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DEMONSTRATING FUNCTIONAL INTERACTIVE LANGUAGE TEACHING IN THE NIGERIAN UNIVERSITIES

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ABSTRACT

Applied linguistics affords Linguists the opportunity of solving language related problems using various methods. In this paper, we x-ray the Nigerian University classroom situation in the teaching of the English language viz – a – viz the use of functional interactive method. Following Littlewood (1981) and Krashen (1982), we posit that the teaching and learning of the English language in the Nigerian classroom situation needs to be done in two ways, so as to aid easy acquisition of the language: provide natural discourse and the need to put learners at the core of the learning. Apart from these, the teacher's roles are highlighted as: identifying learners' strategy, teaching the standard, accentuating standard not status and providing a comprehensive input. A comprehensive blend of the learners' and teachers' roles will make interaction meaningful in the Nigerian Universities ESL classroom.

Keywords: Nigerian Universities Classroom, Functional Interactive Method, Natural Discourse, Learners' Strategy, Esl Classroom.

INTRODUCTION

Applied linguistics, the application of linguistic insights to solving language related problems, has been very relevant to man in the recent years. Its use has not only served as pointers to human problems but its application has actually helped in solving some identified problems especially as they related to language teaching and learning. Some of the major areas where applied linguistics has been useful include psycholinguistics, which is the study of the relationship between linguistic behaviour and the psychological processes and thoughts to underline it. Clinical linguistics, another area where applied linguistics has been helpful, is the application of the linguistic theories and methods to the analysis of disorders of spoken, written or sign language. Another branch, computational linguistics is the study of language, using the techniques and concepts of computer science, especially with reference to the problems posed by the fields of machine translation, information retrieval and artificial intelligence (Crystal, 1997).

Other major domains of applied linguistics include the field of translation, stylistics, lexicography, and foreign language learning and teaching. The teacher in the second language teaching situation not only needs to know the

grammar of the language in question – what Dwyer (1999) calls the 'knowing that' of declarative knowledge but must possess the procedural knowledge, the 'knowing how'. Thus, the teacher not only knows the fact but also the skill which is made possible through his/her understanding of psycholinguistics and his/her ability to relate this to the classroom situation. The ability to effectively utilize and apply all of these in the classroom shows the teacher's communicative competence. Hymes (1972) explains that communicative competence relates to appropriateness in the use of sentences in relation to context. In the present paper, we explore how language use and literary skills can be fostered through teacher/student interplay.

1. Framework of the Study

The goal, in Nigeria today, is to have Nigerians use the English language effectively. This need is emphasized among the literates and those that want to be so educated. Efforts are therefore made individually or collectively to compete relatively well with native speakers of the English language. Thus, in the country, several programmes apart from the academics/school programmes have been introduced to get even more people educated in the English language. The objective of these programmes is to have citizens communicate

effectively using the English language. To make this possible, the learning of the structures of the language especially the grammar is noticed in all learning situations.

This paper examines the teacher/students' relationship in the classroom situation, where students are expected to master the writing skill. We focus on the teaching and evaluation of the written form of the language since most learning situations really center on this with little or no tests of the oral language. It is noteworthy to mention that there are few functional language laboratories in most Nigerian Universities.

2. The Classroom Situation

Learning any language is not usually as automatic/mechanical as what entails in some other types of learning. Learning a language must go beyond learning some forms. It should involve putting these forms/rules into some meaningful linguistic use. The formal type of learning obtains in the classroom situation, where the instructor is a model and teaching is technically and or sometimes dogmatically initiated. The essence of this type of language classroom is to provide some rationale for language learning. This is the philosophy Dwyer (1999) claims creates a link between programme goals and learners' outcomes. It is also important to use what we know about language learning in the context of available institutional learning resources. Biehler (1974) submits that psychology has to be applied to learning. The question is how can this be achieved in the Nigerian classroom situation, especially with certain factors, such as number of students in class, environment of learning, unavailability of resources, unattractive motivation of students and teachers standing in contention?

Learning a language goes beyond knowing grammatical rules; it is using language meaningfully. Melrose (1991:18) reiterating Littlewood (1981) says, "in order to express functional meanings, the learner needs to acquire not only a repertoire of linguistic meaning, but also a repertoire of strategies for using them in concrete situations". To him, the most efficient communicator in a foreign language is not always the person who is best at manipulating its structures. It is often the person who is most skilled at processing the complete situation involving himself/herself and his/her

hearer, taking account of what knowledge is already shared between them (e.g. from the situation or from the preceding conversation), and selecting items which will communicate his message effectively.

Subsequently, having knowledge of a language entails the ability to relate this form to function, while considering the interpersonal relationship between our interlocutors and us.

3. Individualized and Group Learning

There are different types of learning. Vester (1998), for instance differentiates four types: auditive learning (this involves learning by listening and speaking), visual learning (this is learning through the eyes by watching), haptic learning (learning by touching and feeling) and learning through the intellect. But, we can make a distinction between individualised learning and group learning such as we have in the second language learning classrooms situation in Nigeria Universities. Unlike in the individualised learning where the learner learns at his/her own pace using a given strategy, the group learning situation presents a number of varied students with different backgrounds, abilities and various strategies of learning. The second language teacher is, therefore, faced with the problem of attaining a desired goal as it concerns individuals as well as collective learners.

Dwyer's (1999) study the types of learners of the African languages, a programme at Michigan State University corresponds with our classification of learning types. Dyer made a distinction between the supervised tutorial learning type and the teacher – led classroom mode. The supervised tutorial type is learner centered where the learner is left to work out his/her own system with some occasional guide from a model. This type of learning is not common in Nigeria, since it requires much money to pay the model and rich resources to help learners. A teacher guides the classroom method, the more common and relatively cheaper method is the one that is used in the Nigerian Universities classrooms.

With the group learning (classroom model), the language teacher is faced with a number of problems. First, he/she has to cope with fifty students and even more, which of course is not a typical class as far as learning is concerned. He/she, therefore, has no restriction on the choice of his/her

learner since the choice of them does not depend on him. In this situation, several individuals who have the tendency of reacting differently to a given system are faced with the same uniform system – the teacher, his/her linguistic knowledge and procedural awareness. As such, in this circumstance, the teacher cannot always determine which of the various methods available to him/her will just be suitable enough to meet the needs of his/her varied learners.

The teacher, in this instance, not only needs to understand the rules of a language, but also must be capable of applying such knowledge and even more to meeting the various linguistic needs of the learners – that is, being flexible about the application of every learning strategy. We advocate a drift from the earlier traditional focus where classroom teaching was a direct teaching predetermined by a strict programme determined by the teacher. Today, the focus must be on learners' competence to participate in communicative setting. Melrose (1991:20) in his analysis of Cook's (1985) syllabus design says, "in this representation of the syllabus design model implied by Cook's observation on the needs of language learners, choice of functions is influenced by both sociolinguistic conditions (situational factors) and interaction sequence; choice of linguistic forms (realisation) is influenced not only by function but also by situation". The two major conversation strategies described by Verhoeven (2000) become useful in engaging student in zones of proximal development. These strategies include scaffolding and apprenticeship.

Scaffolding, which involves the learners' building on and extending their statement and contribution, can be ensured through six means? They are modeling, which refers to the learners' imitation of the teacher's behaviour; contingency management - concerns the use of rewards. Through feedback, another means, the teacher is able to correct the learner's performance; instruction helps learners regulate his/her learning; by means of questioning, the learner is encouraged through the assistance of the teacher to perform mental operation. Cognitive structuring, another means, concerns the provision of a structure for acting out a given task. To Verhoeven, these six ways of assisting learner's performance come together to

control frustration and the risk of finding task solutions.

Apprenticeship, the second major conversational strategy centers on learners working in groups with minimal teacher assistance. The idea of learners working in groups, preferably small ones, has proved to be effective in increasing learner's language learning opportunities. Such cooperative group works are viewed as special cases of apprenticeship. It is believed that with group works learners are able to make the best of meaning; transfer information and model their communicative strategy.

4. The English Language in Nigeria: A Case of Acquisition or Learning

The English language, a second language in the country is not only learnt for its sake, but it is also learnt to comprehend certain other subjects, since the dissemination of knowledge in these other subjects is done via English. Understanding the English language therefore can almost always be equated with the learning and of course, understanding of other courses, which are either linguistic or non-linguistic based. The knowledge of the English language therefore forms the foundation on which other related and non-related knowledge is based. With this much-recognised importance, should the language be acquired or learnt?

Language acquisition, obtaining the knowledge of a language by some unknown means, is usually associated with the child's mother tongue i.e. first language. One's understanding or knowledge of a second language, however, requires some learning where efforts have to be exerted both by the class teacher and learner. Contrary to previous beliefs, teachers could make acquiring the English language possible simply by exposing learners to rich linguistic data at an early age and by encouraging continuous use of the language rather than make teaching/learning highly formal as it has been the case in most Nigerian schools. If no language is more difficult to learn than the other, but the difference in learning being dependent on factors such as learner's age, teacher or model, condition of learning etc. It goes to show that the English language could still be naturally acquired as we did our various mother tongues. This type of theory of acquisition was promoted by Krashen (1982).Learning the

English language cannot be likened to learning to do any other thing like the behaviorists would claim, and we cannot continue to teach the second language (English) like we do the other academic subjects.

Schmitt and Celce-Murcia (2010:6) explain that the studies carried out by Littlewood (1981) and Krashen (1982) show that "learners could indeed become quite fluent in an L2 through exposure without explicit instruction". Some teachers may strongly want to argue whether or not acquiring the English language in Nigeria is possible. Rather than engage in such academic debate, we could just go ahead to suggest ways we could make acquiring the language possible.

4.1 Providing Natural Discourse

First, language acquisition is always equated with natural linguistic input with the child taking time to process the system in his/her brain after which production of meaningful sounds begins. In the same vein, a natural second language-learning situation is made possible when the linguistic data is rich enough to be processed naturally by the learner. Such competence in the language usually determines the learner's performance in it. Thus, the written language, which is the concern of this paper is made possible and becomes easier, when learners already have a grip on the natural language rather than on mere language forms taught in bits. Writing, remember means more than knowing forms, but being able to put these different forms together using the written symbols. The teacher therefore, must use the language naturally, since learning only becomes effective when the learner is able to do some inductive reasoning from the various examples of the language. He/she must accordingly, not be in too much haste to have learners produce what has not been comprehended. The idea to this end is that, comprehension (through natural data) must precede production since the ability to do whatever task there is can only be based on what has been understood.

It is not possible for us to prescribe the format that the classroom discourse must take. However, like understanding any discourse, understanding forms and meaning in the second language learning situation may have to be dependent on certain rules and principles. For example, the teacher has to posses certain extra-linguistic qualities since he/she is usually responsible for the direction of discourse and also decides what topic to speak on and how to go about discussing it and when to end it. The teacher, therefore, needs to assess the situation and the students' comprehension before giving them task to do.

To do this well, the second language teacher, in the classroom situation, for instance, can do two basic things; one, he/she could use language to make explicit those insights which had previously been known only intuitively. Secondly, he/she could talk over a new knowledge in order to bring it into meaningful relationship with the old. This suggests that knowledge is useless to us unless it is incorporated into the complex of thoughts, feelings, attitudes and evaluations on which our actions are based (Barnes, 1978:158).

4.2 The Learner, the core of the learning process

Who determines the course plan? Is the teacher or the learner? When should the teacher continue for instance, and when is he/she sure there has been some comprehension? The learner, in any learning situation, is the focus and he/she usually should determine the pace of teaching. Teachers must be careful not to dogmatically follow outlined topics in the syllabus. The framework therefore, must be alive, always ready to suggest what can be learnt next based on learner's comprehension and reaction to already acquired knowledge. This principle, Krashen refers to as a natural syllabus.

The student therefore develops his/her awareness of the use of language through his/her own speech and writing. Students ought to be allowed to find their own voices without being buried beneath a melancholy heap of rhetoric, style-sheets, and or topic plans. We do not want to encourage bad use of the language neither do we stress the idea of leaving students entirely on their own, but we suggest that students be allowed to respect their own dialects and grammar, while they learn established forms of English for the sake of economy survival while they, at the same time, under the guidance of the teacher, feel as safe as tortoise under its shell. What the teacher needs often in this situation is learner's feedback. Olateju's (1998) explores the functions of utterances in ESL classrooms. She identifies

the "hearing – check (H/C)" as one of the categories for checking whether the pupils are following the teacher or not.

5. The Roles of the Teacher

In a typical classroom situation, the teacher (the model), learners and other factors determine the success or otherwise of the learning exercise. As the model, the teacher usually sets the pace at which learners go. Most often than not, the learners not only look unto their teachers as some demi-gods, they also unconsciously find themselves take after them –if not physically, linguistically. The teacher realises what herculean task he/she is faced with if he/she remembers that it is possible for us (including the learners) to think about what we know only via language. Besides, language also helps us take conscious responsibility for that which we know, reshape it to suit some new purposes and to critically react to such new designs. Thus, rather than act the master always, the second language teacher must, from time to time, ask himself/herself the following questions: Can all learners work alone or would there be advantages when they learn side by side with other students? What major roles does language play in learning generally? When do we, as teachers, modify our attitudes and values? Is it when we are alone with the individual learner outside class or when interacting with them in the classroom? Does the learner learn from some take home assignments? It does not end here though.

A further stage in the teaching process is providing answers to the questions. To do this, the teacher, for instance, should be interested in knowing who he/she as well as the learners is (how they stand in relationship with one another and what roles they need to play in order to complement each other's roles in the classroom context). The questions and their required answers serve as guides to the language teacher in the classroom situation.

Generally, the teacher's main role is to provide meaningful intercommunication between himself/herself and the learners. But he/she also must ensure the following, to have a desired goal.

5.1 Identifying learner's strategy

The teacher must identify the learner's strategy of learning the second language. Generally, the humanistic teacher is quick to recognize the fact that language strategies are not usually automatic but arise from the individual attempts to communicate, with others. Such strategies could be affected by the established social expectations of a classroom, by the nature of the subject matter and the formulation of the task and the learner's definition of situation. Barnes (1978) opines that, to understand a learner's strategy, the teacher has to pay attention to the learner and the communication patterns of the classroom and school, since these may be telling him/her loudly what constitutes knowledge and what the learner ought to be doing.

In teaching writing therefore, individual learner and not the syllabus dictate and or determine what is to be taught. Learner's centeredness is appreciated in the teaching of this skill when the teacher pays attention to every learner, identifying his/her problems and seeing him/her through such.

5.2 Teaching the Standard

Following Pattison's (1989) opinion, the Standard English should be taught as a practical theory of social advantage, never moral or aesthetic norm. Students, for instance, must be made to understand the advantages they stand to gain when they speak/use the English language well. It is not logical to present correct English as an ethical necessity as it has been the case. With such false logic, learners wrongly reflect the language they need to learn. Teachers as much as possible therefore, need an honest rational for teaching the language.

5.3 Accentuating Standard Not Status

In the English as a Second Language (ESL) situation, the Standard English should be treated as a second language and not as a 'better' language compared to that which the student already speaks and writes. Students should not be made to feel inadequate because the language of their daily lives and feelings does not correspond with the formal language of our society. They should rather be encouraged to learn the rules and the benefits attached to using this formal language in their economic and social lives.

5.4 Providing A Comprehensive Input

Rather than concentrate entirely on formal teachings, teachers should strive to make all learners read and write all those public documents by which society organizes itself. This idea centers on meaningful learning. Students should be encouraged to think, speak and write according to their own conceptions of literacy. Rather than impose ideas on learners, teachers should allow a learner to develop himself/herself using his/her own strategy. As a mother guides and helps her baby to crawl and then later walk, the teacher's role lies in making the learner gradually speak and write clear and comprehensible form of the language. The teacher must develop the consciousness of language necessary for the student to comprehend his/her own linguistic convention.

Furnishing students with plain but natural data will be useful since our linguistic level stands out to determine our ability or performance in some other disciplines. Linguists have blamed students' poor performance in several other subjects on their inability to understand language – a means of expressing these other subjects. Crystal (1989) takes a similar stand with Barnes. They both assert that language does influence the way we perceive and remember. It affects the ease with which we perform mental tasks. Several experiences have shown that people recall things more easily if the things correspond to readily available words or phrases in their encyclopedic knowledge.

Conclusion

Generally, the teacher and learner - participants in the ESL situation – must recognize certain roles they need to perform in the learning process. The teacher, the model, must strive to pass on the standard to the learners with ease. In Pattison's (1989:33) view, "though the norms of correct usage may be false, pretentious, and outdated, they are the standards of literate behaviour demanded in government, business and the profession". The learners, he says, must respect their own non-standard literacy while learning for practical reasons and knowing the Standard English is necessary because it is the language of power and success.

The teacher's job lies in how he/she can make the learner

cope with the linguistic job at hand using an appropriate effective strategy. More importantly, meaningful learning must be encouraged where learners are allowed to have some shared experience through films, diagram, apparatus and written texts. Such allows for some practical learning rather than their guessing at what the teacher needs. Such individualised learning, guided by the teacher not only checks the over direction of the teacher but equally controls the unstructured 'freedom' of the so-called project, which many children may not be able to cope with (Barnes 1978:159). In all, the teacher must set up learning situations that will make the learning of the English language as productive as possible.

In this paper, we have attempted to present the teacher as a coach, who rather than dominate the classroom context shares control with his or her students making them gain more inner control thereby depending less on others. The teacher, as a coach, differs from the traditional teacher who only impacts knowledge and strategies in a structured way via some lesson notes meant to be exhausted in a fixed time schedule. The classroom situation should not be one of the situations which Babajide (2000) says its language should be stereotyped, ritualized and conservative such that no room is allowed for creative and innovative use of language. The functional classroom teacher must interact meaningfully with the learners.

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