Quest Journals
Journal of Architecture and Civil Engineering
Volume 11 ~ Issue 4 (April 2026) pp: 01-07
ISSN(Online): 2321-8193
www.questjournals.org

Research Paper

Bridging The Knowledge Gap: Communication Challenges Between Architects and Unlearned Clients in Nigeria's Building Industry.

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Abstract
This study examines the challenges faced by construction professionals in Nigeria when working with unlearned clients, focusing on the impact of client illiteracy and lack of technical knowledge on project outcomes. Using a quantitative research methodology, copies of questionnaire were conducted with Architects, Engineers, Quantity Surveyors, and Project Managers who have experience interacting with clients lacking formal education. The findings reveal that communication barriers, such as clients' difficulty in understanding technical documents and processes, are widespread, resulting in project delays, cost overruns, and client dissatisfaction. Strategies such as simplifying technical language, utilizing visual aids, and holding regular face-to-face meetings are identified as effective communication tools. Recommendations include enhancing professional training in client communication and incorporating more client-focused communication strategies into the construction process.

*Received 28 Mar., 2026; **R**evised 06 Apr., 2026; **A**ccepted 08 Apr., 2026 © The author(s) 2026.*
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I. Introduction

The construction industry in Nigeria plays a pivotal role in national development, contributing to infrastructural growth, urban expansion, and employment generation. According to the National Bureau of Statistics (2022), the construction sector accounted for approximately 9.6% of Nigeria's Gross Domestic Product (GDP), underscoring its economic significance. However, despite its critical contributions, the industry grapples with systemic challenges, one of the most significant being the difficulties professionals encounter when working with clients who are unlearned or possess limited formal education.

Unlearned clients, in this context, refer to individuals who lack the technical, educational, or literacy background necessary to fully comprehend construction- related documentation such as architectural drawings, bills of quantities, site instructions, or contract terms. Studies by Ogundele and Idris (2020) have shown that these clients often have little or no understanding of industry standards or technical language, which creates a significant communication gap between them and construction professionals.

Moreover, this communication gap is complicated by a lack of structured client education and the absence of regulatory frameworks that ensure client engagement protocols are inclusive and comprehensible to all stakeholders, regardless of educational background. As Idoro (2018) observed, as professionals are trained to follow technical and procedural norms, many clients approach construction projects with a focus on aesthetics and cost, often neglecting functional and technical considerations due to ignorance.

The socio-cultural dimension of this problem also deserves emphasis. Nigeria's multilingual environment means that many unlearned clients communicate primarily in indigenous languages, while professionals rely on English, the official language of instruction and technical documentation. This language barrier, as indicated by Akinradewo et al. (2019), adds another layer of difficulty to professional-client interaction which often required professionals to simplify technical concepts without diluting their meaning or compromising the accuracy of their recommendations.

In practice, professionals often find themselves functioning not only as technical experts but also as educators and mediators. The dual responsibility of delivering construction services while also managing client comprehension is both time- consuming and mentally demanding. As Oladapo and Ojo (2021) point out, the lack of client literacy often forces professionals to engage in repeated clarifications, on-site demonstrations, and

informal consultations to ensure that clients are aligned with project goals, efforts that are rarely budgeted for or acknowledged in formal project planning.

This study, therefore, seeks to examine the challenges faced by professionals when working with unlearned clients in Nigeria's construction industry. It aims to identify specific communication, cultural, and procedural barriers; evaluate how these barriers affect project execution and professional performance; and propose practical strategies for mitigating these challenges through client education, policy reform, and adaptive communication strategies.

Research Objectives

The main objective of this study is to examine the challenges that construction professionals encounter when working with unlearned clients in Nigeria. The specific objectives are to:

1. Identify the common characteristics and behaviors of unlearned clients that influence project execution in the Nigerian construction industry.
2. Explore the specific communication and coordination challenges that arise between professionals and unlearned clients during various phases of construction projects.
3. Assess the impact of client illiteracy and lack of technical knowledge on project outcomes such as cost, time, quality, and client satisfaction.

II. Literature Review

2.1. The Nigerian Construction Industry

The Nigerian construction industry is a central pillar of national development which responsible for the delivery of physical infrastructure and contributing significantly to employment and economic growth. However, a unique issue confronting professionals within the sector is the frequent engagement with unlearned clients, those who lack the formal education or technical knowledge necessary to effectively participate in construction processes. This issue cuts across private and public projects, particularly in informal and small- to medium-scale developments where professional-client interactions are not governed by structured procedures.

Unlearned clients in Nigeria often struggle to interpret architectural drawings, comprehend construction specifications, or understand legal and contractual obligations (Oladapo & Ojo, 2021). This lack of understanding creates a situation in which construction professionals must routinely translate technical language into layman's terms, often distorting the precision of professional recommendations in the process. These clients typically rely on intuition or advice from informal networks rather than professional counsel, which complicates decision-making and undermines the application of best practices.

Communication with clients lacking formal education presents a significant barrier to effective service delivery (Akinradewo et al., 2019). In their study, many professionals reported challenges in gaining client approval for technical decisions due to poor comprehension and a tendency to undervalue professional input. This issue is particularly evident in private residential construction, which dominates the Nigerian building landscape. As observed by Olatunji et al. (2020), many individuals who initiate building projects in peri-urban and rural areas lack exposure to construction documentation or procedures, relying instead on local artisans who speak the local language and appear more "approachable" than formally trained professionals. Although this helps clients feel more at ease but it often leads to sub-optimal construction practices and increases the risk of structural failure (Idoro, 2018).

2.1. Unlearned Clients in Nigeria

Unlearned clients in the context of the Nigerian construction industry refer to individuals who lack formal education, technical training, or literacy skills required to comprehend construction-related documents, drawings, and processes. These clients often financially capable of commissioning building projects, are unable to engage meaningfully with technical procedures due to limited educational background. Their presence is not incidental but rather a reflection of broader national literacy and educational challenges.

According to UNESCO (2020), Nigeria's adult literacy rate stands at approximately 62%, indicating that nearly 38% of the adult population either lacks or has limited ability to read and write at a functional level. This data aligns with the Nigerian National Bureau of Statistics (2022) report shows that literacy disparities are more pronounced in rural areas, where most informal and small- scale construction activities take place. As a result, a significant portion of construction clients fall into the category of "unlearned," particularly in self-initiated housing projects, local community buildings, and small commercial developments.

In practice, unlearned clients often approach construction with a layperson's perspective, relying heavily on past experiences, oral information, or informal advisors. They typically do not understand technical terms, statutory regulations, or procedural requirements associated with planning approvals, structural detailing, and contract conditions. This knowledge gap affects all stages of construction, from project conception and design review to materials selection and site supervision. Ojo (2018) observed that such clients are prone to

misinterpreting design drawings or contractual clauses, which leads to frequent requests for changes, mistrust in professionals, and in some cases, costly project delays. Furthermore, unlearned clients are more likely to bypass professional services or minimize their engagement due to a combination of cost sensitivity and lack of awareness. As noted by Akinradewo et al. (2019), many of these clients engage informal builders or "roadside artisans" who communicate in local languages and operate outside of formal construction frameworks.

2.2. Impact of Unlearned Clients on Construction Projects

The presence of unlearned clients in construction projects often introduces difficulty that affect project performance, communication, and outcomes. One of the most direct impacts is the misinterpretation or complete misunderstanding of technical documentation. As Johnson (2020) points out, clients who cannot read blueprints or comprehend specifications may unintentionally approve flawed designs or request changes during execution that could result to rework, delays, and increased costs.

Furthermore, unlearned clients may experience a sense of exclusion from the project due to their limited understanding of the technical language used during meetings and documentation (Akinloye, 2017). In addition, unlearned clients may unintentionally reject critical recommendations, such as quality assurance procedures or safety measures, mistaking them for unnecessary expenses (Akinradewo et al., 2019).

2.3 Strategies for Overcoming Communication Barriers

Several strategies have been proposed to overcome communication barriers in construction, particularly when working with unlearned clients. According to Odediran et al. (2015), the use of visual aids such as diagrams, models, and videos can help unlearned clients understand complex concepts and project details. Oral communication techniques, including face- to-face meetings and verbal explanations, can also enhance understanding and engagement. Additionally, training community leaders or family members to act as intermediaries can facilitate more effective communication between professionals and clients (Adebowale, 2019).

Policy interventions and industry practices can also play a crucial role in addressing the challenges posed by unlearned clients in the construction industry. According to Eze (2018), government and industry bodies should develop policies that promote the use of visual aids and oral communication techniques in construction projects. Training programs for construction professionals can also enhance their communication skills and improve their ability to work with unlearned clients (Umeh, 2019).

2.4 Theoretical Frameworks and Models

Shannon - Weaver Model of Communication

The Shannon-Weaver Model of Communication, originally developed by Claude Shannon and Warren Weaver in 1948, is a foundational framework in the field of communication theory. Initially designed to improve the technical efficiency of telephone transmission, this model was later adapted to explain human communication. It emphasizes the process of transmitting information from a sender to a receiver and includes components like the sender, encoder, channel, decoder, receiver, and noise.

Basic Assumptions of the Model:

1. **Sender-Receiver Communication**: The model assumes that communication is a linear process involving a sender who encodes a message, a channel through which the message travels, and a receiver who decodes the message.
2. **Noise**: The model highlights the concept of "noise," referring to any form of interference that distorts or hinders the clarity of the message during transmission. Noise can be physical (e.g., poor signal) or psychological (e.g., misunderstanding or misinterpretation).
3. Encoding and Decoding: The sender must translate their ideas into a message that can be transmitted, while the receiver must interpret the message accurately, taking into account their understanding and context.
4. Message Transmission: The transmission of messages is assumed to be subject to external and internal disruptions, meaning the process is not always efficient or clear.

Relevance to the Present Study:

The Shannon-Weaver Model is relevant to the present study because it provides a clear framework to understand the communication breakdowns that occur between construction professionals and unlearned clients in Nigeria. In this study, construction professionals (e.g., engineers, architects) serve as the senders of information, while the unlearned clients are the receivers. The encoding process in this context involves professionals trying to simplify complex technical documents, blueprints, and contracts into a format that clients can understand. However, the decoding process often fails due to the clients' limited technical knowledge or literacy skills, which aligns with the "noise" concept in the model. The noise in this case could be cultural barriers, illiteracy, or misunderstandings due to language differences.

III. Methodology

This study adopts a quantitative research approach with descriptive survey design. Self-structured questionnaire serve as the primary research instrument administered to architects, engineers, quantity surveyors, and project managers who have direct experience working with clients lacking formal education or technical knowledge. A purposive sampling technique was employed to ensure participants are selected based on relevant experience. The collected data was analyzed using thematic to objectively analyze and reported using frequency table and percentage.

Data Analysis

This section present result of the study which were analyze based on the responses provided through administration of questionnaire to the respondents. The results were present objectively as showed in table below.

1. **Distribution by Occupation/Role**
   - **Architects**: 3 respondents (20%)
   - **Engineers:** 4 respondents (26.7%)
   - **Quantity Surveyors:** 3 respondents (20%)
   - **Project Managers:** 3 respondents (20%)
   - **Others:** 2 respondents (13.3%)
   - Site Supervisor (1), Contractor (1)
2. Distribution by Years of Experience
   - **1–5 years**: 4 respondents (26.7%)
   - **6–10 years**: 5 respondents (33.3%)
   - **11–15 years**: 4 respondents (26.7%)
   - **16+ years**: 2 respondents (13.3%)

Architects tend to have more experience (two with over 11 years). Engineers are clustered in the early to mid-career bracket (1–10 years). Project Managers show a broader range, including the most experienced individual (16+ years). Other roles are only present in the 1–10 year range, possibly reflecting their support or subcontracting nature within the industry.

Table 1: Perceptions and Experiences with Unlearned Clients (N = 15)

Question	Response Option	Frequency	Percentage
Definition of an "Unlearned" Client	No formal education	2	13.3%
	Limited technical knowledge	7	46.7%
	No understanding of construction processes	5	33.3%
	Other (e.g., "no project Management insight")	1	6.7%
"Unlearned clients often lack technical knowledge necessary to understand the construction process."	Strongly	6	40.0%
	Agree		
	Agree	7	46.7%
	Neutral	1	6.7%
	Disagree	1	6.7%
	Strongly Disagree	0	0.0%
Frequency of Encountering Unlearned Clients	Very Often	3	20.0%
	Often	5	33.3%
	Sometimes	4	26.7%
	Rarely	2	13.3%
	Never	1	6.7%

The majority of respondents define an “unlearned” client not by their formal education but by their lack of technical knowledge (46.7%) or understanding of construction processes (33.3%). Only a small proportion (13.3%) equate being "unlearned" with lacking formal education, One respondent (6.7%) offered an alternative definition related to the client’s lack of project management insight. Regarding attitudes toward unlearned clients, 86.7% (13 out of 15) either agreed or strongly agreed that these clients lack the technical knowledge

needed to grasp the construction process. When asked how frequently they encounter such clients, 53.3% reported encountering them "Very Often" or "Often", while 26.7% said "Sometimes".

Table 2: Communication Barriers and Their Impacts (N = 15)

Question	Response Option	Frequency	Percentage
Definition of an "Unlearned" Client	No formal education	2	13.3%
	Limited technical knowledge	7	46.7%
	No understanding of construction processes	5	33.3%
	Other (e.g., "no project management insight")	1	6.7%
"Unlearned clients often lack technical knowledge necessary to understand the construction process."	Strongly Agree	6	40.0%
	Agree	7	46.7%
	Neutral	1	6.7%
	Disagree	1	6.7%
	Strongly Disagree	0	0.0%
Frequency of Encountering Unlearned Clients	Very Often	3	20.0%
	Often	5	33.3%
	Sometimes	4	26.7%
	Rarely	2	13.3%
	Never	1	6.7%

The majority of respondents believe that unlearned clients have significant difficulty comprehending technical documentation. Specifically, 46.7% strongly agree and 40% agree that such clients struggle with understanding blueprints, contracts, and specifications. This means nearly 87% of the professionals surveyed view this as a widespread and serious issue in the construction communication process. In terms of specific communication challenges, difficulty explaining technical terms was the most frequently cited problem, with 40% of respondents selecting it. When asked how communication breakdowns with unlearned clients impact project timelines or budgets, 33.3% reported significant delays and cost overruns, while 46.7% observed minor delays and overruns.

Table 3: Coping Strategies and Professional Adaptation (N = 15)

Question	Response Option	Frequency	Percentage
Most Effective Communication Strategies	Simplifying technical language	6	40.0%
	Using visual aids (e.g., diagrams, pictures)	3	20.0%
	Holding regular face-to- face meetings	2	13.3%
	Providing written summaries or reports	3	20.0%
	Other (e.g., using interpreters)	1	6.7%
Adequacy of Professional Training	Very Adequate	2	13.3%
	Adequate	5	33.3%
	Neutral	3	20.0%
	Inadequate	4	26.7%
	Very Inadequate	1	6.7%
Have You Adjusted Communication Style for Unlearned Clients?	Yes, often	6	40.0%
	Yes, sometimes	8	53.3%
	No, never	1	6.7%

The majority of construction professionals surveyed have actively adopted strategies to better communicate with unlearned clients. Simplifying technical language was cited by 40% as the most effective method. On the matter of training, opinions were mixed. While 46.6% felt their training was adequate or very adequate, a significant 33.4% rated it as inadequate or very inadequate, and 20% were neutral. When asked whether they adjust their communication approach for unlearned clients, an overwhelming 93.3% said they do so at least sometimes, with 40% adjusting often and 53.3% doing so occasionally.

IV. Findings

Recent research, such as Adenuga & Babalola (2021) and Usman et al. (2023), confirms that limited technical understanding among clients continues to hinder smooth project execution. Like the current study, these works found that clients often misunderstand technical documents such as blueprints, contracts, and specifications. Usman et al. (2023) reported that over 60% of professionals attributed frequent site disputes and scope changes to clients' poor grasp of construction processes, a finding echoed here with over 85% agreement on clients' struggles with technical documentation.

Strategies like simplifying technical terms and visual aids are consistently recommended (as in this study), recent work by Okon & Ibrahim (2022) revealed a growing use of digital tools (e.g., project management software, WhatsApp updates, 3D visualizations) for client communication.

This study's finding that one-third of professionals feel inadequately trained clients aligns with Nwokoro et al. (2021), who found that most construction education in Nigeria still emphasizes technical over interpersonal skills. However, Okereke & Okechukwu (2023) noted a recent push in academic and CPD (continuing professional development) programs to incorporate client communication modules, signaling a positive trend not yet fully realized in practice.

Across the board, both this study and others (e.g., Lawal & Fagbenle, 2022) agree that communication breakdowns with unlearned clients lead to delays and cost overruns, with recent works emphasizing that these effects are more severe in public sector projects, where client representatives often lack professional construction training.

V. Conclusion

The overall results indicate that communication barriers with unlearned clients, particularly related to technical knowledge and understanding of construction processes, are common in Nigeria's construction industry. These barriers lead to project delays, cost overruns, and a frequent need for professionals to adapt their communication strategies.

Recommendations

The following recommendations were suggested that:

1. Construction professionals should invest in simplifying technical language and utilizing visual aids to improve client understanding and reduce communication barriers.
2. Industry training programs should incorporate modules on client communication and engagement to better prepare professionals for working with unlearned clients.
3. Project teams should hold regular face-to-face meetings with clients to foster clearer communication and prevent misunderstandings throughout the construction process.

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