

# ENHANCING THE TEACHING AND LEARNING OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE USING LEARNER CENTERED STRATEGIES

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**Abstract.** The effective teaching and learning of English Language has been a major source of concern to educators throughout the ages. The use of such strategies as cooperative learning, inquiry, think-pair-share, brainstorming, peer teaching, and jigsaw should be encouraged. These strategies are quite different from the teachers-centered approach in which the teacher is all in all and pupils are just passive learners. This study explored how some of these interactive strategies can be used in teaching English language in order to achieve English language curriculum objectives. The study recommends that strategies which involve active participation of pupils in learning should be adopted for teaching and learning, government should employ more English language specialists to primary schools, training and retraining. Programmes should be mounted for teachers, head teachers should regularly go round to monitor teaching activities, and re-tooling English language teachers on the use of these interactive strategies for more productive teaching and learning.

**Key words:** Strategy, Learning, Brainstorming, Jigsaw, inquiry, think-pair-share and peer teaching

## 1. Introduction

English language remains one of the most popular languages in many nations of the world. Its use as a means of communication in such international gatherings as political conferences, education seminars, sports, commonwealth and other multilateral organisation meetings attest to the fact that English Language is a language of global importance.

The introduction of English language has contributed tremendously to the growth and development of a lot of countries where the diversities of ethnicity and language had previously hampered inter-ethnic and inter-community relationships like festivities, marriages, trading and other socio-economic interactions because of the barrier of language. Hence, the unifying factor provided in the use of English Language as a means of communication had produced a major boost in the socioeconomic status of the people of the community.

In the remote parts of the developing world, especially in the British colonies of Africa, a lot of prestige and respect is attached to the fluent use of English language. This, therefore, proves that English language has attained a far reaching influence sweeping through the nations of the world from the developed countries to the developing ones.

In certain countries especially the developing countries where English language is the major medium of instruction in the educational system from the upper primary to the tertiary institutions, pupils' performance in English language continues to be an issue of great concern because a lot of products of post primary institutions still find it difficult to read and understand materials written in English. This poor performance may be linked to lack of adequate materials for learning as well as unsuitable teaching methods. Therefore, it is important to ensure that there is significant improvement in how the English Language is taught especially in the formal setting.

The thrust of this presentation is hinged on the premises that:

- Learners learn best when they become active participants rather than passive learners. Learners are passive when they just to listen to the teacher who dishes out the knowledge to them without their active

participation. When they are allowed to engage in class discussions, work together in groups and taught to reason well, they make progress quickly in their studies.

- When learners are allowed to engage with real or near real objects, they learn fast and this makes learning permanent.
- Learners are not just to copy the subject matter but should be fully involved in making sense and construct meaning.
- The learners here are processors of the subject matter not just observers of knowledge

## 2. Learner centered strategy

The strategies employed in the teaching of English language will go a long way to determine how fast and how well the language is learnt. A learning strategy is said to be effective when the learners are able to excellently master the subject that is being taught.

Studies have shown that the learner-centered strategies are very effective in producing excellent results in the teaching and learning of English Language. These strategies enable learners to discover things themselves and once this is achieved, the application of the knowledge acquired becomes very easy and helps to build the confidence of the learners.

The teacher's role is to prepare and provide series of activities and then guide the learners to carry out the activities with little or no interruption from the teacher. The teacher, therefore, facilitates rather than dictate in this situation

### Case scenario

A teacher, in teaching learners who have no prior knowledge of the characteristics of the orange fruit, makes the learning about the fruit more meaningful by bringing samples of fruit at different stages of maturation to the class, asking students to look, touch, taste and smell: and then make known their observations.

**Fig. 1 Different stages of maturation and how they are identified** (Adapted from Resource Book for Enugu State Excellence in Teaching and Learning Effective Pedagogical Strategies (2014))

| Skin                             | Colour                     | Taste                            | Texture   | Smell                      |
|----------------------------------|----------------------------|----------------------------------|---|----------------------------|
| Thin when unripe                 | Green when unripe          | Sour when not yet ripe           | Hard, firm when not yet ripe                                | No particular odour        |
| Thick and leathery when ripe     | Yellow/red when ripe       | Succulent and sweet when ripe    | Slightly firm/soft smooth and easy to cut when ripe         | Sweet-smelling when ripe   |
| Thick and leathery when overripe | Brownish red when overripe | Succulent and sour when overripe | Very soft and easier to peel, cut and squeeze when overripe | Rotten smell when overripe |

The students' active involvement with orange enhances their understanding of the concept of the orange fruit and will make learning permanent.

## 3. Cooperative learning strategy

In cooperative learning, the learners are expected to be actively engaged in their learning. The teacher encourages learners to study together with their mates and discuss their findings. It involves the use of small groups in which learners work together to arrive at a meaningful goal (Mohammed, 2011). This strategy gives room for each learner in respect of his/her different activities to improve their understanding of a subject. Ajaja&Evawoke (2013) say that comprehension is facilitated through peer interaction. Cooperative learning promotes international relationship and improves attitudes toward school and peers apart from academic benefits (Johnson & Johnson, 1996).

In various field of studies such as science, social studies, humanities, languages and so on, various studies have been carried out on how suitable cooperative learning strategy is. Some of the benefits reported include enhanced learning achievement of students (Lanpe, Rooze&Tallent-Runnels, 1998). The activity of cooperative learning engages the learners in the learning process and helps to improve the critical thinking, reasoning and problem-solving skills of the learner.

The teachers' activity in this strategy is to give his learners clear instructions on what they are to do and encourage them to learn. He should put them through. For example, if he wants to teach comprehension passage where the learners are expected to answer the questions that follow, he should assist them by putting them through on how to make use of comprehension strategies to solve the task on any given comprehension passage. The steps are:

- **Preview:** learners are to go through the passage and concentrate on important key words. This will assist the learners to have the idea of what is in the passage briefly.
- **Click and chunk:** this helps the learners to note areas or portions of the text that make sense to them.
- **Get the gist:** this helps to identify the main idea in the text. At this point, the learners will be able to restate the important points in their own words.
- **Wrap up:** this encourages the learners to ask questions after they might have reviewed the salient points.

After these steps have been thoroughly facilitated in the learners, the teacher can now guide them to form groups of mixed abilities to work on the task cooperatively among the groups. However, the teacher should avoid ambiguity, he should give them clear instructions which will guide them to work effectively in their various groups.

#### **4. Round Robin Brainstorming Strategy**

This strategy allows learners come up with answers to a question that does not have a specific answer. To apply this strategy in the teaching and learning process, learners have to be in groups of four or five, depending on the class size with one person appointed as the recorder. The teacher poses question with possible answers and allows learners to think and write down their answers. Time has to be allotted to different parts of the activity. Time to think and to share out answers with one another in a round robin style.

The recorder writes down all the answers of the individual group. The individual starts and gives an answer to the recorder and this process is completed in a clockwise fashion. Later the teacher calls the recorders of the groups to share their answers that they have come up with in their individual groups with the whole class. At the end, they will come up with an answer which will be accepted as final answer.

#### **5. Jigsaw strategy**

This strategy involves active participation of individual learner in his/her group. It involves active engagement, discussions, cooperation and presentation including active listening. The group members while working in the team depend on one another to accomplish a common goal. The success of the whole group is therefore not tied to a single individual.

##### **The operation of the Jigsaw Strategy:**

- Division of the learners into groups
- Appointment of a group leader (mature leader)
- Division of the day's lessons into segments. For instance, if the goal is for learners to answer questions in a given comprehension passage, the answers to be given may be categorised into such segments as exact meaning, implied meaning, relationship of thoughts, gist of the text and required information.
  - *Reading for exact meaning:* this involves intensive reading of the passage in order to get the direct meaning from the passage

- *Reading for implied meaning:* the reader is expected to draw a conclusion from what he has read.
  - *Reading for relationship of thought:* the reader is expected to connect ideas between sentences and paragraphs. In essence, the answer is the result of seeing the connection between different aspects of the passage.
  - *Reading for the gist:* it deals with rapid silent reading for general picture of the text and enables learners to pick out and remember the essential things.
  - *Reading for required information:* it deals with searching for the answer to a specific question. The answer may be a single fact or a detail one.
- Assign students to learn one segment
  - Give them time to read over the segment and understand it
  - Form temporary 'expert groups' by having one student from each jigsaw group join other students assigned to the same segment. Give students in these expert groups time to discuss the main points of their segment to rehearse the presentations they will make in their jigsaw groups.
  - Bring the students to their jigsaw groups.
  - Ask them to present their respective segments.
  - At the end of the session, give a quiz on the material.

## **5. Peer Tutoring**

It involves teachers interspersing lecture with short concept questions that are based on students' difficulties about the topic being taught and giving students two or three minutes to answer the questions on their own and encourage them to discuss their answers with their peers in groups.

## **6. Inquiry based strategy**

The teacher, in this setting, sets a motion for learners to follow in order to affirm a concept presented to them in the class. It is just like setting the ball rolling for someone to score the goal.

What the teacher needs to do in this case is to give a thought-provoking topic or question or topic worth exploring but allows the learners to work it out themselves encouraging them to discuss the problem corporately themselves to the point where they derive learning goals. Finally, the results are brought to the whole class through the guidance of the teacher. This will enable them to reflect on the learning that has taken place.

## **7. The experience**

At a training workshop organised by the UNICEF tagged Effective Pedagogical Strategies held at Calabar, Nigeria in 2014, most of the aforementioned strategies were demonstrated. The participants which included Early childhood Care and Primary Education facilitators were taken through these strategies. Articles on the strategies were given to the participants to read, reflect and to compare the lessons learnt with current practices and afterwards contemplate possible changes to the prevalent practices in their classrooms. Groups were created and each was to make use of specified reading strategies for articles assigned to them. Discussions were held within the groups and each prepared a presentation which was shared with the Whole group. The presentations involved modelling with at least one strategy from the group to reflect how it will be implemented in the classroom. This was done to ensure a deep understanding of these strategies and guaranteed their implementation.

At the end, each group prepared a three-day lesson. The interactive strategies were applied in the presentations by each group. The exercise turned out to be a wonderful experience for the participants and a good number have since adopted the strategies in their various practices.

In another workshop organised by Osun State Government in Nigeria, Skill 'G' Nigerian Government-Israel Partnership Scheme in 2010, part of the strategies emphasised included the Inquiry Strategy and the participants were made to prepare a lesson in which the inquiry strategy was used.

From literature review and experience, one is convinced that if the interactive learning strategies are competently applied in English language classrooms, learners will undoubtedly benefit tremendously. It has been discovered that these strategies go a long way to help learners perform better in their studies whenever they learn together in groups. Ajaja and Evawoke (2013) in their findings discovered that comprehension is facilitated through peer interaction and this is central to the success of cooperative learning as it relates to cognitive understanding. Fakeye (2010) discovered that when learners have positive reactions toward their learning, they are likely to remember, seek new ideas and this may facilitate teaching and learning. This positive reaction may occur when the teacher involves the learners in their learning process.

The recent research work conducted by Ajayi (2015) supported the findings of Koya (2014), Bilgin&Geba (2006) the effects of cooperative learning strategy over traditional instruction to assess the conceptual understanding and achievement in reading comprehension. The results show that the students in the experimental group (cooperative learning strategy) had better conceptual understanding and achievement. Also, Ornelas (2005) observes that cooperative learning strategy facilitates cordial relationship among peers in the group, team work, gaining social skills, collaborating on ideas and social growth.

Oladunjoye (2003) asserts that: 'cooperative discussions improve students' recall of text contents. When students read a text together and explain the content to each other and evaluate each other's explanation, they engage in high level critical thinking or critical comprehension.

The results of Ofodu and Lawal (2011)'s studies of cooperative instructional strategies and performance level of students in reading comprehension reported that Think-pair-share strategy (TPSS) had significant impact on low, average and high performance students. They performed better when they were all exposed to TPSS than when they were exposed to conventional methods. The low performance students were noted to have performed better with the use of the TPSS than when conventional methods were used

Alebiosu (2001) conducted a study on cooperative learning and students' effective learning outcomes in Chemistry and employed the STAD (Students' Team Achievement Divisions) and Jigsaw models. The results showed that STAD had the highest adjusted post test mean score followed by Jigsaw while the least was the conventional method.

TalalAbd Al-Hameed Al Odwan (2012) also in his study of effect of the directed reading thinking activity through cooperative learning on English Secondary stage Students' reading comprehension in Jordan finds that the use of directed reading thinking activity through cooperative learning is a successful, instructional strategy that could improve students' reading comprehension.

## **7. Implications of findings**

This paper was born out of the writer's concern about the need of learners where English is their medium of instruction in their schools to acquire basic skills of English and be empowered adequately to apply the knowledge (skills) gained in it to solve real life situation. Thus, they will be able to combat socioeconomic problems such as unemployment, religious intolerance and poverty, among others. Since most of the findings in those studies examined have established the effectiveness of interactive strategies on learners' learning achievements in various fields of study, it is imperative that English teachers should actively and competently engage learners to work together in groups during teaching and learning process.

## **8. Conclusion**

The education system is relevant only if it can address societal and economic problems and serve as a pillar for national development. In order to realise this, constructive changes need to be made in the way English is taught in schools. This is a great challenge considering the drawbacks in the quality of teaching and learning in the light of the existing problems like large classes and inadequate resources.

From the points discussed on learner centred strategies, it is obvious that these strategies have the potentials of improving learners' knowledge of the subject matter. Therefore, learner centred interactive strategies will not only enhance the teaching and learning of English Language, but will also promote cordial relationships and social growth among peers.

## 8. Recommendations

The following recommendations are made based on the points earlier raised in this presentation:

- In order to improve pupils learning outcomes and to be able to use the language (English) competently and effectively, strategies which involve active participation of learners such as cooperative learning strategy, inquiry-based learning strategy, peer tutoring, think-pair-share strategy and the likes should be adopted for teaching of English in order to ensure that the teacher plays a supervisory role rather than a domineering role in the classroom.
- The stakeholders of primary, post primary and tertiary levels of education should encourage teachers and their administrative heads to update their knowledge by attending workshops, seminars, conferences and certificate courses during the end of session
- Government should employ qualified teachers in different disciplines to primary schools so that specialists can handle all areas of English that the learners need to master. Teachers should make themselves available for training and retraining programmes. They should sharpen their skills in effective teaching strategies, be conversant with new findings on teaching and learning.
- The head teachers and principals should regularly go round to monitor teaching-learning activities in the classrooms.
- The school heads should not depend solely on the government for the provision of classrooms, toilet facilities, equipment and other instructional materials. They should approach people, philanthropists, old students and the community to contribute in cash and kind to provide for the needs of the school.
- Government should provide adequate instructional materials for schools. Inspectors should regularly visit schools and monitor teaching and learning in the classrooms.
- Teachers should interact with learners very well so that construction of correct sentences by learners will be enhanced through discussion, story-telling, symposium and sharing news.

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AJAYI, Omoladun Joke was born on may 15, 1960 at Oyo town, Oyo State, Nigeria. She attended the University of Ibadan, Ibadan, Nigeria where she obtained Bachelor of Education (Language Arts) in 1994 and Masters in Education (Language Education) in 2002. She is currently on her Masters of Philosophy program in the same University.

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