

## Interrogating the Teaching and Learning of English in Nigeria: Still in Search of an Enabling Principle

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**Abstract:** With the understanding that effective communication is the central goal in any second language situation, this paper examines how best to achieve this in the light of the current curriculum for the teaching of English in Nigeria. The way the English language is taught at all the levels of education in Nigeria leaves a lot to be desired, and therefore does not hold a promise of actualising the very end of language teaching and learning, which is the development of learners' communicative competence. The teaching and learning of English in Nigeria today is largely grammar-based, so that learners only take grammar lessons, leaving out the colour of language, which is literature. If literature is the colour of its language, teaching any language without its literature is teaching a bleached language. Any language teaching method that adopts this antiseptic learning of the target language may not achieve much, as literature presents the best examples or manifestations of language use, and would serve as a veritable point of encounter with the language. The position of this work is that the divorce between 'language' and 'literature' in our educational curriculum is an anathema.

**Keywords:** *Second language teaching, communicative competence, teaching method(s), grammar, English in Nigeria*

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### 1. Introduction

It has been argued that structural, grammar-based approaches to language teaching promise little in terms of helping the learners to achieve the desired proficiency in the target language, for it seeks to impart 'decontextualised global competence' (Mohammed, 1995, p. 143). This is so in that grammar-based approaches to language teaching are not linguistically and

functionally realistic (Kachru, 1988). Concerning teaching English in Nigeria, Akwanya (2007b) proposes that any acceptable approach to language teaching and learning has got to be the one which can ‘ensure mastery, awaken all the individual’s energies, and lay open before the learner the full resources of this language for exploitation in the task of self-construction, in the project of living, of selfhood’ (p. 26).

The advantages inherent in any language teaching approach modelled on the above language teaching philosophy are obvious, one of which is that the learner is immersed in the target language. This is the central idea of this work, and underscores the high premium literature is to play in such approach to teaching and learning in an L2 situation. For we read from Hall (2005) that the movement which emphasises language learners doing things with the language in authentic contexts has led to an important revival of the fortunes of literature in second language learning. In other words, Hall proposes that the reading of literary texts can offer L2 learners that rare authentic context. The task this work sets out to examine, therefore, is to show how the reading of literature can serve as comprehensible input for learners of a second language.

## **2. Grammar and communicative competence**

The place/role of grammar in a communicative approach to language teaching has been a controversy. Though said in different ways, most Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) experts agree that grammar should serve a role different from what grammar-based approaches to language teaching assign to it. For Shehadeh (2005),

*...most language learners taught by methods that emphasize mastery of grammar [alone] do not achieve an acceptable level of competency in the target language. Language learning in the classroom is usually based on the belief that language is a system of wordings governed by a grammar and a lexicon (, p. 13).*

The first statement in the above quotation touches upon the heart of this study. The reasons are obvious. Even in the very formulation of the concept of communicative competence, Hymes (1972) remarked that he was introducing the concept because the notion of competence expounded by Chomsky was both theoretically and practically inadequate. In the same vein, grammar and its study are insufficient to instil in the learner the rounded knowledge to communicate competently in the target language. The present researchers are not alone in this opinion – Leech and Svartvik (2002) have shown why the teaching of grammar alone is now being frowned at, especially within any communicative approach. This is because the sentences simulated in the grammar class to demonstrate certain grammatical facts are devoid of their authenticating discourse context; they are simply synthetic.

Halliday (2004) also criticises the kind of sentences grammarians analyse. He argues that, most times, grammarians are much more interested in the grammaticalness of the sentences they use than on their communicative values in context, or ‘real-life discourse.’ He says that such sentences are always ‘idealised’ and ‘isolated’. Using the analogy of a building, he points out that analysing just such abstract sentences without due consideration for other ‘several important

aspects of the meaning involved' is 'like describing a house as a construction of bricks, without recognising the walls and the rooms as immediate structural units' (p. 310).

This has been one of the major criticisms levelled against grammar-based approaches to second language learning. This argument notwithstanding, many scholars (Hodges & Whitten, 1982; Khansir, 2012; Oji, 2001; Quirk & Greenbaum, 2004; Rutherford, 2014; and Waldhorn & Zeiger, 2001) still think that the study of grammatical rules and codes is second to nothing in any language learning environment. But the stance that the study of the grammatical rules is all that is important to achieve the needed competence has been widely criticised. Edwards and Csizer (2004, p. 16) have written that '...language learning exceeds the limits of memorizing vocabulary items and grammar rules,' and for them, such works that place highest premium on grammar 'usually fail to provide the necessary and appropriate input in speech acts, and the material they do present often differs from real life speech'. This is what Paulston (1992) refers to as what happens in the artificial world of language classrooms.

It is in the light of the above that this study seeks to further assess the view that the grammar learned by students in second language classrooms is rather too artificial to give them what linguistic knowledge they need to communicate effectively. To give a preliminary stance, at no point would this study argue that these grammatical rules are outright unnecessary. But '...if it is only within the system that the rules are to be found, what rule can there be to guide the actualization of the possible, since there is no limit to the actualization, since the infinite is by that reason not subject to systemic rules?' (Akwanya, 2007a, pp. 1-2).

The disturbing question following up the above is: how are these 'systemic rules' sufficient in our teaching of language use, especially to L2 speakers? It is known that the processes and conditions of acquiring a first (or native) language are quite different from those of a second language. Even where two languages have equal status, Aitchison (2003) has admonished that it is unthinkable to judge one language by the standards of another. But this notwithstanding, before an L2 speaker achieves a near-native speaker competence, some ways of acquisition in an L1 environment may be adopted. To this end, Canale and Swain (1980) argue that:

*...effective second language learning takes place if emphasis is put from the beginning on getting one's meaning across, and not on the grammaticalness and appropriateness of one's utterances.... It is quite reasonable to assume that since in acquiring a first language the child seems to focus more on being understood than on speaking grammatically, then second language acquisition might be allowed to proceed in this manner (p. 10).*

While this is not the central argument here, it queries further the sufficiency of the grammar taught in class in giving second language learners what they need to become effective and mature users of the language. And if it is found insufficient, the question then arises: what is the place of grammar in L2 teaching and learning? Should it be completely discarded or be assigned its rightful role? This point shall be revisited below.

At this point, it is important to take a cursory look at the concepts of learning and acquisition. These two concepts are central in language teaching and learning. Many Second Language Teaching (SLT) scholars have come to agree that the two can be used for both first and second language situations, and there appears to be common approval for that. But while that position may still hold, it does appear safer to follow Krashen to believe that these two processes involve different conditions and also yield different results. According to Krashen (1982), learning is conscious, while acquisition takes ‘a fairly predictable natural order, and this occurs when we receive comprehensible input’ (pp. 86-87). It is against this background that many scholars have argued that children *acquire* their mother tongue, while second language users *learn* the language. One can only agree with this proposition if this difference is established on the basis of how competence is developed, rather than on the status of the language. If that differentiation is anything to go by, it means that acquisition is impossible in a second language environment. But from Krashen’s model, there is enough evidence to believe otherwise. From any of the divides, opinions are the same that what engenders acquisition is de-emphasis on conscious learning, and that learning takes place by picking up (and sometimes, memorising) the rules of a language. But he says that a very important point that also needs to be stated is that learning does not ‘turn into’ acquisition. He adds that language learners can learn a rule without acquiring that rule. Most of the usage errors in L2 situations do not emanate from problems in learning, but in acquisition. This is because learning a rule does not always mean being able to use it in performance, and those who utilize conscious rules during conversation always take too much time to speak and have a hesitant style which is often too boring to listen to. This is a major drawback of the learning process.

According to Krashen, grammar (a term he uses as a synonym for ‘conscious learning’) has two possible roles in the second language teaching and learning programme. The first is that conscious learning can act as an editor by correcting the errors, or rather what the performer perceives to be errors, in the output of the acquired system. He notes that this can happen before or after the sentence is spoken, implying that this correction is not as important as acquiring the structure of—and making use of—the language. The place for monitor use is always in writing and prepared speech; but when it is often used in normal conversations, the result is always the hesitant style mentioned above. Again, one must also know when rules can be used, which rules should be used, and what effects monitor use has. The second role of grammar is its teaching as a subject-matter, which can result in acquisition when and because the target language is used as a medium of instruction. This second role therefore may help to provide modest comprehensible input for acquisition.

The issue has been whether rules should be given directly (deductive), or whether students should be asked or made to figure out the rules for themselves (inductive). From the argument presented so far, there are compelling reasons to argue that the teaching and learning of grammar is not enough, and does not lead to acquisition – the only condition that guarantees communicative competence. This does not mean, however, that ‘there is no room at all for conscious learning. Conscious learning does have a role, but it is no longer the lead actor in the

play' (Krashen, 1982.) In fact, there is no model of communicative competence that neglects the place of grammar completely. Littlewood (1985) says that communicative language use is only possible by virtue of the grammatical system and its creative potential. To lend credence to this still, Widdowson (1990, p. 40) adds that 'a proper understanding of the concept of communicative competence would have revealed that it gives no endorsement for the neglect of grammar.'

### 3. Literature as comprehensible input in SLT

There is enough evidence to believe that every language (especially those already codified and with written forms) has its literature. And the literature of any language is part of and emanates from that language. In fact, literature cannot be except as language. Following Aristotle, many have come to agree that the art form which imitates by means of language alone is literature. If this is so, it is difficult, if not impossible, to divorce literature from language. Even in language teaching and learning, literature should be given a central role because of its communicative values. This position has been canvassed by many (Akwanya, 2005; Al-Darwish & Shuqair, 2015; Rai, 2012; and Shazu, 2014), for the projection of any curriculum of education that erects a demarcating wall between language and literature is inimical to the very purpose it is designed to serve, in that it helps neither the learning of the foreign language nor the mother tongue.

The point we want to establish here is that works of literature can expose second language learners to some kind of linguistic structures, which would in turn serve as 'comprehensible input' in the learning process. The comprehensible input, for Krashen, is to comprise both the known and the new, which indeed becomes known after it has been encountered in a learning experience that is continuously progressive. As it is, no matter how culturally different a literary text is, the reader finds certain aspects of the text familiar (at least the fact that the characters are humans, or behave as humans). This becomes a point of beginning in understanding the actions of the characters which are themselves creations of language, the language of emergence, the target language. Hence the learning of the story goes with the learning of the language structure, and indeed the necessity that accounts for every of the expressions. Hence, as cited in Otagburuagu (2007), Williams says that:

*Literature in a first or a second language confronts the student with various operations of language and the need to elucidate its meaning. Since literature organises language in the most exemplary fashion, the second language learner must be aware of the importance of applying the language of literature as a model for his own use. The teaching of literature has the practical value of enabling the student to learn about the second language as well as use it (pp. 195-196).*

The confrontation of language with the students at the point where language makes a demand on them to ponder on the 'various operations of language and the need to elucidate its meaning' is a clear pointer that textbook grammar alone lacks the enabling capacity for that

which it sets out to do, for to learn grammar outside the site of meaning is to learn rules only, yet every instantiation of language is a search for meaning. In Adichie's *Americanah* (2013), for instance, we read of such expressions as: 'Sometimes not believing herself' (p. 15) and 'Her first love, her first lover, the only person with whom she had never felt the need to explain herself' (p. 17). These are the kinds of expressions that may never pass as examples of sentence in a grammar class, but which, nevertheless, have been so used in the text. And as part of a discourse, their full meaning and, indeed grammaticality, are to be recuperated from the discourse to which they are only a part. This is practical encounter with language; it is grammar at its best, since thought and speech take place as discourse, and not as sentence.

So many scholars (e.g., Akwanya, 2005) have written that literature demonstrates classic models of language which learners of a language can draw from. Thus Akwanya (2005, p. 28) posits that 'literature is unique among the works of language to the extent that it may be studied simply as language.' It is in literature that one can see all the possible structures and linguistic patterns that a given language permits. One of the reasons for this is that to be efficient in a language, one needs to acquire much more than the knowledge of the structures of the language. Language use entails some knowledge of the social milieu, cultural values and habits of thought of the language community of the target language. Concerning this, Carpio and Carpio (2015) allude said that knowing and speaking a second language can imply change of behaviour, for instance, the modification of certain attitudes to perception of others as well as our exterior environment; and that learning another language may imply expanding our horizons and enriching ourselves. It also implies respect for cultural and linguistic diversity.

It follows, therefore, that every correct language use entails a correct attitude to and in the language. It is not probable that the learners of a second or foreign language can acquire all of these simply by the study of grammar in classrooms. If an effort must be made to imbibe such elements of the value system embedded in the target language, and which fixes its grammar and meaning, recourse should be made to authentic texts such as literature, which have the potential of exposing the reader to those elements inscribed in them. In studying literature in order to tap these communicative values inherent in them, emphasis should not only be placed on literariness, but on communicative or linguistic features. In fact, some have suggested that where the reading of literature is for the purpose of language learning, literariness should be sacrificed at the altar of discovering the linguistic features being sought for. While one may not completely agree with that, it has to be emphasised here that reading literary texts with the mind of developing some level of communicative competence has proved helpful.

Most scholars agree that for language learning to take place, there must be direct encounter with the language. O'Connor (1989) says that one must listen to English on the radio, on tapes and other records to be able to have some kind of direct access to [or encounter with] the language. Though he said this in reference to acquiring the sound patterns of language, it is indubitable that direct encounter with the language is essential for acquisition to take place. This is the argument advanced by Krashen (1982). Attentiveness to more advanced users has also been suggested. But besides all these noble practices and efforts, some exposure to the language

through the reading of literary texts stands out. In a foreword to a book, Akwanya (2010, p. viii) remarked that ‘awareness of... linguistic practices [like making good compositions] can only come from sustained contact with language, especially through reading.’ He argues further that close attention to the content, the clause structure, sentence patterns, word order, the variety of vocabulary, the punctuation practices, and to some other linguistic features of the material one is reading is bound to pay off when one is faced with one’s own essay writing tasks. Such other structures like idiomatic collocations, phrasal verbs, vocabulary development, grammatical structures and parts of speech, reading skills, discourse strategies etc can be acquired through the reading of literature. Very importantly, the reading of dramatic literature in particular helps one to develop discourse competence, and indeed, there is no doubt that much more communicative features abound in literature, if it is critically linguistically read.

Each of the genres of literature has some peculiar behaviour necessary for mature language use we can learn from them. Apart from the example above, it is obvious that one can learn economy of words by reading poems. As Akindele and Adegbite (1999) rightly observe, the development of the four basic language skills of speaking, reading, listening and writing is enhanced by the components of the three academic components of literature – prose, drama and poetry. So all the genres of literature are resourceful in the business of helping to develop communicative competence, even if they do not do so equally.

The point that exposing the learner to the situations that enable acquisition to take place is more effective has already been made. For acquisition (which is the condition needed for active competence to develop) to take place, SLT has got to move beyond grammar, the first phase of language teaching. On this, Akwanya (2005, p. 327) says that ‘language teaching in the school system is one phase of language leaning. Probably the more important phase is the non-formal aspect of language learning by direct encounter with the language.’ And this encounter should ideally take place by reading literature, for literature is where one reads language in one of its purest forms.

In a second language environment like ours, another issue would definitely arise. What kind of literary material is to be read? Some have argued that literary texts produced by the second language culture can be used, while some others believe that for English to be learnt from its natural habitat, recourse should be made to literary texts published in countries like the UK and the US, where English is the first language. In whichever side of the coin one follows, what may be more important is to take seriously Otagburuagu’s counsel wherein he posits that to ‘...achieve results, the teacher must ensure that he recommends and uses only standard works of literature in the language programme. The work of literature must contain the right samples of language which the teacher wants to teach and which is of interest to the class’ (2007, p. 197). This is also the position of Kramsch (1985): that the works to be selected for use for situations like this should be such that can be used to illustrate grammatical rules and enrich reader’s vocabulary and the general knowledge of the target language.

#### 4. Conclusion

The strength of literature is its being as discourse, and as such, its capacity to activate all the powers of language to create, to designate, and even to think and represent thought to itself in meditation. This is what makes reading an encounter with language, where structure interweaves with meaning as products of thought and the reader's attempt to reach understanding is also his participation in the process of meaning making and his learning of the language as a habit of thought. Akwanya (2007b) has reported that this was the system obtainable in the 60s in Nigeria, and which had to give way to the current disintegrated curriculum. For whatever reason the old curriculum had to be abandoned, it is now clear that it does not favour English language teaching and learning in Nigeria, especially now that there is a general outcry over the falling standards of English both in public discourse and public examinations like Senior Secondary School Certificate Examinations (SSCE) and Unified Tertiary Matriculation Examination (UTME) (Oji, 2001; Eyisi, 2004; Baldeh, 1990; and Akwanya, 2007b).

Until Nigeria's educational curriculum changes and returns to the practice of teaching English through literature at all levels, the lost glory may be difficult to be restored, other efforts of the stakeholders notwithstanding. Our position in this paper is an inclusive one. We agree that grammar is essential in teaching language in a second language situation like ours. But we are convinced that to teach any language as a second language without its literary and, perhaps, other authentic texts, is a patently impaired practice, limited in its capacity to impact. Matter-of-factly, the sentences usually simulated to illustrate grammatical categories in class have been found to be quite simplistic and far less rigorous than sentences picked from literary texts. One implication of this is that analysing such sentences from a discourse appears to demand, from the students, certain skills and knowledge which their mastery in analysing abstract sentences can't supply, and this borders heavily on competence.

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