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TEACHING THE USE OF ENGLISH CLASS IN NIGERIAN TERTIARY INSTITUTIONS USING COMMUNICATIVE PRINCIPLES

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Abstract

The need to engage students more in the language class and make language teaching more interactive with learners' needs cannot be overemphasized. This paper discussed the communicative approach to language teaching as an approach that can engage students more actively and serve the purpose of developing students' ability to use language as opposed to knowing about the language. The paper pointed out that the approach has been proven to be effective in developing various communication skills in students and it highlighted the role of the teacher as a guide and facilitator in the language class. It demonstrated how class activities can be made communicative and recommended that English language teachers in tertiary institutions, particularly those taking the Use of English or General English class, should consider integrating the approach in the General English class. The paper concluded by recommending what should be put in place for language classes to be more communicative and meaningful to students.

Introduction

The Use of English course, Communication Skills or General English as it is referred to in different higher institutions of learning in the country is a compulsory course taken by all students admitted to read whatever course. For some institutions like the polytechnics, the course runs throughout the National Diploma level and for one year at the Higher National Diploma level (NBTE 2004). While in the

universities, it is a one semester course that is taken at the point of entry for all undergraduate programmes. In the case of colleges of education, the course runs in the first and second semesters of year one and two and in the second semester of year three (NCCE, 2009).

The goal of the English language course as spelt out by universities, polytechnics and colleges of education is to help develop communicative competence in students. This is to enable students develops skills in communicating effectively in all situations and to help them benefit from instruction in their various areas of study (NBTE, 2004; NCCE, 2009). Maisamari (1999) pointed out that language instruction at the tertiary level is supposed to be a development programme, but has generally been conceived differently. While some see it as a remedial programme, others see it as a development programme. The position of this paper is that it should be seen as both remedial and development programmes meant to help students develop what they have learnt previously in order to benefit from instruction carried out in their various areas of study which is conducted in English language. This is because sound knowledge of the language of instruction results in better understanding of different areas of study and by extension better performance (Richards, 2006).

However, studies (Silver & Ephraim, 2012; Dada, 2013) have shown that even after being exposed to English language instruction for at least twelve years before getting to the tertiary level, students have continued to demonstrate low level of competence in the use of the language. This, some scholars (Aloitaibi, Aldiahani & Alrabah, 2014; Dada, 2013) posit, is because the students come with different language needs while others tie it to poor teaching methods adopted by teachers over the years. They complain that the methods used lag far behind the result that is expected. Suggestions have been made by scholars like O'Neill (2000) on having the English language class matched with the various tasks and activities the students are actively engaged in carrying out. Also, students are expected to be actively involved in producing input for the language class and not just rely on output from the teacher who in most traditional language classes is the sole source of input in the class.

The purpose of this paper is to highlight the need for a shift from the conventional approach of teaching to a more interactive approach since the students are believed to have reached a level where they can interact more meaningfully with each other, with the teacher, with the class activities and with texts. This approach borrows from a wide range of methods motivated by research findings in second language acquisition (SLA), cognitive and educational psychology.

The form of instruction where students are active participants, where information is got from students' interaction with the language and with each other through various interactive activities is referred to as communicative. The Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) approach emerged as a response to the traditional and structural approaches which some grammarians considered as inadequate in meeting the needs of developing communicative competence. Proponents of this approach are led by the basic principle that whatever is meaningful to the learner, promotes learning outcomes and studies have shown that this approach is effective in developing various language skills in students (Inececay & Inececay, 2001; Xiao, 2011). This applies to students in both second language (ESL) and foreign language (EFL) environments.

This paper recommends the adoption or adaption of communicative activities in the Use of English class as a shift from the conventional structural approach class. This is to enable teachers try out new ways of handling the language class and test the effectiveness of the much talked about communicative approach which teachers shy away from because of the heavy demand it places on them and the small class size required.

Communicative Language Teaching Approach

The Communicative Language Teaching approach commonly referred to as CLT is a set of principles about the goals of language teaching which is concerned about how learners learn a language and the kind of classroom activities that best facilitate learning (Richards, 2006). The principles of the communicative approach according to SIL (1999) are that: Activities that involve real life communication promote learning; activities

in which language is used for carrying out different tasks promote learning and language that is meaningful to the learner promotes learning. The concern in the communicative circle is not just about how learners learn a language but also about the role of both the teacher and the learner in the classroom.

This approach emerged as a reaction to the existing audiolingual methods which were based on the school of behaviourism in psychology and structuralism in linguistics. The structural approach is still being used in schools where presentation, practice and production (PPP) pattern is used (Richards, 2006). Richards explains the PPP pattern as present, practice and produce where language patterns and dialogues are presented by the teacher for the students to practice through mimicking, repetition and memorization. Similarly, drill type exercises, substitution drills and model sentences are presented for the students to practice and master. This is based on the belief that once the right habit is mastered, the students are likely to make less grammatical errors. The danger with this approach is mastering a wrong habit which is solidly registered on one 's memory.

Unlike the structural approach of the behaviourists theorists which laid emphasis on spoken language because it saw language as a mechanical process of habit formation and automatization, CLT is based on the theory that the primary function of language is communication and not accuracy in the use of grammar items. CLT proponents (Richards, 2006; Savignon, 2002) maintain that one can master correct structures and the rules of language but still cannot use the language in meaningful communication. Since the goal of language instruction is to develop communicative competence such that the learners can function in different settings using the language, it is important that a more result oriented approach is considered and adapted or adopted in the language classroom particularly in tertiary institutions. Students of tertiary institutions need language for different purposes. The main purpose however is for them to function effectively in their different fields of study and to gain more meaningfully from instructions in these fields. The language class should therefore reflect these needs in such a way that language items taught are so done within the context of meaningful communication. This way, communicative

competence will be developed in the students because according to SIL (1999), language instruction that is meaningful to learners promotes learning outcomes, and activities in which language is used for carrying out meaningful tasks also promote learning. In CLT, emphasis is on language use and not usage. Here the learners are guided to learn to use the language and not to know about the language.

Communicative Competence

Communicative competence is the ability to express oneself, interpret what has been expressed by others and negotiate meaning. Savignon (2002) said competence has to do with the ability to achieve effectiveness and appropriateness of speech during the process of interaction. This involves the mastery of functions needed for communication across a wide range of situations, where vocabulary and grammar are chosen according to the functions identified (Richards, 2006). Communicative competence applies to both oral and written communication because communication takes place in both forms.

Communicative competence in grammar for instance is about the rules of application and how to use them in effective communication. Savignon (2002) cited Canale and Swain as explaining that communicative competence in language is achieved at four levels namely: linguistic competence, sociolinguistic competence, discourse competence and strategic competence. While linguistic competence is competence in the use of lexis, syntax and structure, sociolinguistic competence has to do with learners' appropriate use of language in different situations and settings. Discourse competence is about speakers' ability to combine language to form meaning (Savignon, 2002). Strategic competence relates to the use of strategies that make up for the inadequate abilities in other aspects of communication. Several activities are classified as communicative activities. These activities usually require different stages of interaction between the students and the negotiation of meaning through these stages of interaction.

Communicative lessons are task oriented, need based, learner centered, contextualized, authentic and recursive (Larsen & Freeman, 2003). Activities that are as authentic as possible are used in the communicative class. Differences exist between the practice in a General English class and a communicative class. The first is motivation as different motivation levels have been reported to exist between the students in the two classes (Netiksiene, 2006). The students in the communicative class usually have a high motivation level. According to Riga (2000), the students in the General English class sometimes lack the focus their counterparts in the communicative class have.

Maisamari (1999) commented that the General English class has a high probability of presenting linguistic items in an arbitrary manner. In a communicative class, students are not only learning a language item but are experimenting with it as well. These imitate as much as possible what the students will be encountering in real life situations. Some of these activities include: games, role play, pair communication, information gap exercises, jigsaw, interview, dialogues, reporting, storytelling or making students to write about their experiences and so on. Other communicative tasks include surveys, using stimulus pictures and prompt questions, or a series of pictures which need to be sequenced before a story is discussed (Belchamber, 2007). This way, Belchamber continues, even the challenges in the mixed ability class can be addressed.

In teaching the simple present tense or simple past tense for instance, the general practice is for the teacher to introduce the tense, list its various uses, give several exercises showing the use of the tense and ask students to make their own sentences using the tense. In a typical communicative class however, the students can be led by the teacher, through questioning, to write or talk about what they do every day, or what their friends do every Saturday in order to project the use of the tense with the third person singular personal pronoun subject. Equally, they can be made to talk about how they spent their weekend or last holiday in order to project the use of the simple past tense. Rules concerning the use of the tenses are learnt inductively from the way they are used in communication. For instance, with the third person singular, the

students will notice that the verb carries a +s morpheme. This will suggest the rule for using the tense with the third person singular. The teacher can guide the students to see this by asking questions.

In teaching the parts of speech, students do not necessarily need to know what nouns or verbs or adjectives are as much as they need to know how to use them in meaningful communication. Ordinarily, one does not go to the market or church or office and explain what a noun is or the types of nouns or whether their plurals are formed by adding a +s morpheme or not. In a communicative class, how the various nouns in both their singular and plural forms are used in various situations to carry out various tasks are explored and the students are led to see the rules governing them in the way they are used. This way, students not only learns how to use the language item, but how their rules apply, Information should be communicated using language items in focus and in the course of communicating such information, the use of the language item is learnt.

To teach reading, materials from students' areas of study can be used where particular reading skills needed by the students based on their areas of specialization should be projected, In the case of writing, in a communicative class, teaching the different writing skills can be done through group discussions or general class discussion after which the students can be made to write their individual essays or compositions, Ideas generated and the development of the ideas can be got through group discussion.

To teach prepositions for instance, the students can be engaged in showing directions, examining maps or diagrams and explaining the location or position Of some places or objects, This can be followed by questions requiring the students to explain what prepositions do in a sentence, When teaching other language items like the use of 'can' in expressing ability and not permission, the teacher can make students to carry out different tasks and ask them to talk about all the things they can do. This way, the students are actually using the language to learn more language.

The Role of the Teacher in a Communicative Class

The role of the teacher in a communicative class is different from his/her role in a structural class. While in the structural class, the teacher is the 'master' and source of information during the lesson, the reverse is the case in a communicative class. The teacher in a communicative class is a programme implementer. As a programme implementer, the teacher draws up the language programme for the students based on a needs analysis conducted in order to identify the language needs of the particular group of students he/she is to teach and implement the programme drawn up. This implies that the teacher is also a needs assessor,

The position of this paper however, is that a new programme does not necessarily have to be drawn up. The course content drawn up by the regulatory bodies saddled with the responsibility of doing so, should be used by the teacher but the content should be taught communicatively. In the communicative setting, the teacher is also a material designer where he/she sources for materials for the language class through collaboration with content teachers, adoption or adaption of existing materials.

In addition to being a programme implementer and material designer the teacher in a communicative setting is a guide and facilitator. As a guide, the teacher provides the context for various interactions in the class by setting up activities for communication to actually take place in the class, This way, he/she leads the students to explore the target language. The teacher can from time to time correct errors but this should be done sparingly or in such a way that the students are made to see the errors committed themselves through pair-checking of answers before an open class checking. The need for an ongoing negotiation during interaction with peers increases learners' overt participation (Belchamber, 2007), A lot of demand is placed on the teacher in a communicative class as ingenuity is required to prepare class activities that are communicative. Generally, the teacher's role is to facilitate the activities that go on between the participants, the activities and the materials,

For the students, they are active participants in the learning process. They arethe main focus, as such, they are actively engaged in generating input for the lesson,

In the course of interacting with the language and with their peers, output generated forms input for the language item being learnt. This is in agreement with Krashen's theory on second language acquisition where language learning is said to come about through using language communicatively rather than through practicing language skills. The students also serve as guides to the language teacher when it comes to introducing their subject areas which will be used in the language class.

Conclusion

English language is a second language in Nigeria and should be taught as such. It should not be taught as a subject which terminates after examination but as a life long skill which the students will continue to use even after leaving school. The type of teaching that goes on at the tertiary level should reflect this. This is because at this level, language instruction is no longer for the purpose of remediation only but for development as well, Having examined the communicative language teaching approach as learner centered and driven towards both learning language and doing something with the language, teachers of the General English classes are encouraged to shift emphasis from the "form focused" form of instruction to a "meaning focused" one, The teachers' attention is drawn to the fact that the structural class can adopt communicative activities in order to engage the students more in the learning process. Trying out a new approach will demonstrate whether the low level of performance in English language is as a result of the methodology being used or something else is responsible. It will equally substantiate or debunk the claim by proponents of the communicative approach that the approach is effective in developing different language skills in students.

Recommendations

Teachers of General English classes should be trained English language teachers because only trained language educationists are conversant with language teaching methodologies and how to implement them. In addition, the language teachers should be trained on the implementation of the communicative principles

because teaching communicatively requires a sound knowledge of how to apply the communicative principles.

- There should also be collaboration between the English language teacher and the content teachers of the various programmes in institutions. This way, materials and tasks carried out in the various fields of study will be made available to the language teacher and can be used in the language class, This will in turn make language learning more meaningful and motivating to the learners as they will see a relationship between English language and their various areas of study,
- An integrative approach should be adopted in the English language class, where communicative principles will be used in teaching the already drawn up language items on the course syllabus. This way, the general nature of the course syllabus can be made more specific as they are adapted to meet the specific needs of students. For example, in teaching clauses and phrases to a class of science and technology students, the use ofclauses and phrases in science and technology and the different tasks carried out using them in the field of science and technology can be used in the classroom activities.
- Students should be grouped according to disciplines or relatedness of their disciplines in order to make the language classes smaller for proper carrying out of communicative activities,

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