guy will cumulatively delay my marriage. My brothers even cited two other ladies in our village whose age mates have more children than them because of delayed marriage which resulted from their long stay in school.

The above experience-fear of delay marriages is a gendered conception which is in tandem with the postulation of the Identity Negotiation theory where Ting-Toomey

(1985) indicates that gender roles begin from the home which is the primary factor of

Socialisation (Littlejohn & Foss, 2011). Individuals acquire gender characteristics first from the home and it becomes part of them throughout their life. So for the respondents and those around them to think the reproductive functions of the woman supersedes any other function of the woman will only be confirming the ideas of Ting-Toomey's that gender roles begin from the home and continue throughout the life of the individual. Again, the fear of delayed marriage confirms the reproductive roles performed by women. The primary role of the woman is to reproduce younger ones of her kind that is why Muslims think that women must marry to perpetuate generational growth in terms of increasing the numerical strength of Muslims across the globe.

8. CONCLUSION

The study concludes that when female Muslim students enter Tamale College of Education, they develop Communicative Competence due to the interactive nature of the collegiate environment.

The study also showed that female Muslim students experience an enhanced form of confidence.

The study further showed that when female Muslim students developed their communication skills, their expectation of Job opportunities become realised.

Again, the study showed that female Muslim students become liberated when they develop communication skills. The study showed that when female Muslim students develop in their communicative competences, it enhances their social networks in and outside the school environment.

The study finally showed that the development in female Muslim students' communicative skills leads to their marriage prospects being enhanced.

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