

AN EVALUATION OF THE COMMUNICATIVE APPROACH TO LANGUAGE ACQUISITION AND LANGUAGE EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT: *This article evaluates the communicative approach adopted in the teaching of language in Nigerian Secondary Schools. This study analyses the communicative language teaching approach in line with the language difficulty situation of the Nigerian students. The Stephen Krashen theory on language learning was adopted for the study. A critical review of literature, interviews and classroom observation reveal that unless conscious and deliberate steps are taken to arrest the current traditional method of teaching language in Nigeria by teachers and language policy makers the success of this approach will remain a mirage. The study suggests that teachers of the English language need to be more proactive and less non-challant in their use of the communicative approach. They also need to implement appropriate communicative activities consciously to meet the learning styles and needs of their students in the Nigerian context.*

KEYWORDS: Language teaching, language learning, communicative approach.

INTRODUCTION

The aim of teaching English language in the post primary school in Nigeria is to help the student to communicate effectively in different situations and forum. But in recent times, there have been an outcry that most of the students in post primary schools are not proficient in the use of English language despite the fact that they have spent some years learning the language. A lot of reasons have alluded to why most of these students still fail in oral and written comprehension in English language. In responding to the poor performance of public examination at all levels of Nigeria educational system as a reflection of the poor quality of teaching by teachers who themselves are incompetent, the WAEC Chief Examiner's report on students' performance in English language is a testimony to the poor level of teaching. In the report (2003, p.7), the chief examiner has this to say: "The students made a lot of grammatical errors while answering their comprehension question. Thus, they did not understand the questions very well which reflected in the answers they gave in the comprehension passage. Their sentences were filled with wrong constructions, filled with vague expression, the students could not understand the question, which resulted in the wrong expression and answering they made. Thus, their expressions were badly constructed which also deducted some marks from them."

The teaching of English language cut across the curriculum, in other words, using content from other subjects in the teaching of the skills, and the teaching of grammar in a context with an integration of the language skills. The communicative approach encourages the use of integrated method. The integrated method aims at integrating the teaching of the four language skills, such as writing, oral, reading and listening on the one hand, with grammar and literature within the English lesson, on the other hand, the content of the wide variety of other important subject (Chimombo and Mandalasi, 2000).

In this case teachers are to adopt the communicative language teaching approach. Though this method has been received with mixed feelings from the teachers in training as well as teachers in service. While others feel this is the best method to use to help students acquire communicative competence others feel it is complicated and ineffective considering the low level of assimilation of the students we currently have in our schools. This study aims to evaluate the communicative language teaching approach in Nigerian schools as well as examine its applicability in the teaching and learning of English as a second language in Nigeria.

Theoretical Framework

To drive the study, the Stephen Krashen's Second Language acquisition learning theory will be adopted. Cook (1993) opined that the Krashen's theory to second language acquisition has five related hypotheses. The theory stipulates that the learners of second language acquires the rules of language in a predictable order; this is called the natural order hypothesis. This means that the way we learn a second language, is the same way we acquire our first language. The second hypothesis is the acquisition and learning hypothesis. In this hypothesis Krashen distinguishes learning from acquisition. On the one hand, acquisition is described as a 'natural' process where there is no conscious focusing on linguistic forms and the minimal condition for acquisition is participation in natural communication situations (Krashen, 1992 cited in Johnson, 2001). For the later, learning is described as a conscious process and it usually takes place in the language classroom. It is particularly characterized by error correction as well as rule isolation (Krashen, 1992 cited in Johnson (2001).

The third hypothesis according to Cook (1993) is the monitor hypothesis, in this hypothesis Krashen argues that conscious learning can only be used as a monitor or an editor. This means that the rules of language that one consciously learns are used just to monitor if one is producing the appropriate language or not, but not as a way of acquiring the language. In other words, it is claiming that language acquisition does not happen when we learn and practice grammar rules, rather language acquisition only happens when we understand messages (Krashen, 2004). This does not mean that the teaching of grammar is completely abandoned in a language class. Grammar can still be taught for two reasons. First, for the purpose of "language appreciation," otherwise known as "linguistics." Linguistics includes language universals, language change, dialects, etc. The second reason is for the purpose of filling gaps left by incomplete acquisition and places in which idiolects differ from the prestige dialect. Even society's expectation for writing is 100% and mistake is not envisaged in punctuation, spelling or grammar usage. That is why an error will usually be criticized vehemently. The truth is that, as second language users there may be gaps because there are places where grammatical competence differs from accepted use (Krashen, 2004).

The fourth hypothesis is the input hypothesis. This hypothesis stipulates that humans acquire language in only one way by understanding messages or by receiving comprehension input, that is to say language acquisition depends upon trying to comprehend what other people say. (Richards and Rogars, 2000). The comprehension hypothesis states that we acquire language, when we understand messages, when we understand what people tell us and when we understand what we read (Krashen, 2004). In other words, the fundamental element in the comprehension hypothesis as regards language acquisition is that the learner must understand either by reading or hearing.

Again, for the learner to reach understanding in the language learning process of the input hypothesis, Zheng (2008) proposed that the teacher needs to employ simply language devoid of ambiguity, such as simple vocabulary and less complex syntactic structures, slower speech rate to enhance understanding and provide comprehension input.

The fifth hypothesis is the affective filter hypothesis, Krashen, argued that the best acquisition is likely to occur in an environment where anxiety is low and defensive tendencies are avoidable (Brown, 2007).

Language Teaching and Learning in Nigerian Secondary School

The goal of language teaching and learning in Nigeria is to develop learners' communicative competence in English as a second language. This goal support the fourth goal of the 2030 Agenda of the United Nations for Sustainable Development which focuses on quality education and lifelong learning for all, to enable every woman and man to acquire skills, knowledge, and values to become everything they wish and participate fully in their societies. Rivers (1978) in Hong Thi Nguyen, Wendy Warren & Heather Fehring (2014) recommend that "when selecting learning activities, we must always remember that our goal is for the students to be able to interact freely with others: to understand what others wish to communicate in the broadest sense, and to be able to convey to others what they themselves wish to share" (Rivers, 1978). In other words, until the learner reach understanding of what is said (the message) and he is understood clearly when he speaks, the goal of language acquisition is incomplete. The language learning skills or communication skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing) are vital to the teaching and learning of language. Looking at what language teaching and learning in Nigeria is all about, one thing comes to mind, that is the need for Nigerian learners to effectively learn English as a second language. This means that for the learner to be competent enough to understand and use the language they need to learn the language in natural environment which can be achieved by providing them with comprehensive input and in a classroom environment where according to Krashen (1992) cited by Johnson (2001) rules will be isolated and be dealt with one by one.

Language, according to Sapir (1921) in Lyons (1981) is purely human and non-instinctive method of communicating ideas, emotions and desires by means of voluntarily produced symbols. Ugot (2007) notes that "language comprises words, and being but symbols by which man expresses his ideas, are an accurate measure of the range of his thought at any given time." Language also uses grammar. According to Fromkin and Rodman (1974) when you know language, you know the sounds used in the language, the basic unit of meaning, such as words and the rules that combine these to form new sentences. The elements and rules constitute the grammar of language. This grammar is concerned with the principles that govern their interpretation (Radford, 1997). It will be safe to conclude that grammar is what we know when we know a language.

When one knows the grammar of a language, he or she needs to use the language. This means that knowing the rules of a language is not the same as knowing how to use it. Chomsky draws a distinction between linguistic competence (the speaker-hearer knowledge of his or her language) (Radford 1997). This means therefore that when one learns a language he or she learns the rules or principles that govern that language and how to use the language. Language teaching and learning therefore should involve acquisition of the rules as well as the usage.

The Communicative Language Teaching Approach (CLT)

The communicative approach to language teaching equips the learner with communicative competence. This is the knowledge of how, when, and where to use what language and to whom. Communicative approach to language teaching makes communicative competence the goal of language teaching and acknowledges the interdependence of language and communication (Larsen-Freeman, 2000). Communicative competence is "our tacit cultural knowledge about how to use language in different speech situations, how to interact with different people engaged together in different speech events and how to use language to perform different acts" (Falsod and Connor-Linton, 2006). In essence, communicative competence is our knowledge on what, how, when, to whom and where to use language.

According to Brown (2007), communicative competence consists of grammatical competence, discourse competence, social-cultural competence and strategic competence. Grammatical competence refers to the ability to recognize the lexical, morphological, syntactic and phonological features of a language and to make use of these features to interpret and form words and sentences. While discourse competence deals with the connectedness of a series of utterances, written words and/ or phrases to form a text, a meaningful whole e.g poem, telephone conversation or a novel. Social-cultural competence requires an understanding of the social context in which language is used, the roles of the participants, the information they share and the function of the interaction.

The strategic competence on the other hand is the coping strategy that we use in unfamiliar contexts, with constraints due to imperfect knowledge of rules or limiting factors in their application such as fatigue and distraction. In short, for one to communicate effectively, one has to use appropriate language coherently and in different contexts. Thus the standard for measuring our student's intelligibility in English is their ability to use the language for communication in different situation.

In order to achieve this, the teacher needs to give the students enough time to practice the language skills with integration of grammar as well as exposing them to different literary works.

According to Brown (2004), the communicative approach to language teaching has the following characteristics; firstly, the classroom goals are focused on all the components of communicative competence and not restricted to grammatical or linguistic competence. Secondly, language techniques are designed to engage learners in the pragmatic, authentic, functional use of language for meaning purposes. This means that when teaching English, the teacher needs to bring real life situations into the classroom which will help the students to use the language outside the classroom. The idea is that the students should not have problems when they meet the same situations outside the classroom. The language that should be used should be functional and not just explaining the structure of the language.

The other characteristic of the communicative approach to language learning according to Lansem-Freeman (2000) is that students frequently working in groups or pairs tends to transfer meaning in situations in which one person has information that the other lacks which helps for interaction and appropriate use of the right language. In this way, students are able to learn new information at the same time acquire the language skills. The working together in groups or pairs also help for participation in the class activities as opposed to the teacher doing all the work alone. This process, no doubt will address some of the problems teachers of English face

when teaching English language such as; low level of students participation in the teaching and learning activities, students' failure to use correct grammatical structures in both spoken and written work; inadequate materials; and poor background of students in English (Simango, 2009).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this paper is to discuss the usefulness of communicative language teaching approach in language learning and how it can help learners to go beyond learning the rules and principles governing language and grammar to knowing how, when, where whom to use language.

METHODOLOGY

The study is qualitative in nature. The data that was collected described the situation in the schools as such it does not deal with quantities. Data was collected during the researchers students' supervision at a teaching practice exercise of the Delta State College of Education, Mosogar in 2017\2018 session. The subjects involved in the study were the student teachers. This was so because these are the people who have just learnt the use of the communicative teaching approach and were supposed to implement the approach. The total number of students who were engaged in discussion of the approach was thirty five. Apart from the information that was sourced from the student teachers, the experienced teachers in the field were also interviewed informally to find out what they think about the approach. The number of teachers engaged in this informal discussion of the approach was five.

Data was also collected through observation. The total number of classes that were observed were ten and out of the ten classes five were English language classes. The observation involved assessing the classroom environment and setting, the number of students in each class, the availability of teaching materials like textbook, the use of English in the group, pair and class discussion and assessing the level of students' language.

Data was also collected through assessing of the student teachers notes as well as students examination scripts. The examination scripts were analyzed in terms of the content and structure in order to check if the four language skills are integrated as per the requirement of the communicative approach to language teaching.

The data was qualitatively analyzed using Creswell's procedures. Thus the data collected from the teachers, classroom observation and examination scripts was read through to make sense of the themes, ideas, relationships and categories that emerge from the data. By listing the themes, ideas and concepts, coding categories were developed. The data was coded and sorted out on the coding categories, from which conclusions were made.

Evaluation of the Approach in Relation to the Secondary Schools in Nigeria

Evaluating the approach will be based on the information that was sourced from the subjects, the observations that were made, the literature review and the theoretical framework. It has been observed from the literature and from the subjects that the choice of the communicative approach is worthwhile for the following reasons:

First, the communicative approach gives the opportunity to the students to speak more in the class setting, through the use of the group or pair work. Through these activities they are able

to interact and acquire the language skills, which is the goal of communicative language teaching. In other words, when the learners are engaged in a task they will learn to speak out their ideas at the same time learn to listen to the other members of the class. These activities allow learners to actively participate in the teaching and learning process which will in turn help them to internalize what they learn.

Second, the use of communication aid or real life situations in class helps students to acquire meaningful skills that can be beneficial outside the classroom environment. This is because it enables them to deal with things that affect or will affect them personally and motivate them to participate, at the same time provide them with input they can relate with and which makes language learning easy.

Third, the teaching of grammar in a context helps the learners to understand how they can use different forms of language in different context, rather than just understanding what English entails and the rules of grammar.

Finally, since the approach does not seek to achieve accuracy but the ability to express oneself, it gives the learners the courage to express themselves. As Krashen opined, that knowledge of the rules of grammar will not help in the acquisition of second language, instead it makes learners not to be anxious in the mastery of grammar rather strive to communicate the ideas, making language acquisition easy. This agrees with Krashen's affective filter hypothesis which argues that the best acquisition will occur in an environment where anxiety is low and defensiveness absent (Brown,2007).

From the argument presented above, it is clear that the aim of the communicative approach for the learner is for the mastery of the English language, as well as good academic performance in school. However, it should be noted that English language in Nigerian school is not only learnt for the sole purpose of obtaining good grades in class, but it is also to enable the learner to adapt well in the society after school since English language is the official language in Nigeria as well as the language in politics, commerce and the media (Onotere, 2007).

The other issue that is clear from the observation schedule and the classroom interaction or discussion (such as the use of group and pair) is the low background of the students in terms of English language usage. Majority of the students are not proficient in the use of English language because of the influence of their mother tongue and the Nigerian pidgin. Delta State, the area where this study was carried out is highly influenced by the Nigerian pidgin. Since the systems of Nigerian pidgin are quite different from those of the English language, an average Nigerian learner of English who uses pidgin may experience some levels of transfer from pidgin to English language in his English utterances (Onotere, 2008).

Implication for the Study

Implication for language curriculum planners is that communicative language teaching and learning approach in Nigerian schools has been a traditional method of teaching English language which gave priority to grammatical competence, because it is believed that grammar could be learned through direct instruction and through a methodology. These approaches to the teaching of grammar according to Richards (2006) were deductive and inductive. In deductive approach, students are taught grammar rules and then given opportunities to practice using them, while in inductive approach students are given examples which contained grammar rules and are asked to work out the rule themselves. It was assumed that language learning

meant building large numbers of grammatical sentences and patterns to produce when situation demands (Richards, 2006). But in communicative language teaching and learning (CLT) classes, grammar is not the starting point. Teachers are expected to teach grammar through materials in the environment such as pictures and other visual aids to communicate effectively. In supporting this view, Chimombo and Magalasi (2000) opined that grammar is to be explored not as a separate, isolated entity in the teaching and learning process but through the medium of the four language skills. It should be explored in literary texts as one of the many kinds of grammar in use. This means that a teacher is to decide on the language skill to be taught in class and incorporate a grammatical focus in it, and the literary text will be the context, which will be used in developing of the language skill of the learners, as well as the grammatical focus. Curriculum planners therefore should review the necessary aspect of the language policy to include students' active involvement in the learning process and place teachers as just monitor to facilitate explanations (Saricoban and Tilfarlioglu, 1999).

Implications for teacher: According to Ansary (2012). There are two main roles for teachers in CLT classes. The first one is to facilitate the process of learning among the students, and between the students and the different activities. The second one is acting as an independent participant or monitor within the learning process. Teachers' roles in the language learning classes is to act as an independent participant or referee and not as decision makers, teachers should allow learners to explore knowledge and find the answers to puzzles. (Chang, 2011). Implication for students: Group work activities increase interaction among learners, and they provide opportunities for cooperative relationships among them. Furthermore, group work allows the learners to control their own experiences. It also helps learners cooperate with their friends. Therefore, students should not shy away from getting involved in these learning activities, though it may be tasking but it is beneficial to them as it helps them to build relationships and develop self confidence in themselves.

Although CLT has its own difficulties, it can be implemented as one of the appropriate methods in language learning. The self-confidence of the learners is a main factor which is emphasized by CLT through activities such as, role play, group, or pair work. Comparing this method to traditional methods, teachers do not have the authority over the students in classroom. They just provide a situation in class for learners to communicate and share their knowledge.

One pertinent issue that came to play is the assessment of grammatical usage. Grammar is concerned with the principles which determine the formation of words, phrases, and sentences and the principles that govern their interpretation (Radford, 1997). What this portrays is that lack of the knowledge of grammar will automatically lead to inability to communicate. The implication is in line with Krashen's argument, that we acquire language through understanding of messages, so if a learner do not comprehend what the teacher is passing across, learning will definitely not take place.

CONCLUSION

The communicative language teaching approach is one of the best approaches that can be employed to solve the difficulty faced by students and teachers of English language in Nigerian schools. This is because its emphasis is on communicative competence which requires both the knowledge of the rules of language and the use itself, thereby enabling its viability to achieve the goal of teaching English in Nigerian schools. However this approach may not be productive

and efficient for solving the problem of mastering English in Nigerian school as long as the teachers exhibits non-chalant attitude towards its practice.

In addition, communicative language teaching requires that teaching of English in secondary schools should be considered as teaching communication and language skills; teachers should present authentic materials and activities for classroom interactions; language textbooks should only serve as guides to teachers and learners; and teachers should make language learning become natural for learners inside or outside the classroom.

Finally, students' background also poses a challenge to teachers who use this approach; this is because they prefer the traditional method of teaching. As a result, the communicative approach to language teaching though a good option in our fight to improve spoken and written English in our learners, is difficult to implement in Nigerian schools.

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