

THE PLACE OF LITERATURE IN A TASK-BASED LANGUAGE TEACHING CLASSROOM: THE FUTO EXPERIENCE

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ABSTRACT: *This paper examined the deployment of literature texts in the teaching of language using the task-based constructive approach. The theory of constructivist language learning is one which advocates a learner-centred, task-based approach, contrary to older teaching methods where the teacher dominates the classroom or where rote learning is encouraged. In a constructivist learning situation, the learner discovers new knowledge for himself as he undertakes certain language tasks with the guidance of the teacher-facilitator. This paper studied the use of literature texts, rather than isolated constructed sentences, as material for language tasks in the teaching of Use of English at the Federal University of Technology, Owerri (FUTO). The two areas of language examined in the paper were coherence in text organization and descriptive writing. The use of literature texts was found to be closer to authentic data than de-contextualised constructed sentences and, therefore, challenged and excited the learners more. The paper recommends a greater adoption of literature texts and other texts taken from real-life or near real-life situations as material in task-based learning.*

KEY WORDS: constructivism, task-based language teaching, literature texts in language teaching

INTRODUCTION

Background

Second language acquisition (SLA) is an area that has preoccupied scholars for quite some time now. Two issues have dominated discussions in this area. The first is determining how learners acquire a second language and the second is establishing the best method to teach a second language. Various theories of second language acquisition have been propounded and various approaches have been canvassed as being the most effective in the teaching of a second language. Numerous teaching methods or approaches abound in the literature [see Galloway, June 1993; Rodgers, September, 2001; Ubahakwe and Obi, 1979; Bell, 1981, and Wikipedia]. Some of the major ones include the traditional method, the audio-lingual method (ALM), the notional functional /situational method, the communicative language teaching (CLT), and constructivism.

Traditional Method: This is known as the grammar and translation method and prevailed until about 1950. Its features include the belief that language skills can be taught in isolation. There was also the emphasis on knowledge about language, such as definition, and amassing of

lexical items to be learnt in isolation. The traditional method equally concentrated on translation from one language to another.

Audio-Lingual Method (ALM): This teaching method is tied to the Behaviorism school which believed in learning by habit formation. The audio-lingual method made drilling, repetition and habit formation the major mode of instruction. Also grammatical structures were taught through dialogues representing native speakers. Students listened to taped conversations and mimicked the pronunciation and grammatical structures.

Notional Functional /Situational Method: The notional functional/situational approach arose as a reaction against the audio-lingual method. In this teaching approach, instructions are organized in terms of the notion of the context in which language can be used and the particular purpose (function) it serves. For example, in the market context, a speaker can perform the function of pricing goods. Learners are taught to perform language functions in real-life contexts.

Communicative Language Teaching (CLT): The communicative language teaching approach grew in the 1970s. In this teaching method, learners learn to communicate by interaction. Authentic texts are used to teach. Authentic texts are texts generated in real life situations. Situations are created where learners carry out classroom activities which reflect their real world experience outside the classroom.

Constructivist Approach: One of the most recent second language teaching theories is Constructivism. Hein (1991, p.1) describes it as “the latest catchword in educational circles”. Constructivism is also seen as “a theory — based on observation and scientific study—about how people learn.... People construct their own understanding and knowledge of the world, through experiencing things and reflecting on those experiences” (Educational Broadcasting Corporation, 2004, n.p.). One of the strategies for learning in a constructivist classroom is performance of various tasks under the moderation of the teacher-facilitator. In a typical constructivist classroom, learners are given the free hand to construct knowledge for themselves through exploration, reflection and interaction as they are actively involved in group tasks. The learner becomes an active initiator rather than a passive receptor. The role of the teacher becomes that of a moderator and facilitator. The learning tasks are real-life problem-solving challenges based on learners’ experience in their socio-cultural environment.

The Problem: Literature has always played a role in the second language learning environment. In justifying the teaching of literature, Willmott (1979, p. 57) writes: Quite apart from whether a work of literature edifies or entertains the pupils, its study confronts him with language and the need to elucidate its meaning. A work of literature for all reading ages – is an organization of language to which linguistic awareness must be applied if it is to be understood and appreciated.

Willmott’s assertion has highlighted the interdependence existing between literature and language. The knowledge of one reinforces the other. Given this mutual relationship existing

between language and literature, it is pertinent that we consider the role literature could play in a task-based constructivist classroom. This is the problem this paper intends to address. The use of literature texts as data for language learning can be regarded as authentic data as against constructed sentences for the purpose of illustrating something about language. Leech and Svartvik (2002, p. 4) describe such constructed structures as appearing “stilted or ‘wooden’, distancing the learning of grammar from real live usage”. A literature text can be considered as real life because it has a context even though an imaginary one. Abram (1981, p. 62), in presenting the view of Speech-act theorists, notes that a writer of fiction only “‘pretends’ to make assertions, or ‘imitates’ the making of assertions, and so suspends the ‘normal illocutionary commitment’ of the speaker or writer of such utterances to the claim that what he asserts is true”. Inasmuch as the truth value of illocutions in fictional works is questionable, it still does not remove from the fact that they are grounded in both textual and cultural contexts. Therefore, they are real life data.

Objectives: This paper, therefore, has the following objectives:

- (i) to demonstrate that a literature text, as contextualized language output, can offer that authentic data needed in a task-based constructivist classroom;
- (ii) to determine the suitability of literary texts in the teaching of language topics, such as coherence and descriptive writing, in a constructivist English language classroom.

Procedure: This paper adopted the qualitative approach in the study. The selection of the literary text used in the analysis did not follow any controlled procedure. It was drawn from one of the texts used in teaching Use of English to first year students in the Federal University of Technology, Owerri. It is basically a creative literary text. The class situation was not an experimental one, but one of the regular classes the researcher held for GST 102: Use of English II. It was not one where a purely constructivist philosophy of teaching was adopted all through. The teacher tried it out in teaching the two topics to see how well this approach could be applied.

PRESENTATION, ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

In the study, the literary text given below was used to demonstrate how a literary text could be adopted in the teaching of coherence and descriptive writing in a task-based constructivist classroom.

PASSAGE A

¹In Obia , Ukala, the madman, is as prominent a landmark as the giant tree which stands in the centre of the village square. ²It is said that he was made mad by a jealous business partner somewhere in Ibibio land many years ago. ³Ukala is dark-complexioned and of medium height. ⁴He has a very pronounced bow-leg and his hands are abnormally long. ⁵When he walks, he reminds one of a chimpanzee. ⁶His eyes are very remarkable indeed. ⁷They are widely set apart, dark and piercing. ⁸Despite his age and difficult circumstances, there is no tinge of grey in his dark hair. ⁹His bushy moustache is, however, snuff-stained.

[From *Use of English for Advanced Students* edited by Uzomah (1990), cited in Ihejirika, 2008, p. 250]

Teaching of Cohesion in a Task-Based Classroom

Halliday and Matthiessen (2004, p. 532) write the following about cohesion:

On the one hand, there is a set of lexicogrammatical systems that have evolved specifically as a resource for making it possible to transcend the boundaries of clause—that is, the domain of the highest-ranking grammatical unit. These lexicogrammatical systems originate in the textual meta-function and are collectively known as the system of COHESION.

The source identifies four ways of creating cohesion in English: “by (i) conjunction, (ii) reference, (iii) ellipsis and (iv) lexical organization” (533). It is cohesion that brings about the bonding we have in a text and gives it the character of being a text, as one sentence is linked with another in the paragraph.

The question now is: how can the teacher of English at the tertiary level use literature texts as resource to make students discover the role of cohesion in text-making in a constructivist classroom? The following is the procedure adopted by this researcher to make students discover for themselves what cohesion means as in the literary text used.

(a) Task One: Scrambling and Re-arranging of Text. As expressed by Halliday and Matthiessen (2004), cohesion transcends the boundary of the clause. The implication is that it holds across the sentences in a text and helps to keep them bonded. However, cohesion does not apply to any sequence of sentences. The students discovered this themselves when the sentences of the passage above were scrambled as below:

PASSAGE B

²It is said that he was made mad by a jealous business partner somewhere in Ibibio land many years ago. ⁹His bushy moustache is, however, snuff-stained. ³Ukala is dark-complexioned and of medium height. ⁷They are widely set apart, dark and piercing. ⁴He has a very pronounced bow-leg and his hands are abnormally long. ⁶His eyes are very remarkable indeed. ⁵When he walks, he reminds one of a chimpanzee. ¹In Obia, Ukala, the madman, is as prominent a landmark as the giant tree which stands in the centre of the village square. ⁸Despite his age and difficult circumstances, there is no tinge of grey in his dark hair.

The teacher guided the students through a series of questions and dialogue to discover the absence of bonding (cohesion) to a very great extent in the scrambled text. These questions include the following:

- Teacher:** (i) What is your observation in reading the scrambled text?
(ii) What do you think is responsible for the loss of meaning?
(iii) What does this tell you about the way writers organize sentences in a text?

The students were given the room to express their views on these questions and they eventually arrived at the conclusion that the loss of meaning was as a result of lack of cohesion.

(b) Task Two: Discovering the Logical Sequence of Sentences: The teacher led the students to discover that there was a logical sequence existing between the sentences which was disrupted in the scrambling.

Teacher: In re-arranging these sentences, there must be some things that suggest their sequence as to make it possible to rearrange them.

The students work to identify some of the factors that suggested the sequence of sentences. These include the following:

(i) Sentence One logically precedes Sentence Three because the apposite structure “the madman” is more appropriate after the first mention of the name Ukala.

(ii) Sentence Four logically precedes Sentence Five because of their semantic content: He reminds one of a chimpanzee because he has a very pronounced bow-leg and his hands are abnormally long.

(iii) Sentence Eight and Sentence Nine are logically contiguous because of related lexical items they share: *hair* and *moustache*; *grey* and *snuff-stained*. Again, Sentence Nine is a natural sequel to Sentence Eight because of the adverbial linking expression *however*.

(iv) Pronouns also helped in determining sequence because they make backward reference and the sentences containing their precedents naturally precede them.

(c) Task Three: Discovering Lexical Cohesion: The teacher helped the students to discover the lexical motif running through the text which sets up a lexical chain; what Halliday and Matthiessen (2004, p.524) call *logogenetic patterns*.

Teacher: In a text, one of the ways of recognizing the focus of the text is identifying the main subject (the person or thing that is in focus). One of the ways of doing this is to recognize the key word(s) or expression(s). This is usually repeated several times in the text. Sometimes, its synonyms or near synonyms are repeated. They set up a lexical chain that runs like a motif throughout the text. Now, what is the key word or expression in the text?

Answer: The students scan the text to give the answer: *Ukala*

Teacher: What are other repeated forms of this word or synonyms or pronouns or other expressions that make reference to this key word?

Answer: *Ukala, madman, he, his hands, his eyes, his age, and his bushy moustache.*

(d) Reference: Reference links elements in the text by making reference to them. When referential links are sustained within the text, they form referential chains. The teacher directed the students to discover use of reference in the text.

Teacher: The use of reference also helps to sustain the sort of cohesion we have seen so far in the text. Elements used in making reference in the text include pronouns. Do we have examples of reference in the text? Identify them and their precedents.

The students scan the text to identify instances of reference in the passage which are the chains of pronouns used to refer to Ukala and some parts of his body: *he, his, and they*. Contrary to some students' thinking, *it* in Sentence Two is not a pronoun but an expletive (a filler structure). The role of the teacher here is to guide the students to correct their wrong generalization that *it* is a pronoun.

Teaching Descriptive Writing in a Task-based Classroom

Descriptive writing was another topic this researcher taught his GST 102 class using a task-based interactive approach as advanced in the theory of constructivism. The learners were guided by the teacher to discover for themselves what descriptive writing is. The text above (Passage A) was also used for illustration. The following steps were taken, each step corresponding with a particular task.

(a) Task one: Identifying the writer's purpose: The teacher guided the students to discover the writer's purpose by posing the leading question:

Teacher: Every writer has a purpose in mind when he writes a text. His purpose may be to define, explain, classify, narrate, persuade, describe, express an emotion, etc. What do you consider to be the purpose of this writer?

The students were left to work out the answer. Interaction among them was allowed as they argued it out among themselves what they thought could be this writer's intention based on the evidence before them. They naturally came up with the answer:

Answer: The writer is trying to describe somebody.

This answer prompted the next task.

(b) Task Two: Identifying the language resources used by the writer to achieve his purpose: Having identified the writer's purpose, the next task was to discover the language resources the writer used to achieve the effect.

Teacher: We are in agreement that this writer is trying to describe somebody. What language features did he use that suggest to us that his intention is to describe?

The students scan the text trying to see language features that show that the writer's intention was to describe. As usual, they were allowed to work in groups even though the groups were not formally defined. The sitting arrangement and the class size did not allow clear divisions. The following answers came up:

Answers:

1. The focus of the writing is on somebody: Ukala the madman. The focus is achieved through repetition and prominence.

2. The dominant expressions are descriptive expressions. These include the following:

- as prominent a landmark as the giant tree which stands in the centre of the village square
- made mad by a jealous business partner somewhere in Ibibio land many years ago
- dark complexioned
- of medium height
- pronounced bow-leg
- abnormally long (of hands)
- reminds one of a chimpanzee (when he walks)
- remarkable (of his eyes)
- widely set apart (of his eyes)
- dark (of his eyes)
- piercing (of his eyes)
- no tinge of grey in his dark hair

- bushy moustache
- snuff-stained (of his moustache)

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

The use of literature texts in the constructivist classroom where emphasis is placed on task performance has been seen to be viable. This brings real-life texts into the teaching situation. Just like the literature text, texts in other fields such as the sciences, commerce, etc. can be used as data to teach in a task-based classroom. This will bring the real world into the classroom and make them better performers on the job. This researcher, therefore, recommends the use of authentic texts, such as literary texts, in the teaching of English rather than constructed isolated sentences.

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