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Dictation as a Veritable Tool for Language Proficiency on Project Educational Reform in Nigeria (Pp. 18-25)

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Abstract

Dictation is a valuable language teaching and learning device that has been used for centuries though often ignored by teachers. It is a writing activity that involves writing down what someone says and or reads out as it is being said or immediately after it is said. Given the background of unsatisfactory performance of learners of English language in Nigeria this paper is an attempt to put a useful but now undervalued technique back into the language teaching activities. It contends that effective use of dictation activities will help to improve students' proficiency in the four aspects of English language among the second learners of English language in a country like Nigeria. Nigeria is a multi-lingual country and English language has always been treated as a compulsory subject. To this end, an attempt is made in this paper to explore how dictation can be used as a device to improve students' performance, especially in the current school reform. The paper equally suggests that the curriculum planners at the secondary school level should, as a matter of priority, include dictation activities in the syllabuses. It concludes that there should be consistent application of dictation activities. By doing this in the classroom, they would be making significant contributions to the current school reform project of the nation-learners.

Introduction

English is one of the most commonly used languages of the world. It occupies an international position. Richards (1991) stated that it is a medium for international commerce, industry, communication and a source of scientific and technological advancement. Its role in the academic world cannot be overemphasized. Many countries of the world have not only declared English as their official language but have also adopted it as the language of teaching and learning. Nigeria like any other country has continued to make serious efforts towards meeting the needs of her citizenry through effective study English by developing the language curriculum and making policies since she is a multi-lingual country. In Nigeria's educational system the English language has always been treated as a compulsory subject and used as a medium of instruction after the first three years in primary schools (NPE, 2004). The implication is that all aspects of the school curriculum expose the Nigerian students to the English language from the primary school, and their ability to learn and exhibit desired learning outcomes depends to a great extent on the effectiveness of the English language teaching and learning activities as piloted by the teacher. In effect, language teachers need to be abreast with different methods of language teaching and learning which are dynamic and keep changing and improving with time. Although English language enjoys a pride of place in all facets of Nigerian life and has been taught and learnt for several decades in the school system, students' poor performance in the subject is worrisome. Abolade (2004) reported that less than 10% of the total number who took the annual West African Senior School Certificate Examination (WASSCE) had credit pass in English language. The situation continues to get worse. This situation needs an immediate overhaul. The introduction of dictation activities into the secondary school syllabus may help to redress the present ugly situation in the teaching and learning of English language.

Dictation is a writing activity that involves writing down what someone says or reads out as it is being said or immediately after it is said. The use of dictation as a valuable language teaching and learning technique has gone through a long history and has been used for centuries all over the world. Dictation ensures attentive listening, concentration and teaches students to write from dictation. It equally trains students to distinguish sounds and helps them learn punctuation and develop aural comprehension. Blanche (2004) remarked that dictation exercises are old-fashioned as audio-lingual in a

novel way, not only to teach listening and writing but also to teach pronunciation.

Dictation has long played a significant role in the English language curriculum in Nigeria particularly in primary schools. It often acts as a memorization exercise or spelling-checking assessment. The situation is that pupils particularly the less capable ones either work under stress or give up because they perceive it as a boring and threatening lesson. They may gradually develop a negative attitude towards dictation lessons and this tends to hinder their learning. Dictation should be treated as a teaching and learning exercise in which pupils learn to improve their language learning rather than being a mechanical drilling or assessing tool. Though it has been neglected for a long time, second language teachers (L2) and in fact foreign language (FL) teachers have to learn how to use only the parts of older methods that are relevant in today's context. Teachers can use different genres and a number of dictation activities to conduct their lessons so as to change a boring, threatening and stressful classroom atmosphere into a relaxing, supportive and enjoyable learning environment which subsequently brings a positive influence on learners' performances. The major function of the language is giving feedback to students on their performance, by which students work through their individual errors. Dictation offers great opportunities for increasing accurate and fluent command of the language through students analyzing their work. At the secondary level of education in Nigeria, dictation is not given a place as part of language teaching and learning activities unless where a teacher uses his or her ingenuity. Nigeria has been going through various educational reforms. The most recent rebrand project is one of such reform. Teachers should be made to understand the vital contributions dictation could play in a language classroom so as to employ it in instruction.

The use of dictation in an English language classroom

Research has shown that dictation can help students improve different aspects of their language proficiency. Davis and Rinvoluceri (2002) explained that:

Dictation contains a wealth of new technique to extend the traditional language learning activity of dictation. The activities range from the traditional focus on spelling and punctuation problems to exercises that emphasize personal attitude and

opinions of both teachers and students. Dictation provides activities suitable for a wide range of levels and ages, example texts for many activities, opportunities for students to create their own texts, and a variety of suggested correction techniques.

Again Alkire (2002) opined that dictation with broadcast learning possibilities is

orthographic text dictation in which students transcribe a unified passage. This is a classic dictation exercise which, besides reinforcing the spelling and sound correlation of English, uncovers comprehension and grammatical weakness in learners for the teacher to analyze and address in future lessons.

From the above assertions it is clear that dictation is a valuable language teaching and learning device that has been used for decades though often ignored by teachers probably because of their not being aware of its importance in instruction especially in a developing country like Nigeria. Pappas (1977) reported dictation as a good means of developing the learner's comprehension. Whitaker (1976) also considered dictation as a good teaching device. He explained that aural comprehension is prized with literacy and ability to read the foreign language. Similarly, Morris (1983) drawing on the mistakes made by English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners on three dictations concluded that dictation is a technique which can be used both as a testing technique and more importantly as a learning activity which helps students develop their accuracy in listening and writing, and reinforces structure and vocabulary. Valette (1964), had earlier asserted that dictation could be a method of both testing and learning. She believed that practice with dictation can help students learn the language and that the teacher's concentration on different components of the language, including sound sentence structure e.t.c encouraged students' awareness of the written language.

A few people were of the opinion that using dictation in class and practicing with it has nothing to do with the improvement of the learner's proficiency. Cartledge (1968) was of the view that dictation is not a teaching device. He claimed that it could only help learners have some practice in oral comprehension. Stanfield (1985) rejected using dictation as

a test of foreign language proficiency due to its strong association with the Grammar Translation Method (GTM).

Other researchers however have continued to believe that dictation can be used as a teaching technique due to amount of input it provides for the learner. Jafarpur and Amini (1993) observed that dictation allows the language learner to both comprehend and produce the language in the context of meaningful discourse. Myint (1998) further stressed that though dictation has always been a controversial activity in the language classroom, it is still a teaching device at some stages of language teaching because it gives the badly needed practice in listening comprehension. Moreover, Montalvon (1990) has earlier remarked that there are at least twenty advantages of dictation but the most important are:

1. Dictation can help develop all four-language skills in an integrated way.
2. It can help learn grammar.
3. It helps to develop short-term memory.
4. Practice in careful listening to a speaker will be useful to learners in future in the note-taking activities for instance listening to lectures.
5. Dictation fosters unconscious thinking in the new language.
6. Correction can be done by the students peers correction of written dictation leads to oral communication.

It is surprising that despite all the benefits of dictation as enumerated above, dictation is not widely used in teaching English, especially at the secondary and tertiary education levels mainly because some linguists/teachers consider it teacher-centered and old-fashioned. However, currently dictation seems to be undergoing a revival as a useful teaching and learning device. It is thought that it can help develop all language skills that is, grammar, oral communication, pronunciation and listening comprehension. In the Nigerian context, there seem to be no work on the usefulness of dictation either at the secondary school level or tertiary level. Consequently, the present work is an attempt at bringing out the usefulness of dictation as a teaching and learning tool to empower students' proficiency in English language at the secondary school level. This should contribute to the ongoing education reform project in Nigeria as part of

teaching techniques hitherto viewed as old-fashioned is being rebranded to assume new and better meaning for effective teaching and learning in the classroom.

Suggested steps of using dictation in the English language classroom

The English language is a second language (L2) to both the teachers and students in most public secondary schools in Nigeria. Many students struggle to express themselves in the language because outside the classroom, they have essentially little or no contact with the English language. Again, people in general find it difficult to express themselves in grammatically correct English. Many views have been given to account for why many learners and people in general do not acquire language proficiency. The situation seems to be getting worse, especially with learners at the secondary school level. The performance of students at various external examinations has remained unimpressive. It is expected that after learning the English language for so many years, students would have reached a certain level of proficiency, so one way of arresting the anomaly seems to be the introduction of dictation as a teaching and learning device by English language teachers and maybe Literature-in-English teachers.

For any meaningful learning to occur in the English Language, dictation must be given a place in any modern multi-modal L2 methodology. To achieve this purpose and make dictation a worthwhile activity in the language classroom, innovative dictation activities should be implemented to replace the traditional dictation exercise where it exists at all. The following steps should be systematically followed in order to achieve positive results:

- a) Pupils'/students' interest and ability must be considered in choosing materials.
- b) The activities must be set from the easiest to the more challenging. Start with materials/works the students are familiar with, that is move from simple to complex exercises.
- c) Each activity should be conducted twice to make sure the students understand the rules and get used to the ways the activities work.
- d) Clear instructions must be given before the start of the activities so that the students understand well what they are expected to do.

- e) The teacher should provide sufficient support to the students who may have some difficulties during the activities (so as to avoid boredom).
- f) At the end of the dictation activities about five minutes should be given to the students to go through their work to check their spelling mistakes. The time given for this depends on the exercise and sometimes they may be allowed to use reference books or dictionaries.

Blanche (2004) explained that almost any “text” (in the philosophical sense of the word), thus most parts of any book, textbook, newspaper, magazine, broadcast, play, screenplay, poem, speech or song can theoretically be dictated in a foreign language classroom. He went on to counsel that the work selected must be:

- i. In line with students’ average ability;
- ii. Relevant to their needs and interests;
- iii. Not too long (always less than a fully printed page);
- iv. Capable of being cut up into short, self-contained portions.

From the above, it can be deduced that dictation makes for good review and that texts that were used for different teaching purposes several weeks earlier can be reused. Dictation activities can therefore be taken from anywhere; for instance, textbook, newspaper, magazine, and poetry e.t.c. provided the themes meet the guideline listed above.

Conclusion

This paper looked at the role dictation plays in teaching and learning situations in classroom instruction and suggested ways it can be implemented in the Nigeria classroom at the secondary school level, especially now that different innovations and reforms are going on in the education sector and more recently the Nigeria rebrand project. It can be concluded that for effective use of dictation in the classroom, the planners of the secondary school English curriculum should, as a matter of priority, include dictation activities in the syllabus. Teachers on the other hand, should try to be abreast of developments in the education industry in other parts of the world, especially the developed nations so as to incorporate some in their classroom practices. This will enable them to produce learners who are effective in this information age. This is also a way of contributing

to the various education reform of the Nigerian government in order to improve education and more especially the teaching and learning of English Language.

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