



IMPROVING LANGUAGE TEACHING IN NIGERIA: APPROACHES AND METHODS

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this research work is to examine ideas, approaches and methods of language teaching and learning, and how they can improve teaching and learning English language in Nigeria. The difference between ‘approach’ and ‘method’ as they concern language teaching is explained for proper understanding of the topic. Major approaches and methods of language teaching are identified and explained. The advantage and drawback of each one is also pointed out. Problems affecting language teaching and learning in Nigerian schools in the area of methodology are revealed and suggestions are made to remedy them. Techniques and activities that teachers can employ to engage students actively and to motivate language learning in the country are explained. Mastery of language increases performance in all other subjects.

Keywords: *Approach, method, structures, grammar, communication*

INTRODUCTION

Human societies cannot exist without language. In carrying out his daily needs, man employs language such that his thoughts, wishes and communication are realized through language. In school children fail Science, Mathematics, History and other subjects not because of the difficulties inherent in the subjects themselves, but because they seem unable to meet the language demands that the subjects make upon them. Language teaching has been the pre-occupation of many scholars, philosophers and linguists. It varies considerably from one teaching situation to another and between teachers at different levels.

Oyetunde (2010) is of the view that methodology is a critical factor that affects the learner’s attitude to learning and education generally. Methodology is not given enough attention as an important element in quality education. What

happens in Nigerian classrooms in the name of teaching is not likely to promote quality education. Language teaching and learning have approaches and methods. These are dynamic because there are changes and improvements with time. These changes are as a result of advancement in all aspects of life.

An approach according to Richards & Rodgers (1995) is a set of correlative assumptions dealing with the nature of language teaching and learning. It describes the nature of the subject matter to be taught. Method on the other hand, is an overall plan for the orderly presentation of language material and is based on the selected approach. Therefore, an approach is axiomatic, while method is procedural. Within one approach, there can be many methods.

In Language, approach is the level at which assumptions and beliefs about language and language learning are specified. Method is the level at which choices are made about the particular skills to be taught, the content to be taught, and the order in which the content will be presented. Lar (1997) says that there are many methods of teaching and a good number of these methods are specific to particular subjects). The aim of this study is to examine how new ideas, approaches and methods in language teaching can facilitate English Language learning in Nigeria.

APPROACHES TO LANGUAGE STUDY

We can look at approaches to language teaching and learning from three view points:

- a. The structural view
- b. The functional view
- c. The interactional view

a. The Structural View

This approach has its root in psychology (behavioral theory). It emphasizes repetitions to form habits. It uses substitution tables as means of explaining grammatical patterns. The grammar of language is described in terms of syntagmatic structures. Words within frameworks are varied to generate sentences with different meanings. The structural syllabus provides the learner with a range of structures that make it possible to generate many new sentences. Language learning is based on structure-joining parts.

b. The Functional View

This approach views language as primarily intended for use in society. The emphasis is more on syllabus content than method of teaching alone. Syllabus content is developed with reference to functions and notions. Such functions are performed in setting such as market place, bank or post office. Groups of students are expected to carry out exercises in places like government offices, companies or chambers. The exercises can be written and/or taped for presentation in another lesson.

Syllabus materials comprise of language functions known as “speech acts” not on traditional units of grammar. Lesson titles include “asking for information”, “apologizing to someone” or “expressing an opinion”. This is a departure from titles such as “countable and uncountable nouns”, “transitive and intransitive verbs” or “the present tense”. Language is learned in variety of settings, variety of topics, with individuals performing different roles. Priority is given to communicative competence in language teaching (Williams, 1990).

The Functional approach has its limitations. There is difficulty in sorting out and grading materials for classroom or textbook presentation. It is difficult to determine which function should be dealt with before the other. Also, it is difficult to determine which syllabus materials are suitable for new learners. Dramatization and role-play require knowledge of basic structures which must be learned formally. Traditional practices are still necessary when it comes to teaching basic language skills and structures.

c. The Interactional View

In this case, language is seen as a means for interpersonal relations and for performance of social transactions between individuals. Language is used for creation and maintenance of social relations. Language teaching involves analysis of interactions, negotiations and conversations.

All these approaches use certain methods of teaching. A teacher using one approach may employ different methods. This means that approach does not specify procedure and an approach can be carried out through different methods, techniques and activities.

METHODS OF LANGUAGE TEACHING

A method is the implementation level of an approach to language teaching. Some of the methods are as follows:

- a. Grammar-translation (traditional) method
- b. Direct method
- c. Audio-lingual (aural-oral) method
- d. Cognitive code learning (CCL) method
- e. Communicative language teaching (CLT)
- f. Eclectic method

a. Grammar-translation (traditional) method

This method dominated language teaching in Europe during the 19th century. The classes were taught in the students' mother tongue, with little use of the target language. Descriptions of English and other languages were based on the grammars of the classical languages- Greek and Latin. This method emphasizes the study of the forms of language rather than the communicative use. Teaching is based on detail analysis of grammar rules: defining terms and giving examples. Students are made to break down sentences into phrases and clauses, memorize terms for structures and defining parts of speech. Little attention is paid to the content of texts, which are treated only as exercises in grammatical analysis.

The method does not take into consideration speaking and listening skills. The teacher does too much talking, denying students the active participation that is necessary in second language learning. In fairness to this method, it can be effective technique of language teaching in some situations. Traditional practices are still necessary for new learners- they need basic language skills and structures. We still use terms and distinctions of traditional grammar to talk about our own languages.

b. Direct method

This method evolved as a reaction or alternative to grammar-translation. It ruled out translation in teaching foreign languages and is based on the theory that language learning is a natural process. The basic assumption is that language has to be learnt from the strict order of hearing, speaking, reading and writing. It discourages writing at early stage. Oral activity is prompted by the use of gestures, and miming or with the aid of pictures, diagrams, illustrations etc. This method is full of activities between students and teachers. But it may not be realistic using this method alone in teaching a second language because

the procedure is too unstructured and success in its use depends on the teacher's personality and ingenuity.

c. Audio-Lingual (Aural-oral) method

This method is based on structural linguistics and the theory of behavioral psychology. Structural linguistics is based on the idea that language is made up of structural units and these units are used in patterned practice. Language is taught mainly through practice and repetition, mimicking and memorization. To avoid errors, lexical items and grammatical units are isolated for practice in carefully controlled situation. Use of language laboratory is necessary for this method. It is learner-centered and very effective in teaching listening and speaking skills. But, the mechanical nature of its presentation does not show language as used in real life.

d. Cognitive code learning (CCL) Method

This method evolved as a reaction to the audio lingual method. It is based on the idea that language is rule-governed. As such language learning is rule formation not habit formation. Writing is seen as important as speech in language teaching and there is no need to concentrate on pronunciation since foreign language learners cannot sound exactly like native speakers.

Group work and individual instruction are given more attention than choral work and greater use is made of audio-visual aids and illustrations.

The CCL method is more eclectic than the other ones preceding it. It is more effective because it provides more practice in all kinds of skills and is learner-centered with lots of activities.

e. Communicative Language Teaching (C.L.T)

CLT views language as a form of social behavior and language teaching as training learners to communicate fluently, appropriately and spontaneously in the cultural context of the target language- English. CLT recognizes that knowledge of linguistic form is essential, but insists that such knowledge is not sufficient on its own for the development of overall competence in the language. As Williams (1990) points out, the objectives of CLT go beyond mere grammatical competence. Language occurs in socio-cultural and interpersonal contexts and so it serves much more than limited linguistic purposes.

Objectives of CLT can therefore, be specified with reference to the social purposes of language:

- i. Appropriateness of usage
- ii. Conventional usage
- iii. Transactional usage, and
- iv. Interactional usage

On appropriateness of usage, a speaker knows when and when not to speak, what to talk about with whom, when, where and in what manner. Conventional usage is also governed by a similar set of social restraints. In mastering transactional and interactional usage, the learner has to do more than manipulate a number of language structures. He has to be on his own in using language that has not been rehearsed in stimulus-response drills. Use of Language especially the spoken one is extended in unpredictable ways.

CLT makes use of pair/group work to involve learners more. The role of the teacher becomes far less as he becomes only a guide, adviser or moderator. Group activity is essential for practice in communication. Communicative activities are geared towards some functional objectives-coronation of a king, clothes that are in fashion, drawing up rules and regulations for a club etc. The method integrates all skills- listening, speaking, reading and writing. The communicative activities are task-oriented.

One disadvantage of this method is that it does not attach much importance to grammatical aspect of English. This could lead to poor performance in the language in examinations. The method is better for matured students who already have some basic linguistic competence.

f. Eclectic Method

This method selects the most appropriate technique to suit a specific objective identified in terms of learner's needs, that is, what is to be learnt and the learning environment. It is an integrative method of language teaching. The teacher acquaints himself with alternative choices and modifies a particular method to suit his particular situation. This makes teaching flexible.

PROBLEMS OF LANGUAGE TEACHING IN NIGERIA AND SOLUTIONS

Language teaching has gone through phases of grammar-translation, direct method, audio-lingual to the present day communicative method/approach. The communicative approach is still not popular in Nigeria because of lack of facilities. Nigerian language teacher can hardly give satisfactory explanation

of what communicative language teaching is, let alone practice it. In Nigeria, language teachers still make use of textbook method of grammar-translation. There are so many teaching methods, each developed on a particular view of language (approach). The language teacher in Nigeria requires a specific set of techniques and materials to be implemented in specific sequence. Thus, it is difficult to pick one most effective method of teaching language. The advice given by Odo (2007) is useful in this case. He is of the opinion that the language teacher in Nigeria needs to assume two roles-an artist and a scientist. The teacher is an artist because he has to use his imagination and creativity to achieve effect. He is a scientist because he applies tests and measurements to achieve his goals. The teacher is required to use his own judgement or discretion.

If teaching is good, it is assumed that learning will also be good. It is the teacher's responsibility to engage the interest and intellect of the learner with whatever means available to him. The language teacher in Nigeria has to be innovative in making his choices and devising his own procedure which best suits his students' interests and specific learning situations. This will increase motivation and make optimum achievement possible.

CONCLUSION

It is sad that most language teachers in Nigeria are not current and do not know new methods/trends in teaching. Language teachers need to update their knowledge through conferences and researches. There are no language laboratories even in tertiary institutions. Where there are laboratories, equipment are lacking. In developed countries, language is taught using computer-aided programs. Texts are put into diskettes, language programmes are transmitted on radio and television and are dubbed for individualized instructions.

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