

Meaning Making Strategies and Challenges: Teaching English as a Language in Nigerian Educational Institutions

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Abstract—This paper attempts to discuss the construction and deconstruction of meaning in language communication in classroom teaching-learning situations. Classroom discourses in our educational institutions centre on the use of language to create meaning through the application of multidimensional approaches of both the teachers and the students. The ability to impart linguistic skills to the students can be effectively enhanced when teachers are empowered through the awareness of the multi-modal approaches of language teaching which can make them effectively expose their students to a variety of methods of meaning creation. The paper therefore hopes to expose the role of English in communication in order to enable Nigerian students be exposed to the language to make them achieve that level of communicative competence required of second language learners.

Keywords—Meaning-Making, Classroom Discourses, Multi-Dimensional, Multimodal, Communicative Competence.

I. INTRODUCTION

LANGUAGE has been described as a powerful instrument of social change. It is instrumental to the transformation of nations. Owing to the role of English as the world language, the desire to learn the language has become very imperative. English Language, according to Tiffen (1980), is required for many reasons and to prove this assertion, Jegede (1990) posits that the backbone of the country's (Nigeria) educational system is English Language pointing out that students' ability to undertake higher education on any discipline depends on their achievement in English. The language, therefore, remains a strong mediator in the face of Nigeria's multilingualism which makes it official language and a key to meaningful development and worthwhile employment.

Teaching English as a second language to students of our secondary and post-secondary schools in Nigeria is imparting desirable linguistic skills by teachers to the students to them achieve a level of competence that can make them use the language in communication internally and internationally. Students acquire a measure of proficiency in the language through the amount of exposure they get during classroom interactions they have with their teachers and the instructional materials. Over the years, teaching-

learning activities in language classrooms in the Nigerian secondary and post-secondary schools have been based on narratives in which teachers dominate most of the discussions in language lessons. Experience has shown that students are reduced to passive listeners where they only take notes, dictation and barely participate in active discussion among themselves.

II. MEANING-MAKING IN LANGUAGE INSTRUCTIONS

A. What is Meaning-Making?

Meaning-making, as the words imply, involves mental activities and processes of constructing or deconstructing meaning of any linguistic aspect by the language learner. It is an attempt by a language user to understand the function and notion of linguistic aspects. Meaning-making is therefore the process of creating meaningful representation for linguistic units to enable easy understanding of the topic and make communication possible.

Modern methods of teaching language have emphasized the use of various techniques and methods of constructing and deconstructing meaning. Kress and Loeuwen (2001) develop the multimodal theory of communication which focuses on practice and the use of resources, especially in relation to meaning. According to them, meaning is "being made in ways that are becoming more multimodal because the ways the language is used is continuously being reshaped by new forms of communication media." Modernization has given birth to new linguistic and other semiotic mode of meaning-making which replaced the traditional teacher-centred approach. To buttress the above assertion language instructional practices must be properly framed to enable proper participation and meaningful achievement. The teacher's role in the classroom is to spark and strengthen the will to know about new knowledge, to develop critical thinking and encourage students' personal involvement in tasks. With fluency students can conduct researches and analyze information from multiple resources; they can facilitate exchange of ideas, make critical analysis strengthen their communication skills.

Multimodal approaches to teaching of English that facilitate easy understanding of meaning for students in Nigeria must be designed to enable both the teachers and students' exposure to learning pedagogies outlined below:

- Linguistic Design: types of discourse, text, language and

discourse experience; what teachers should do to tap these resources to empower their students.

- Visual Designs: still pictures within the classroom like projectors, PowerPoint, motion pictures used by teachers to engineer discussions and promote critical thinking in the students.

- Audio Designs: model reading by teachers, presentations, use of tape recorders and resource persons to trigger debates and critical discussion on topics relating to cultural and learning experiences within the classroom contexts.

- Gestural Designs: meaning-making through the use of body language like gestures, kinesics, proxemics etc.

- Spatial Designs: space within and outside the classroom. This can also be within the 'texts' used by teachers, bullet points, headlines, font sizes etc.

It is pertinent to note that the role of a language teacher is that of a modeler, a role model, a facilitator. The teacher can empower the students, through providing them with enough opportunity for assessing new knowledge. This allows the students to develop capacities to speak up, to negotiate meaning and to engage themselves critically in their working life after school.

O'Rourke (2002) asserts that for students to be empowered so they can operate in the 'multiliterate' world, they must be provided with opportunities to both express themselves and make sense of the world through multiple modes of communication (linguistic/textual, visual/graphic, musical/audio, spatial/gestural). In view of the above, Nigerian language teachers should be ever ready to face the challenges of the fast-changing world. Knowledge of specific software and hardware application which is necessary for engagement in various tasks is highly desirable in order to achieve the above. Any semiotic (meaning-making) activity which includes the use of language for producing or understanding text is considered desirable in the classroom

III. APPROACHES TO THE TEACHING OF ENGLISH IN NIGERIA

Different approaches and methodologies are applied in the Nigerian educational institutions to teach the subject to students. These approaches range from lecture-way, note taking, group discussions among others. However, most of the methods adopted by these teachers merely reduce students to passive listeners. It is only when students involve themselves in group work or discussions that they are found to be active, a situation that rarely occurs. This scenario, however, is not unconnected with the multitude of problems that bedeviled teaching-learning practices in Nigeria. Onuigbo & Eyi (2009) lament "though English in Nigeria remains a second language, it has its own features or characteristics which make its learning and teaching very difficult". Many problems militate against the successful teaching of this course in the country. Among these problems include linguistic interference (phonological syntax, semantic etc.), lack of experts in the course, lack of electronic teaching, large classes and the lack of or improper facilities

Teaching English is more than just the imparting of

grammatical knowledge or lexical elements. Words taught to students must meet their contextual definitions. Aspects of language introduced to students in classroom interactions must be contextually meaningful in ways students can practice them in their day-to-day interaction. There should be an activity-oriented approach to the teaching of English in Nigeria which gives students the opportunity to explore meaning and simulate activities on their own using resources from both within and outside the classrooms. Teaching English as a second language in Nigerian schools has its own unique challenges among which include how the language works, patience and a show of dedication from teacher as well as students' needs and expectations. The teaching needs to be challenging and the situations must be set up for the students to use the language. Throwing more light on the pathetic English Language teaching in Nigeria Adekunle (1977) laments "It is an open secret that many undergraduates have not mastered the rudiments of English Grammar; and that they still have semantic problems which include wrong choice of words, wrong idioms, and the choice of wrong prepositions, spelling problems as well as punctuation and morphological headache".

IV. MODERN TECHNIQUES AND METHODOLOGY

Methodological approach to the teaching of English emphasizes the introduction of various teaching pedagogies with a view to opening up students' horizon to enable them acquire basic skills of the language that can make them achieve a measure of proficiency in the use of the language. Varieties of techniques abound to both the students and teachers which can expedite the acquisition of reasonable amount of linguistic skills. The lingual, visual, audio, audio-visual, the ICTs, the internet and many other modern language learning strategies are there to support students in their bid to learn the language. Students can process a lot of information through the use of these techniques.

Teachers and educators in Nigeria should be conscious of the fact that the keys to learner transformation are those processes of engagement, harnessing of resources and deployment of pedagogy. Teachers thus needed to be self-aware and be expert in the range of knowledge process that produces learner transformation and ongoing performance. They need to know when to plan, scaffold and deploy which knowledge process and for which goal.

Since English is used in the sourcing and processing of information, English Language Teachers (ELT) in Nigeria are required to know how they deal with diversity, the sort of modalities in their teaching texts and, of course, the sort of pedagogy/knowledge processes they recognize and use in their lessons. Another dimension of knowledge available to these teachers as pointed by Sarjit, K. (2010) include the following:

- o What activity sequences are deployed in teaching-learning experiences?

- o What are the sources of teaching designs (schemas or mental maps that teachers use to plan their teaching and create learning experiences?)

o How do these designs vary according to the instructional settings, curriculum and groups of learners?

o How can these designs for learning be extended, supplemented, made more resilient and broaden to meet the needs of the wider range of learners?

o How can Information Communication Technologies (ICTs) assist this process; including e-learning, collaborated content creation, spaces and digital portfolios?

It is therefore evident that emerging concepts to be considered in any meaningful and successful language learning instruction (New London Group, 1996) include experiencing, conceptualizing, analyzing and applying. These processes help learners of English as a second language to negotiate meaning in language instructions

V. CONCLUSION

Globalization had made communication in the use of English a necessity owing to its emerging role as a world language and lingua franca. It has therefore become pertinent that professional preparation of English Language teachers in Nigeria must take into consideration a number of very important critical challenges. Beavis & O'Mara (2006) assert that to nurture students' ideas about literacy and social justice and encourage them to engage with the broader field of English teaching require the participatory approach and introduction of wide range of texts for critical analysis. This is the only way teachers can develop students' use of the language to empower themselves in participate in various community engagements. Since meaning-making is an important aspect of every communication, it is thus a matter of necessity to expose students to the multiliterate or multiple means of making meaning in language. Multimodality has provided this opportunity to both the students and teachers alike in order to make easier the task of teaching and learning in our educational institutions of learning.

VI. RECOMMENDATION

Having seen the aforementioned teaching-learning schemes and various strategies of empowering second language learners it is highly commendable for English Language Teachers in Nigeria to consider their roles in the teaching enterprise as that of mediators or facilitator whose various roles are to direct and engineer their students to find new ways of involvement with language tasks which can make them know how to express themselves properly. Second Language learners (L2) should be made aware of the various social and global roles of the language in order to ensure proper engagement.

The government should, as a matter of urgency, consider its stand on issues involving English Language teaching. To provide and ensure a sustainable achievement of English Language teaching-learning atmosphere, this paper proffers the following suggestions:

1. The government should empower the teachers and guide them on how to deconstruct their own knowledge, beliefs and practices through training. The task of making the language

teachers critically appraise themselves is done by experienced language educators. These educators are to train teachers to discover all the potentialities which should equip them with knowledge as well as the various pedagogical approaches to be applied in teaching.

2. Very large classrooms should be decongested to provide an enabling environment for conducive teaching- learning situation. This is done to ensure that every group of learners gets the attention they require from teachers.

3. Learners must be provided with adequate facilities to enable them involve themselves in purposeful activities both inside and outside the classrooms. Where learning facilities are readily available students can engage themselves in activities which is virtually a way of self empowerment

4. As a matter of urgency the government of Nigeria must computerize all its teaching-learning activities to enable students access information from the multiple means available. E-learning, video conferencing, e-library facilities must be made available to students to allow them partake in various meaning-making activities in language instruction. This will in turn open up opportunities to engage themselves properly in the global literary practices.

5. Achieving proficiency and competence in the use of language (English) is only possible when qualified personnel are put into the service. The government should therefore ensure that only qualified persons are employed to teach this course. This is done to achieve quality control.

6. Teacher of English as a second language (L2) should from time to time be encouraged to participate in seminars, workshops as well as small and large groups discussion to update their knowledge. It is through these kinds of discussion that they are able to know modern designs, techniques and approach to the teaching of the course

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