Bringing The Real World Into The Classroom: A communicative approach to the teaching of reading and writing skills of the English language

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Abstract

The article focuses on the communicative approach to the teaching of the reading and writing skills of the English language. First, a theoretical base for this approach is established. The views of different authors who advocate this approach are examined. Some short-comings in the traditional approach to the teaching of the two skills are pointed out. The article then goes on to discuss fully the communicative approach to the teaching of the reading and writing skills of the English language. The merits of this approach are highlighted. Finally, the paper recommends the application of the communicative approach for improvement in the teaching of the two skills.

Introduction

Educationists have always emphasized the need for a teacher to see that his lesson sounds real and relevant to the students' experience. A teaching approach that stresses the appropriate manipulation of the teaching material in concrete and real-life situations has been advocated by the pragmatists. This approach assures a total involvement of a child in a lesson. When a child's interest and past experience are utilized in a lesson, learning becomes effective. A teacher's objective is easily achieved.

It is through the communicative approach to the teaching of language skills that this laudable objective is achieved. As a result of its effectiveness in language teaching, the approach is highly recommended by experts in modern language teaching. It is the view of these experts that, through this approach, students easily understand and perform effectively in their target language. On the other hand, the traditional approach to language teaching is very much discouraged nowadays in favour of the communicative approach. This is as a result of its obvious shortcomings, which will be examined later in this article. It is pertinent at this stage to highlight the characteristics of these two approaches.

Communicative and Traditional Approaches to Language Teaching

A communicative approach to the teaching of English presents the teaching of the language in realistic contexts. Under this approach, language teaching is based on a real-life situation. Most of the examples and illustrations utilized in lessons are drawn from the real-life experiences of the students. Moreover, students are made to interact in the target language as much as possible. Teaching is not confined to the textbooks. Activities and illustrations employed in teaching are based mainly on matters related to the daily life of the students. Through this approach, students are made to realize that the language they are studying is the

one they can use to express their real-life experiences and also the one they can use to interact with members of the society to cater for their communicative needs.

The traditional approach to language teaching contrasts sharply with the communicative approach. This approach concentrates on issues outside the real-life experiences of the students. Emphasis is virtually on the language of the textbooks. More often than not, the textbooks treat matters that are not related to the students' everyday life. The traditional approach emphasizes the rules guiding the use of the target language, creating little or no provision for students to actually use this language to communicate on matters related to their daily life experiences. In other words, what the students acquire through this approach is simply the bookish knowledge of their target language.

A report titled "New Methods Vs Old in American Education", quoted by Okafor (1988: 77), advocates that a classroom lesson should be child-centred or student-centred as opposed to teacher-centred. The child's interest and needs, according to the report, are paramount. It goes further to advise that teachers should try to discover these interests and needs in order to channel them into the learning experiences so as to make learning purposeful, stimulating and rewarding for the students.

The observations in the report aptly apply to the English language teaching. One of the major factors responsible for the poor performance of students in the language is that teachers do not put in enough efforts towards making students realize the relevance of English to their experience and communicative needs. Commenting on this state of affairs, Dadzie (1989: 125), remarks that the teaching of English as a second language has become so technical that we forget that the language is meant first and fore-most for interaction. If the teacher uses English to say real things to the class, it will give the students the feeling that English is a real language which is used for communication and not just a language that belongs to the textbook.

Stressing on the same issue, Hubbard (1983: 125) recommends that a teacher of the English language should ask himself the following two questions to guide him in his teaching:

> How close can my teaching take students to their anticipated language needs in the outside world? How much opportunity am I giving members of my class to talk realistically as individuals to each other, using as much English as they can to say things which they have decided to say and which are, as far as possible, in response to what has been said before?

As far as the teaching of the four basic English language skills in our country is concerned, the questions posed by this author, as stated above, are worthy of a serious reflection. In line with his view, this article dwells on the communicative approach to the teaching of reading and writing skills of the English language. The paper highlights the importance of getting students to realize how the language can cater for their communicative needs in the outside world with regard to the skills of reading and writing.

Reading and Writing

Reading involves the recognition of ink marks on a page. This recognition or identification is done through the use of formal elements of language with meanings they symbolize. According to Longe 91979: 94), the essence of the reading skill is the

transforming of the visual representation of language into meaning. Yankson (1985) defines reading as an active attempt on the part of the reader to understand a writer's message. He states further that a more demanding type of reading involves an ability to critically analyze and judge a text. This type of reading is at times referred to as text processing.

Writing as a language skill arises out of the need to record in writing what one has listened to or heard, read from a written text or what one may plan to talk about for someone else or others to read. Therefore, this skill concerns record keeping. The importance of writing can be fully appreciated by considering the place of record keeping in our daily life. Our feelings, important ideas and thoughts, messages, etc, are recorded and preserved through this skill. It is, indeed, a major communication tool to a language user.

A Communicative Approach to the Teaching of Reading and
Writing Skills at the Various Levels of Education

Motivation is an important factor in education. It is a technique employed by a teacher to arouse a desire for learning in his students. When students are motivated, their interest in learning is not only aroused but is sustained. A communicative approach to the teaching of reading and writing skills motivates students a lot to study and use the two skills. Through this approach, students see reading and writing as useful tools for communication and even as sources of fun which can give rise to a variety of interactions in their lives. The students are made to understand that reading and writing are not simply abstract skills taught by the teacher but are skills, which can immensely enrich their lives in the society if acquired.

The use of this communicative approach in teaching reading and writing is useful right from the beginning of formal education. At the nursery and primary levels of education the students should be made to realize the relevance of reading and writing to their practical everyday life. At the secondary education level and even the initial stage of tertiary education, the communicative approach to the teaching of the two language skills is also quite effective.

Below, a communicative approach to the teaching of each of the two language skills is treated separately. Ways of enhancing the communicative approach to the teaching of reading and writing skills are highlighted.

a)   **A Communicative Approach to the Teaching of Reading**

In the communicative approach to the teaching of reading, the duty of the teacher is to transpose the world of a reading text into a form, which is recognizable to the students and relevant to their real life experience. One important fact a language teacher should note while using this approach is that it is not in every reading activity that the concepts of 'right' and 'wrong' have to be emphasized. In most reading exercises, these concepts should be played down, more especially when the purpose of reading is largely to derive pleasure. In this case, the teacher's role is not that of a corrector or a judge but that of an enabler or a guide.

What is more important is to make students feel that communication takes place during a reading activity. The purpose of this communication is not to arrive at a 'right' answer to any question on the text read but to give a hearing to a variety of different answers to such a question. This feeling will be engendered in students if a teacher is tolerant of the students' different views on what they have read. As a way of motivating his students, a

teacher should avoid negative and damaging comments on their expressed views on a text. Sympathetic and encouraging remarks are, on the other hand, recommended.

One other way of enhancing the communicative approach to reading is by exposing students to a variety of reading sources. Students should not be limited to the prescribed textbooks only for their reading activities. The contents of these textbooks cannot equip them adequately for their reading needs in their after-school life. Limiting the students to only the textbooks will lead them to feel that reading is unnatural and artificial and is not relevant to their needs. Students' attention should also be directed to newspapers, magazines and even their own write-ups.

Apart from newspapers and magazines the teacher should, from time to time, collect suitable samples of written English from tourist agencies, banks, government and company publications as reading sources for his students. Students should, in addition, be urged to read each other's write-ups such as notes, letters, essays, poems, etc, etc. This adds a touch of reality to reading as a language activity. Students are made to realize the relevance of reading to their lives outside the classroom. The practice also leads the students to understand that reading is not simply a classroom exercise confined to the prescribed textbook but also an important communicative tool relevant to their practical everyday life.

There are certain modern reading techniques, which greatly enhance the communicative approach to the teaching of reading. Three of these modern techniques are treated below:

I)   **News on the Board**

This device is meant to introduce an innovation in the students' reading activities. In using the device, the language teacher leads his students into a discussion of what they have experienced in the last two or three days. As a follow-up, sentences based on the discussion are used to build a coherent passage. These sentences, which should come from students, are written on the board provided for this purpose. The teacher should, however, feel free to recast any sentence, which is in substandard English. The board is later hung on the classroom wall as a reading source to the students.

This sort of reading material is fascinating to the students as it is based on their own language and experience. The reading material is, therefore, automatically personally meaningful to them. It is also important to the students as it affords them an opportunity of seeing what their spoken words look like in print.

II)   **School-wide Silent Reading Programme (SSR)**

This technique is designed to help students acquire and develop the reading habit. A period is set aside on the school time-table once a week for 30 minutes of silent reading in the entire school. During the period all the students and all the teachers, including the principal, do nothing else but read a book of their choice. Later, an opportunity is created for the students to **communicate** to each other on how they enjoyed the books they have read.

The programme is based on the principle that students have to enjoy reading in order to develop the reading habit. Furthermore, students who develop the reading habit through this approach will form an additional habit of picking up a book to read without anybody asking them to do so. Through this programme, the students get the opportunity of seeing their teachers and principal read for pleasure and learn a lot by imitating them. It also affords the students an opportunity of selecting their own reading material instead of being

forced to read texts in which they have no interest. For the programme to succeed, a small library collection of interesting and appropriate reading material for each classroom is a necessity.

III) **Directed Reading and Thinking Technique (DRTT)**

This technique is basically designed to encourage students to use their natural abilities to make and confirm predictions as they read. Students are asked to read a material they have never seen before. Copies of the reading material, often a story, are distributed to the students covered. When they are about to start reading, only the title of the reading passage is unveiled. Then the teacher asks the following three questions:

1. What do you think the passage is all about?
2. What do you think will happen next?
3. What makes you think so?

A wide range of responses is expected from the students. The predictions are proved right or wrong as they read the material. Students should be told not to worry if their predictions are wrong. What is of importance is that the responses will ensure that students are not passive as they read; they are actively **interacting** with the text. This technique is an exciting reading strategy that greatly enhances the students' communication with the reading texts. In short, it is a typical example of text processing.

b) **A Communicative Approach to the Teaching of Writing**

Pincas (1982) identifies three aims in teaching English writing:

i) The scope of writing should be widened to go beyond the artificial, unrealistic school-type composition of traditional teaching to more genuine, practical and relevant kinds of writing.

ii) Writing should be as communicative, or functional as possible. It should be seen to fulfil the sort of communication purposes, or functions that writing is used for in everyday life.

iii) It should go beyond merely reinforcing grammar and vocabulary lessons and deal quite specifically with those skills that are required for effective writing. The teaching of writing should be recognized as a special part of language teaching with its own aims and techniques.

Emphasized in these aims stated above is the fact that the teaching of writing should be made relevant to the students' communicative needs. In real life, writing normally involves interaction. For instance, we write letters and notes for people to read and reply to. Unfortunately, this is not the case in the classroom situation as far as the traditional approach to teaching is concerned. Most classroom writing is done to be read and corrected.

There are several ways through which a resourceful language teacher can get his students to appreciate the relevance of writing to their everyday life. One of these ways is to get the students to interact in the class as in real life through writing. They can, for instance, be asked to write to each other to ask for personal information. Replies should also be written. They can write and answer several notes this way in just a few minutes. Students do appreciate this type of exercise – they get the feeling of achievement that they can actually communicate through writing because they now receive replies to what they write.

One other effective way of employing a communicative approach to the teaching of writing is by exposing students to varieties of English writing. Through this exposure the

students are made to realize that writing is an integral part of everyday life. A guiding principle in the teaching of writing has always been the use of good models for the students to emulate. Consequently, an important step in teaching writing is the selection and demonstration of relevant varieties of written English to the learners. English newspapers and magazines, imported products with English written on the package, instructions, brochures from travel agencies, banks and government publications, etc, etc, are among the possible varieties of written English to which students can be exposed and asked to emulate. Students should always be made to appreciate the relevance of what they write to their practical everyday life and communicative needs. As one useful way of practicing letter-writing, for instance, an imaginative and resourceful language teacher can bring a magazine to the class, refer his students to the pen-pal column in it, and ask them to respond in writing to the invitations to pen-pals as advertised in the magazine. Motivation is always greatly increased if writing is placed in a realistic communicative context in this way. Topics for exercises based on these varieties of written English can conveniently be integrated into the formal writing programme in the students' syllabus.

For students to realize and appreciate the communicative importance of the writing skill, they should be able to develop the ability to visualize a reader. They should be able to predict what their reader will be taking for granted and what such a reader needs to be specifically told. Nothing is as motivating for a writer as having a real reader to write for. The common practice of making the teacher the only reader of whatever a student writes in the class, as practiced under the traditional approach should be discontinued. This practice cripples students' interest and originality in writing. On the other hand, when students write to one another in the class, they get real satisfaction by feeling that they can actually communicate through writing because they get a reply to what they write and not some corrections in red ink. While it is necessary for the teacher to occasionally read and correct what his students write, frequent attempts should be made to find other real readers for their writing other than the teacher.

Under the communicative approach, the students should be made to interact as much closely as possible with the texts of their writing. In other words, they should be encouraged to imbibe the idea of self-correction. Under the traditional approach, teachers generally accustom students to their (teachers') own correction of errors as the teacher's work. Ideally, students should be trained to criticize and correct their own work. This self-criticism is quite more valuable to the students than the teacher's. After all, the teacher's voice and red bic marks do not go with the student throughout his life after school; but his habits do. In other words, the habit of self-criticism and self-correction continues to be a useful tool even after the student's school life.

An effective way through which this habit can be inculcated in the students is by urging them to read over and over again to themselves what they have written. Through this habit they are placed in a position to find out whether what they have written has communicated their ideas effectively or not. It should be emphasized that this type of reading has to be done slowly and that only the words actually seen should be read. This may lead to a certain amount of muttering, which, in this case, has to be permitted. In addition to inculcating this idea of self-criticism and correction, students should be encouraged to practice reading over each other's write-ups. This provides a more reliable test of finding out whether the intended ideas in the students' writing have been communicated or not. In addition, they will notice the omissions and other errors in their

neighbour's work more easily than in their own. These two measures stated above permit a chose interaction with the written text, which, in turn, makes room for improvement in writing.

Some Shortcomings of the Traditional Approach to the
Teaching of Reading and Writing

Undoubtedly, the traditional approach to the teaching of the reading and writing leaves much to be desired. Under this approach, many teachers do not even realize that reading and writing are separate language activities. They see the two skills simply as means of re-enforcing grammatical lessons. It does not occur to such teachers that, like other language activities, reading and writing are very important skills in which students should be trained and developed by experts. They should not be regarded as appendages to other aspects of language as vocabulary building and grammar.

Moreover, under the traditional approach, most teachers make reading and writing activities artificial and uninteresting by failing to relate the two skills to the communicative needs of the students. The activities in which students are engaged as a way of illustrating the two skills are not relevant to their actual everyday activities. Consequently, students see reading and writing as passive and boring activities performed constantly in isolation from what actually obtains in the real world outside the classroom. As a result, they regard the skills as being alien to them.

Furthermore, the traditional approach limits the students' reading to their textbooks. They are not exposed to adequate reading sources. As a result, they lack vocabulary and word power.

Lamenting on the state of reading in schools within Nsukka Education Zone, Yankson (1985: 128) observes that

> Apart from the privileged few who enjoy school or town library facilities and the few who have their own collection of story books which they swap with those of their colleagues, the only reading materials available to the greater majority of the students for their study of English language are their language and literature books.

He goes further to warn that unless a secondary school has a fairly well-stocked library to which students can go and read various texts of their own choice either on their own or under the guidance of a teacher trained to teach reading, this type of reading cannot provide the students with the kind of rich language exposure which is necessary for language learning and for the students to appreciate reading as an important communicative tool in their lives. Under the traditional approach, students are not also exposed to adequate writing activities. They are limited to very few traditional writing topics normally included in the school curriculum. Consequently, their writing activities are deficient in terms of both scope and variety.

Conclusion
The important role of English as a world language is an obvious fact acknowledged by the users and non-users of the language alike. Its contribution to our national life in this country

in particular can hardly be quantified. Taking all these into consideration, no effort should be spared to teach the four basic skills of the language effectively.

This paper has highlighted different means through which the reading and writing skills of English can be taught communicatively to students. If all the advocated innovative approaches to the teaching of the two skills are actually practiced instead of limiting reading and writing activities to the pages of the textbooks and few writing topics respectively, students' interest and ability in the language skills will remarkably improve. They will come to realize that reading and writing skills have a lot of relevance to their lives even outside the four walls of the classroom.

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