

Facilitation Methods in the Acquisition of English in Selected Primary and Secondary Schools in Gombe Metropolis

Ruth Ishaku Ibbi PhD

*Department of English,
Gombe State University. Gombe.*

Abstract

This study is an investigation of the existing English language teaching methodologies employed in the classroom. One of the concerns of Applied Linguistics is that appropriate teaching methodologies are needed to achieve any success in the acquisition of English as a second language. Several previous studies focus more on teaching methods that affect second language speakers of English like German, Spanish, French, Chinese, etc. However, this study investigates how most Hausa speakers (L_1) of English as a second language (L_2) acquire English in the classroom setting. The study draws on two theories of language acquisition, namely the behaviourist theory which states that language must be learned by the child because it is behavioural and environment-dependent, and the mentalist theory that argues on the fact that abstract system of language cannot be learned, but that humans possess an innate language faculty. Public and private schools in Gombe metropolis were sampled to capture sufficient data, while questionnaire and classroom observation were employed to describe English learning method as found in each school. The traditional and modern teaching methodologies as outlined from the theories are used to explain acquisition of English. This study takes the view that conceptualizations of second language learning based on behaviourist approaches and the latter ones on nativist approaches are adopted to constitute the modern teaching methodology. The study concludes that it is pertinent to re-evaluate and restructure the English teaching methodologies in primary and secondary schools for more success to be recorded in the use of English language.

Key words: *Acquisition, theories, methods, behaviourist, mentalist.*

Introduction

Acquiring and learning a second language is important in a bilingual and multi-lingual society. It is also a necessity in today's global world where information and communication technology are mostly restricted to specific languages of the world. This study is essentially an investigation of the existing teaching methodologies employed in the classroom by English teachers of primary and secondary schools in Gombe metropolis. The shortcomings of English acquisition especially in Northern Nigerian schools is a significant area of concern, thus, it is posited in this study that appropriate teaching methodologies are needed as much as qualified teachers are needed. A significant point of this study lies in explaining another concern of applied linguistics which is to provide understanding of theoretical backgrounds of classroom language learning that will provide policy makers (those in charge of language education) with a basis for better teaching methods for second languages. Methodology is a system of practices and procedures that a teacher uses to teach. It is based on beliefs about the nature of language, and how it is learnt (known as 'Approach'). Several research have been carried out on the L_2 classroom acquisition such as Krashen (1987), Sun (2001), Robinson (2001), Lubbas (2006), Gass (2008), Schmidt (2010), Adesida, Aina and Adekunle (2011), Rivers (2011), and Sawalmeh (2013), etc. Most of these studies focused on how speakers of such languages as German, Spanish, French, and Chinese acquire English in

the classroom. However, this study investigated how most Hausa L₁ speakers of English as second language (L₂) acquire English in the classroom setting. This is because the classroom setting is believed to be the source of acquisition of English for most of the target subjects of this study. Consequently, the effect that a particular type of instruction has on the learner is the thrust of this study. Ellis draws attention to research in second language acquisition thus:

While the majority of SLA research has been devoted to language learning in a natural setting, there have been efforts made to investigate second-language acquisition in the classroom. There have been attempts made to systematically measure the effectiveness of language practices for every level of language, from phonetics to pragmatics, and for almost every current teaching methodology. Research has indicated that many traditional language-teaching techniques are extremely inefficient. (2)

The Hausa speakers that constitute the target respondents for this research are situated in Gombe State, one of the 36 states in Nigeria. The Hausa language is the lingua franca and first language of most of the people in Gombe; thus, English is generally learnt as a second language with the educational institutions as its sole provider. The aim of this study is to find out the role of the English teacher and the teaching methods employed in the teaching of English as a second language.

The two theories of language acquisition which underpin this study are the behaviourist and the mentalist theories. The behaviourist theory states that language must be learned by the child because it is behavioural and environment-dependent (Lamidi 90), while the mentalist states that the abstract system of language cannot be learned, since humans possess an innate language faculty (Chomsky 165). Thus, the traditional and modern teaching methodologies as outlined in the theories are used to explain the acquisition of English.

Research Methodology

Four schools were chosen as samples for this research; two public (owned by the government) primary schools, and two private (owned by individual or group) secondary schools. They are Pantami Primary School, Government Secondary School, ECWA No. 1 Nursery and Primary School and All Saints College. These schools are located in different areas of Gombe metropolis.

It was necessary to sample both the public and private schools because they represent the available types of primary and secondary schools in Gombe, and a comparison of how English is acquired in both educational sectors is necessary and relevant to the study. Also, final year classes and English teachers were selected from each school. Questionnaire and classroom observation were employed to describe the English learning method as found in each school. The researcher was personally involved in the observation over a period of five days. Twenty selected teachers that earlier responded to the questionnaire were observed at different times in their various classes.

Conceptual and Empirical Clarifications

There are many different teaching methodologies employed in language teaching which are classified under the domain of either traditional or modern teaching methodologies. Thus, traditional, and modern teaching methods were adopted to classify and categorize the teaching methods employed in the selected schools for this study. The focus of the description of the two methodologies is on their aims, procedures, and some practical examples of their usage.

Traditional Methodology

Clearly, one of the aims of any methodology in second language teaching is to improve the second

language ability of the student. Traditional methodology is based largely on a reduction of the integrated process of using a second language into sub-sets of discrete skills and areas of knowledge. It is essentially a functional procedure which focuses on skills and areas of knowledge in isolation. Consequently, traditional methodologies are strongly associated with the teaching of the language which is used in a certain field related to the students' lives or work. A typical feature of traditional methodology, as Broughton et al. described it, is “teacher-dominated interaction” (22). The teaching method is deeply teacher-centered. This idea corresponds to the illustration of Scrivener, who claims that “traditional teaching [is imagined to work as] 'jug and mug'; the knowledge being poured from one receptacle into an empty one.” This widespread attitude is based on a precondition that “being in a class in the presence of a teacher and listening attentively is enough to ensure that learning will take place” (Scrivener 17).

Consequently, in the teaching of grammar using the traditional methodology, Tharp (49) points out that the “emphasis was placed on the formal side of the language”. After analysing the way people speak, Broughton et al. concluded:

The actual choice of words and their arrangement is new virtually every time we produce an utterance... The only way to explain the process of making new sentences by analogy involves the notion of observing the regularities (rules, patterns, structure) underlying them and working out how to operate them to generate new sentences. (45)

Richards further shows that language learning and teaching were traditionally assumed to mean building up a large repertoire of sentences and grammatical patterns and producing them “accurately and quickly in the appropriate situation” (6). Based on these opinions, therefore, is “the traditional view that the English language consisted of a battery of grammatical rules and a vocabulary book” (Broughton et al. 39). It is on the basis of such conclusions that the traditional methodology emerged.

White highlighted the consequences of handling language in this grammar-governed way by explaining that traditional methodology does not always present the language as a means of communication. Rather, this approach to teaching conceives “language as a body of esteemed information to be learned, with an emphasis on intellectual rigor” (8). Obviously, the traditional approach shows language primarily from the rule-governed point of view and concentrates on the knowledge of grammar and items of vocabulary. It is supposed that a person who knows the rules and the lexis is able to understand and speak the target language. Consequently, the teaching also focuses on the grammatical rules and items of lexis. As Richards states, “earlier views of language learning focused primarily on the mastery of grammatical competence” (4). He also offers a definition of grammatical competence thus:

Grammatical competence refers to the knowledge we have of a language that accounts for our ability to produce sentences in a language. It refers to knowledge of building blocks of sentences (e.g., parts of speech, tenses, phrases, clauses, sentence patterns) and how sentences are formed. (3)

In applied linguistics, teaching a second/foreign language with grammatical competence being given the highest priority is called the 'Grammar-Translation Method.' The principles of this approach are articulated by Broughton et al.'s explanation that “the grammatical approach to language produced a teaching method which selected the major grammar rules with their exceptions and taught them in a certain sequence...its rules, its examples, its paradigms and related exercises” (39). According to Richards, the Grammar Translation Approach is:

based on the belief that grammar could be learned through direct instruction and through a methodology that made much use of repetitive practice and drilling...approach to the

teaching of grammar was a deductive one: students are presented with grammar rules and then given opportunities to practice using them. (6)

White supports this opinion in her assertion that “grammar translation involves the learning and application of rules for the translation of one language into another” (8). What can be deduced from these explanations on language lessons in relation to traditional teaching methodology is that the priorities were (and still are) grammar, grammatical rules, given examples, and translating from English into the mother tongue and vice versa. This is further explained in Tharp's assertion that in traditional language teaching, the essential issue is “rules to be memorized, grammatical text analysis, and literal translation” (cited in White 49). The students are always expected to memorize the grammatical rules and to practice using them while translating sentences and analysing English texts. Arguably, memorizing the grammatical rules and vocabulary is an essential feature of traditional methodology and “knowledge of the rule is regarded as being more important than application and the focus is on teaching about the language” (White 8). The application of rules is practiced by translating from one language to the other.

In the traditional methodology also, much emphasis is placed on the written language rather than pronunciation work or oral communication because it is the written language that is taught. Mental discipline is also stressed rather than any actual ability to use the language. Richards states that “techniques that were often employed included memorization of dialogues, question and answer practice, substitution drills and various forms of guided speaking and writing practice” (6). It tends in one way or another to encourage students to memorize things and not to create their own new sentences and statements. Like any other method, this method of teaching language has some advantages and disadvantages.

The traditional teaching methodology encourages translation and the use of the students' native language. Consequently, it is believed to reveal whether the students have really understood the main point, the concept of a new point, the concept of a new word or a grammatical relationship between the words. From the very beginning, the teacher is expected to bring the students' attention to the conceptual differences in the two languages and help them establish correct concepts in English. If an error still occurs, the teacher is advised to correct it as soon as possible.

Concerning error correction, Broughton et al. asserted that “by making mistakes the learner is practicing the wrong thing and developing undesirable habit” (46). Richards agrees with this opinion by expressing a belief supported by traditional methodology:

Good habits are formed by having students produce correct sentences and not through making mistakes. Errors were to be avoided through controlled opportunities for production (either written or spoken). By memorizing dialogues and performing drills the chances for making mistakes were minimized...Accurate mastery was stressed from the very beginning stages of language learning, since it was assumed that if students made errors these would quickly become a permanent part of the learner's speech. (4, 6)

To avoid fossilizing the errors, all mistakes noticed by the teacher are immediately corrected by him or her for the student not to remember the incorrect form.

Another feature of the traditional teaching methodology which is believed to be beneficial to some learners is that routines are not broken. The typical routines can be described as follows: the teacher starts the lesson with revision of the previous lesson and examines the students individually by asking them to go to the blackboard. They are asked to do an exercise, respond to teacher's questions or sometimes the whole class takes a written test. The teacher explains a new subject matter and practices it with exercises.

Finally, he/she sums up the topic and sets assignments for the next lesson. It would be observed that the students always know what follows. First, the previous lesson's subject matter is revised either collectively or by one student, who is examined, or possibly in a test that all the students take. The second component is the new subject matter, which the teacher explains and provides exercises which comprise mostly translation practices. The last component is revision and the assignment/homework (Chuda and Chudy 19).

One of the shortcomings of traditional methodology is that there is a seemingly insufficient attention that is paid to teaching the basic communication skills: reading and writing, speaking, and listening. For instance, reading in a foreign language is different from reading in one's mother-tongue. The student tries to understand every single word and its grammatical form, because he/she believes it is essential for understanding the text.

Also, in traditional teaching methodology, emphasis is not placed on speaking and pronunciation practice (White 8; Broughton et al. 9). What obtains instead of speaking and getting the meaning through is linguistic information like rules with examples and related exercises. Broughton et al. note that many learners experience significant frustration at the moment of realizing that they were not able to speak in common life situations (9). This method of teaching was found to be used in most of the classroom observations during the collection of data for this study.

In sum, the traditional teaching methodology can be described as an approach to the teaching of target language, which regards the language as a body of grammatical rules and an enormous number of words that are combined according to the rules. Traditional methodology thus focuses on grammatical structures and isolated items of vocabulary. Scrivener adds that “the teacher spends quite a lot of class time using the board and explaining things – as if “transmitting the knowledge” (16). Students are expected to learn the rules and the items of lexis, and it is supposed that they will be able to use the language. However, most students end up exploring only narrow avenues of the language, because the syllabuses are based largely on grammar and the language is grouped according to particular purpose. The primary skills, namely reading, writing, listening and speaking, are generally taught at an insufficient level. Nevertheless, as Scrivener notes, this method, with all its potential disadvantages, has been used very often in schools worldwide “and is still the predominant classroom method in some cultures” (16, 38). This is also found to be the most used method of teaching in the schools following this study.

Modern Methodology

Unlike traditional methodology, modern methodology is much more student-centred. According to Scrivener, the teacher's main role is to “help learning to happen” which includes “involving” students in what is going on “by enabling them to work at their own speed, by not giving long explanations, by encouraging them to participate, talk, interact, do things, etc.” (18, 19). The language student is best motivated by practice in which he senses the language is truly communicative, that it is appropriate to its context, and that his teacher's skills are moving him forward to a fuller competence in a foreign language. Briefly put, the students are the most active participants in this process. The teacher is present not just to explain but to encourage and help students to explore, try out, and to make learning interesting and acquisition possible. Great emphasis is put on the communication of meaning. Richards also highlights the focus on communicative competence, which he defines as “being able to use the language for

meaningful communication” (4). Thus, this methodology is often referred to as the Communicative Language Teaching approach.

Another feature of this method is that foreign languages are taught “not simply for the learner to be able to write to a foreign pen friend” but to broaden his or her horizons by introducing “certain ways of thinking about time, space and quantity [and] attitudes towards” issues that are faced in everyday life (Broughton et al. 10). This implies that some people learn a foreign language most importantly to be able to communicate with the native speakers of the language, and other people learn a foreign language above all to see the world from a different point of view, to discover new approaches to life or to find out about other cultures. For these reasons, attention is shifted to the knowledge and skills needed to use grammar and other aspects of language appropriately for different communicative purposes such as making requests, giving advice, making suggestions, describing wishes and needs and so on (Richards 8). Even teachers' methods, courses, and books are adjusted to new needs of the learners to fulfil their expectations. Instead of grammatical competence, communicative competence is the priority. In line with the modern methodology, White articulates three principles: the first being “the primacy of speech”; second, an emphasis on “the centrality of connected text as the heart of teaching-learning process”; and third, the “absolute priority of an oral methodology in the classroom” (11). Therefore, instead of memorizing grammatical rules and isolated vocabulary, this influential kind of methodology (modern) prefers to present contextualized language and to develop skills.

An important part of modern teaching methodology is the teaching of skills. The main skills are listening, speaking, reading, and writing. They can be classified into two groups: receptive (listening and reading) and productive (speaking and writing). These skills consist of sub-skills: for example, reading includes skimming (reading for gist), scanning (reading for specific information), intensive reading, and extensive reading. While listening, students can listen for gist, or for specific information: for some details, like numbers, addresses, directions, etc. In real life we do not normally listen for every word spoken. Therefore, as modern methodology believes, the task should be realistic too. The tasks should improve skills, not test memory. According to Scrivener, with receptive skills it is always better to assign one task, let the students accomplish it, have feedback and then assign another task, let the students read or listen to the text again, have feedback, etc. Scrivener also points out that the tasks should be graded from the easiest to the most difficult, in other words, from the most general to the most detailed; and the students must know what the assignments are before the listening or reading itself is done. If the students do not manage to accomplish the task, the teacher should play the listening again or give them more time for reading (173).

Concerning the productive skills (writing and speaking), there are some important issues to mention too. While students practice productive skills, a teacher using modern methodology is aware of a contradiction between accuracy and fluency. Richards states that “fluency is natural language use occurring when a speaker engages in a meaningful interaction and maintains comprehensible and ongoing communication despite limitations on his or her communicative competence” (13). Modern methodology tries to keep a balance between the fluency and accuracy practice. Context and purpose are also important features which mirror real life situations, and which have a goal. This can mean that skills should be taught in a context which is close to real life situations in which students might well find themselves; the practice should be involving, and the activities should be well aimed and executed. This approach helps learners to be motivated and interested in the subject matter.

Teaching grammar is also important in the modern teaching method; however, the presentation of new grammar also involves students to a great extent. The method encourages students to actively listen, speak, read, and write the new language (advisably in this order). This approach highlights the need for students' participation and interaction. Some ways to involve students in the grammar presentation are elicitation (getting learners provide information) and personalization (letting learners express their own ideas). These two methods appear to be very useful tools. Students always seem to be interested in their teacher's and friends' personal affairs, etc. In fact, situations that the teacher presents as personal do not always have to be true. Elicitation meanwhile invites students to be active, to take part in the lesson and to present their knowledge and ideas. Scrivener points out that the “ability to use language seems to be more of a skill you learn by trying to do it... than an amount of data that you learn and then try to apply” (19). It appears that encouraging students to 'play' with the target language is very effective in helping them learn to speak it.

Guided discovery is another effective method used in the modern teaching methodology. It means that the teacher is seen as leading the students to discover things they did not know they knew through a process of structured questions (Scrivener 268). The teacher can also introduce a situation and a context and elicit the language from the students. A suitable reading or listening can be used as a source of the new language.

To sum up the principles of the modern methodology, we can highlight the student-centred interaction which is connected to the involvement of the students in everything going on during the lesson. By this arrangement, the teacher's role is to facilitate learning rather than being the centre of learning. The teacher's task is to choose activities suitable for learners, to guide them in the lessons and to encourage them to experiment with the language. The modern methodology comprises a rich variety of methods with some common features: activities that improve involving students and are close to the real-life situations.

Discussion and Result

Most of the teachers indicated modern method as the best method of teaching English with a representation of 70%, while some indicated using traditional method (25%) and others indicated using both methods of teaching (5%).

Perceived Effect of Teaching Method on Learning English Language

Most of the teachers support the assertion that teaching method affects the learning of the English language (65%); but 35% of the teachers indicate that teaching method does not affect the learning of the English Language.

Method of Teaching Observed

From the observations made from the teaching sessions, the traditional method of teaching is used more than the modern method representing 50%. About 30% of the teachers employ the modern method which represents the teaching methods in the theoretical framework. A few of them employ a combination of both traditional and modern methods with a 20% representation as observed.

Method of Teaching English

There is a significant relationship between school type and preferred method of teaching. The two are teacher/education authority factors. This is an indication that both the teacher and the school authorities have a huge role to play. From this study, it can be deduced that there is a preference for the modern method of teaching as indicated by 73% through the questionnaire. This was however found not to be the practice from observation. The modern language teaching methodology encourages

teachers to recognize the fact that even learning ability varies from learner to learner, and errors can be approached systematically. However, the method of teaching observed in this study from the selected schools did not indicate modern approaches but rather traditional approaches. In fact, some errors are penalized instead of employing appropriate methods in correcting and teaching.

Conclusion

Re-evaluating and restructuring of English teaching methodology are important factors that teachers and education authorities can adopt to improve acquisition of English. The differences between traditional and modern methodologies are obvious. When comparing the terms, the differences are noticed. The traditional Grammar-Translation Method focuses on teaching rules, and which are practiced through translation. The aim of modern Communicative Language Teaching on the other hand is to teach the learner to communicate - simply put, to get the meaning through. The Grammar-Translation Method prefers routines and a limited number of methods, such as teaching, translation activities and drills. By contrast, Communicative Language Teaching consists of a great number of activities with different aims which are (or should be) balanced. The Grammar-Translation Method relies on memorizing rules and isolated items of lexis. However, Communicative Language Teaching employs more contextualized information and practice similar to real life situations, which is attractive for most learners. Through the Grammar-Translation Method, it is expected that students learn well if they listen to the teacher and do not make mistakes. In contrast, the Communicative Language Approach suggests that one must experiment with the language to learn how to use it.

Equally, the theoretical model adopted is in favour of the modern teaching methodology. This study takes the view that conceptualizations of second language learning based on behaviourist and nativist approaches are adopted to constitute the modern teaching methodology. For example, the behaviourists' role of practice, error correction, success through imitation and the role of corrective feedback will improve language acquisition better if used alongside with the nativists' language acquisition device, universal principles, rules of core grammar and critical period hypothesis. Therefore, practice and effort of the learner are the keys to successful language acquisition.

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