

DEVELOPING SPEECH PROFICIENCY OF THE IGBO LEARNER OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE THROUGH THE USE OF IGBO TALES

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ABSTRACT

Many advocates of the communicative approach to language study contend that comprehensive input and carefully structured communication opportunities are sufficient for language acquisition to take place. This work which centres on developing speech proficiency through the use of Igbo tales, argued that using the Igbo tales to teach the Igbo learners of English as a second language will certainly enhance their proficiency in speech. The paper adopted the communicative competence approach and demonstrated that proper input will lead to a better output. The paper posited that the use of Igbo tales in teaching speech skills will lead to a more developed speech proficiency. The paper as well highlighted the importance of the speaking skill over the other language skills and concluded that a truly organized Igbo tale used to teach speech skill will enhance it.

Keynotes: *English language, Igbo learner, Igbo tales, speech proficiency*

INTRODUCTION

There is no doubting the fact that the writing and reading skills of the English have been given prominence by most teachers of the language. This is because they practise the traditional teaching method which actually favours the two

skills mainly. The result is that the productive skill like speaking is often neglected. Hodson (2006) in Alam and Uddin (2013:17) notes that "the explicit teaching of speaking and listening has been neglected". Also Wilkinson, Davis and Berril (1990) in Alam and Uddin (2013: 17) equally agree that "the spoken language in English has been shamefully neglected". These scholars have clearly shown that the teaching of oral communication skills in English are often relegated to the background because most teachings of the language practise traditional methods of language teaching.

It is really very unfortunate to note that this aspect of language skill has been dumped for written exercises in Nigerian schools. Before today, Test of Oral English used to be conducted some two or more weeks before the written aspect in the English language examination in WAEC and other certificate examinations. But today, it has been abandoned as a result of one reason or the other. As a matter of fact, people contend that the test of orals examination is useless as the examination often leaks because it is believed that the moment such a test is done in one school, the others know what the school was asked as questions. This is becomes a blow the learning and development of the speaking skill of the English language.

But both the listening and speaking skills are supposed to be developed in the classroom context. What is often experienced is that language teachers end up in giving students some kind of minimal pairs to memorise in class and sometimes at home (which is often is not practised by the

learners. During examinations, the students are only given written examinations without the actual practice of the speaking skill, which is a two-way communication actually. Communication, which we know as exchange of ideas among people either by writing or by speaking now becomes limited to writing alone, in examinations. This retards the development of the speaking skill for the L2 learners of the language. Speaking usually takes place in the presence of the listener as he often responds to the speaker's statements or communication.

The truth therefore, is that the Igbo speaker of English as a second language lacks the appropriate fluency and accuracy, which are the hallmarks of speech proficiency in English language. This paper therefore, contends that the Igbo learner of English as a second language can actually improve in his or her speech proficiency (her use of oral English) if he/she is taught speech in the classroom using Igbo tales. The paper also contends that not only will the speech be improved or developed but also the reading skill of such a learner.

Some Definitions

The two major expressions in this topic are *speech proficiency* and *Igbo tales*. For purposes of clearing some doubts and not as a matter of routine, the two major expressions will be given illuminations.

Speech Proficiency

The primary reason for talking is the belief that another is hearing. Except for a mad man, any person who talks expects a listener. To listen well and understand, the speaker (i.e. the person talking) must talk well. This means that the person must pronounce his words well, use appropriate grammar and punctuations at the appropriate time. Such a person must make appropriate pronunciations to avoid misinterpretations. Anyone who is able to use his/her grammar in such a way as talked above can be said to be proficient in his use of the English language. Speech proficiency therefore, means a speaker's ability to use his/her language in such a way that there are no lapses - he says what he wants to say in the way it is supposed to be said grammatically and phonologically. Speech proficiency involves the knowledge and application of the English grammar correctly. Speech proficiency therefore, is synonymous with communicative competence.

Igbo Tales

Igbo tales are aspects of the Igbo oral repertoire. Tales belong to Igbo oral literature which has to do with *what is told* (Chukwuma, 1999:27) i.e novel (as in written literature, as opposed to *what is recited*, and *what is acted* (i.e. poetry and drama respectively). Tales are stories of Igbo origin, sometimes of creation, of existence, of reason, e.t.c. all aimed at educating and informing. Such tales as **why women do not grow beards, why human beings die, origin of a deity**, e.t.c. are part of Igbo tales. These tales are often told and recited during moonlight nights and as part of Igbo oral life. The result is that such aspect of oral life is communally known and owned. The argument in this paper is that when a child is taught in the classroom using such tales he is familiar with,

there is every tendency that motivation, as well as active participation is guaranteed.

The Igbo Second Language Learner and Igbo Tales

The contention in this paper is that when a learner is taught in the language he knows very well, he will understand more than when he is taught in a language he is struggling to learn. An Igbo learner of English is very obviously conversant with the Igbo language as that is his *mother-tongue* or *source language*. There is obviously no aspect of the Igbo language he does not know - be it the basolet, acrolet or the mesolet. This is because the Igbo community is his speech community.

If such a learner of English as a second language is taught to speak the English language well using such stories he knows, such a student will learn faster and as a result develop the speech aspect of the language faster. The simple reason is because he enjoys the teaching because what he knows already is involved. There is fuller participation in class. The result of this is the enhancement of and eventual growth of that aspect of the language.

Words that he is familiar with will be used to teach him. He will be asked to pronounce them, say their meanings and so on. This is why the opinion of this paper is that using the Igbo tales in teaching English language to a learner of it as a second language, especially an Igbo learner, will help the learner to develop his/her speaking skill in English (speech proficiency). It will also help such a learner to read better and faster because he/she is reading what she knows. Through this activity in class or anywhere, the speech proficiency of that person becomes improved. In such a

teaching, the classroom teacher will apply the theory of *Communicative Language Teaching (CLT)*, which sees language as a system of expression of meaning - the primary function of language being interaction and communication.

The Igbo Tale as Oral Literature

It has earlier been noted in this paper that oral literature is categorized into three distinct areas of 'what is sung' (poetry), 'what is told' (prose) and 'what is acted' (drama). The oral tale falls under what is told and some schools of thought refer to this as 'folktales'. According to Ruth Finnegan, "any type of oral prose narrative from whatever society could be, and was, referred to as 'folktale' and thus treated as a 'survival' from an earlier and even more primitive state' (1970:318). The folktales, and indeed all oral narratives have been handed down through generations from the remote past and so the question of authorship or ownership no longer arises since these are treated as 'survivals'. These tales are often linked to existence, reasons, origins, e.t..c. so the evolutionist school in the study of oral literature capitalized on origin to belief that folktales and indeed oral literature is communally owned and transmitted.

It is believed that there are many interesting similarities which have been discovered in the plots of the stories (tales) found in Africa and elsewhere in Europe, in Arabia, in India and in the new world. These are perhaps where African slaves were taken to then. Oral literature (African oral) can then be said to have a lot of similarities of not only plot but structure, especially the tale. Finnegan notes that many of the resemblances in the folktale are striking but however notes

that beyond this, there are still many differences both of detail and general treatment.

Some notable tales are *the vulture and the hen*, *the tortoise and the birds*, *one cannot help an unlucky man* (a Hausa tale) and many more. Many of these tales are highly developed in plot, language and even proverbs specifically and because these tales too are communally owned, the students who are taught using the tales will obviously catch up with issues involved in the tales. Tales now can be seen as that part of oral literature which is relevant in the English classroom, though it is often abandoned by language teachers.

The Second Language Learner and Igbo Tales

A second language learner is that learner who already has developed a first language (usually the person's source language) and now learns another language (example English language) as a second language. Such a second language is often learned because of its wider usage and importance. The English language, for example, is seen as the *lingua franca*, a language used for wider communication and for trade. The result is that it is mainly learned as a second language.

With the problems associated with learning a second language - e.g. meaning of words, pronunciation and grammaticality, e.t.c., the second language learner often does not understand the English language faster, but this same learner has known a language earlier, i.e. the local indigenous language (the Igbo language, Hausa or Yoruba for example). Because he is

conversant with that language, the stories of existence, origin, e.t.c, as part of the folktales are also known. Obviously, the usage of such already known tales will go a long way in enhancing participation, and understanding in the classroom. Therefore, the use of such tales to teach fluency in speech will certainly have greater impact on the students than just teaching in the conventional way. This paper therefore, advocates the use of the known to teach the unknown. Familiar Igbo tales can be used to teach pronunciation, even reading and writing in schools.

Speech as an important language skill

The National Institute on Deafness and other Communication Disorders (NIDCD) Fact Sheet notes that speech is talking which is one way to express language. It involves the precisely coordinated muscle actions of the tongue, lips, jaw, and vocal track to produce the recognizable sounds that make up language. Speech is basically verbal and it's almost always firstly used before any other language skill e.g. to say good morning, or to give instructions even in cases of teaching or interview. Good speech involves fluency and accurate articulation of words grammatically and phonetically.

Many language teachers in the past used the communicative language teaching methods to teach communication which is speech based. This helped to emphasize or instil the learner's participatory condition in a meaningful L2 interaction. This is important as it prepares the learner for future communications in real life contexts. Poor speeches distort communication and hinder understanding. When a learner lacks the basic rudiments of speech (knowledge of the

grammar of the language in use, improper articulation of words, e.t.c) he falters and understanding certainly becomes problematic. It is common knowledge that speech is primary to writing and other language skills and this is because a newly born child acquires it before learning. The body organs of a child, especially the speech organs are developed from birth (at least a child must cry at birth and this is a sign of having the speech organs). How often we speak or communicate enhances fluency and how often we learn the grammar of the L2 ensures accuracy. Speech is very important, more than the other language skills because with that we can make our intentions known at once especially in a face-to-face contact before the use of any other language skill. It is therefore, adjudged to be one of the most important language skills.

Developing Speech Competence through the use of Tales

Asghar Ali Ansari (n.y.) of University College, Umm-Al-Quara contends that literature is secondary to language. This is because it is through language that literature is written. Without language, we cannot express our thoughts. On the other hand, literature is thought expressed with the use of language. One therefore, finds rest in the other. Leo Tolstey, the Russian writer is of the opinion that literature fails if it cannot answer the two fundamental questions of who we are and how shall we live. Literature should teach us how to live and also tell our identification. This suggests that literature has engulfed our lives from cradle to death. Through the study of literature, we come to know ourselves.

The study of literature improves our thinking skill. It can therefore, be said that literature improves our thinking skill

and trains us in the field of high order and high thinking. Ansari also notes that: "the subject matter of literature is as wide as human experience itself. So the themes of literature have at once an infinite variety and an abiding constancy".

He contends that literature can be taken from myth, history, contemporary events or they can be an invention of the writer. Literature too can be taken from orality as it can constitute what men in society do. Oral literature involves such literature handed down through word of mouth and this reflects the culture of a people. It could be poetry (what is sung), drama (what is acted), or novel (what is told).

Since the oral literature is communally owned and transmitted, every member of a society should know it. Because every member of a society knows the aspects of oral literature, as it is part of their culture, Igbo learners of English as a second language for instance should know various tales - whether tales that involve human beings (human tales) or those that involve animals (animal tales). Whenever any of such learners is taught speech proficiency through the story(s) he knows, he will always show more interest and so learn faster. The teacher can always pick up peculiar expressions and words and instil these into the learners. Through drills and matched text, the learner can understand the occasions of use of such expressions or words isolated and constancy makes such expressions the learner's own.

Also, because of the high sense of reasoning, which abounds in literature, the L2 learner begins also to develop a high reasoning capability. This in turn helps the learner to develop

his or her speech proficiency. He graduates from the known to a higher speech pedestal. Such stories (tales) that can be used are varied - e.g such that can show greed, anger, treachery, origin, e.t.c. These kinds of tales generate interest because the learner knows it.

Llach (2007) acknowledges that part of the importance of using literature as a teaching tool in a language class is because it provides the learner with authentic linguistic (also sociolinguistic) and cultural material, and also motivates the learner to interact. This as a matter of fact is one of the benefits of applying communicative competence in language teaching and learning.

It becomes imperative therefore, that an L2 learner who is taught with a tale or tales he is familiar with will certainly learn more words, better expressions, as well as idioms because not only that there is keen interest but also because the background of the teaching is not alien to him. He is therefore, free to ask questions and more likely to memorise the tale(s) at home and through this, a learner can develop his/her speech proficiency faster. This is because he has interest in what he is learning.

A literary text has multiple interpretations and these trigger different opinions from the learners and this is one of the importances of literature in a language class. Because literature generates different opinions from the learners, it leads to real, motivated interaction with the text as well as with fellow students and with teacher too. Literature in a language classroom actually puts the learner in the front line

and so he participates actively; it as well makes the text to be the major focus of attention. This helps the learner to learn more as well as speak more than before and as he does this, he improves on his speech proficiency.

Ramsaran (1983) in Llach (2007) contend that,

Using literature to teach language not only contributes to a better linguistic understanding, a development of creative skills, and higher language proficiency, it also makes an important contribution to literary appreciation.

Because literary texts involve reading, it helps in language development. This is because many linguists believe that reading is one of the best ways to learn a language. Llach (2007) also is of the opinion that 'reading helps the second language learner to acquire not only more vocabulary and more meanings and uses of the words already known but it also helps to develop syntactic knowledge'. It is also through extensive reading of texts (literary texts) that most learners acquire most of their vocabularies. The number of words (vocabulary) a learner can boast of obviously will determine the learner's choice of words during speech and this ultimately leads to proficiency in language. The use of literature in the teaching of language (especially the *oral tale*) helps the L2 learner to develop proficiency in speech. This proficiency in speech helps every user of a language to communicate more fluently and meaningfully as he is sure of the words he uses and speaks without thinking.

The Primacy of Speech over other Language Skills

It is rather sad to realize that most linguists (scholars) often neglect speech as an aspect of language skill that is the *primus inter per*. The result is that they write on all others

like writing, listening, reading, e.t.c., paying less attention to speech. But it looks like stating the obvious to say that we speak before we write or read as human beings. This is because any child in his first 1 - 3 years has that innate feature or characteristics known as LAD - Language Acquisition Device. With this, the child begins to blab... acquiring the consonantal and vowel sounds of the mother tongue without much difficulty. The child obviously begins to learn, to read and write the moment he begins to go to school. Still, linguists tend to ignore writing on speech, as they write on other language skills.

Even as those who have learnt their language, human beings often speak more than they write, listen or read. We can notice in our everyday lives that we speak oftener than we write; think of what happens at home, in the church, in the market place, at the village square, e.t.c. . We are prone to speaking in such situations than we write or engage in the other language skills. Hodson (2006) in Uddin and Alam (2013) says "the explicit teaching of speaking and listening has been neglected". This is also the same opinion of Wilkinson, Davies and Berril (1990) in Uddin and Alam (2013) when they note that: the spoken language in English has been shamefully neglected. These scholars openly note that teaching Oral Communicative Skills (OCS) are relegated to the background because of the use of the traditional method of language teaching. Even in our normal examinations today, attention is focused more to writing and reading to the neglect of speaking. This, of course, has led to poor performance of many students of English especially when it comes to speech. Some rather 'force' themselves to speak what they are not

conversant with. The result is *false starts* and *malapropisms* and these negate speech proficiency.

Listening and speaking skills are to be developed in the classroom context but it appears that this is not possible because of poor infrastructure or teaching materials. Many schools, it is obvious do not have a standard language laboratory, if they have at all. The result is that the speaking skill as well as the reading skill is not effectively handled. Again, because most language teachers are used to the traditional method of language teaching, they are found paying more attention to reading and writing. This undermines speech. This paper therefore, advocates the return to communicative competence as this guarantees speech proficiency to a very large extent. Through the use of literature as a tool to teach language, communicative competence is highly promoted.

CONCLUSION

It is not an overstatement to say that most users (speakers) of the English language are actually not proficient in it. The reasons for this may be double-fold. In the first place, most teachers of the language appear to neglect the teaching of speech and the methods of developing good speech and secondly, there appear to be some kind of abstraction in the language itself as a result of origin. Tschimer (1992) believes that communication based teaching techniques lead students from input to output in a stimulating and motivating environment, especially as each activity begins with an input base and ends with an output base. An Igbo learner of English as a second language who is presented with an Igbo tale,

which he is assumed to be familiar with already has an input that is encouraging as well as motivating.

The output should equally be encouraging. This is because the learner started with what he knows already. The fact that a student is taught with what he has interest in brings its motivational effects. The natural approach to the learning of a language argues that input and motivation are as a matter of fact, indispensable requisites of any foreign language learning.

Tschimer's idea that the input phase in the adoption of the communicative approach has two primary goals is obvious. It focuses on comprehension and thus, provided input; it also provides a model for students to follow in their own speech and writing. During the output phase, students are encouraged to make use of what has been presented as input and expand such in their spoken and written repertoire. Tales have a kind of impact on the receiver especially when one is already familiar with it. Using a tale like *why women do not grow beards*, *why human being dies* etc to teach second language learners how to produce a good speech will be of great effects to such a learner. This, to a large extent will encourage fluency in the use of English language.

This paper therefore, posits that the Igbo learners of the English as a second language will certainly learn faster when they are taught the speaking skills (speech proficiency) using the Igbo tales. This is because the tales, by extension, are already known by the learner and this will encourage facilitate fuller participation. The idioms and other figurative expressions in the tales will be highlighted and explained as

well as difficult expressions. This will ultimately encourage or promote speech proficiency among the learners.

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