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RETHINKING PEDAGOGY: ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING APPROACHES

The principal goal of education is to create people who are capable of doing new things, not simply repeating what other generations have done - people who are creative, inventive discoverers. (Piaget)

Education in the light of present-day knowledge and need calls for some spirited and creative innovations both in the substance and the purpose of current pedagogy. (Anne Sullivan Macy quotes)

Introduction

Education, pedagogy and change are watchwords of twenty-first century educators and researchers. They are interrelated on theoretical, as well as practical levels. The renewed attention given to pedagogical changes in the education sphere is propelled by globalisation and its knowledge economy forces. As the need to engage with these ‘forces’ arises, so does the need for communication in a ‘global language’. This gives rise to this question: which language is a global language? As indicated by the work of ‘scholars’ who have an interest in linguistics, that global language is English (Raine, 2012; Rosen, 2010; Crystal, 2010). This paper looks at English Language teaching approaches for learners whose Mother Tongue is not English.

Rosen (2010) advances the outlook that English is “a language that has grown to world domination”. Admittedly, not everyone has a total positive outlook on English language ‘domination’ since this can bring about the abandonment of native tongues (Rymer, 2012, p. 60). However, one cannot ignore the importance of English language as a vital communication tool for the knowledge economy – knowledge and skills specialism by means of technology (Chen & Dahlman, 2005; Robertson, 2005). It seems therefore that education systems’ interest in the teaching of English language is not misplaced if they are to engage in ‘an international communication’ that has the potential to improve their educational status as well as enhance nation-building activities. Strategy consultant, Dorie Clarke, in commenting on whether English is a preferred language for global business notes:

English will maintain and grow its dominance, moving from “a marker of the elite” in years past to “a basic skill needed for the entire workforce, in the same way that literacy has been transformed in the last two centuries from an elite privilege into a basic requirement for informed citizenship.” (Clarke, 2012).

Clearly, “the global spread of the English Language” (Raine, 2012), has not escaped the attention of educators around the world. Little wonder that in this era of educational change and pedagogic reform, education ministries see the teaching of English language as a priority curriculum matter. This paper reports on English Language teaching approaches that are now being used by Gambian English Language teachers. It contends that English should be taught using content, activities and resources that are specifically tailored for learners whose Mother

Tongue is not English. And as such, assert that basic grammatical structures and related principles should be at the heart of teacher training, which is crucial in equipping teachers with the professional skills they need to attain and maintain high English literacy levels in the national community, and beyond. To this end, the paper promotes a cross-concept poetic/musical approach. It argues that this approach is practical and advantageous in situations where English is a second language, or considered as a foreign language; and makes the case that English Language teaching should be a pleasurable experience for teachers and learners alike. It draws on personal experiences, and experiences of some English Language teachers in The Gambia. The background information that is presented in the next subheading provides the context for this paper. It gives insight into my interest in the educational experiences of Gambian teachers, pupils and students.

Framing the Case

The Ministry of Basic and Secondary Education (MOBSE) in The Gambia is currently on a campaign to improve the quality of education in its schools (MoBSE, 2012). This is done in collaboration with the University of The Gambia (UTG). To this end, the enhancement programme purposes to raise the content knowledge level of all English and Mathematics teachers in Lower Basic Education (LBE) (Grades – 6, referred to as Primary Education in some education systems). The upgrading of teachers' content knowledge is being done via a programme of in-service training. The selection of teachers for this 'special' training was based on the results of a 'Content Knowledge Test' taken by teachers who are qualified, but who do not hold West African Senior School Certificate Examination (WASSCE) credits in English and Mathematics. The total number of teachers undertaking this training is 2 700, which represents 75% of qualified LBS teachers in The Gambia.

The 'Content Knowledge Test' was administered in 2010 but the training sessions were carried out in August 2011, December 2011, April 2012 and December 2012, in Centres in the six regions in The Gambia. As noted earlier, MoBSE's main target is to improve teachers' content knowledge; but there is also a strong focus on pedagogy. This target is my connection to the training programme, in particularly the December 2012 session. As the English consultant for this round of the training, I was expected to collaborate with an 'English Language Teachers' Team' to develop the pedagogical aspects of the training programme. One of my tasks was to provide training for the tutors who deliver the training sessions. Another was to design and develop course materials for teachers to use.

It is within the boundaries of these roles that I had the opportunity to 'rethink and redesign pedagogy', in relation to the teaching of the English Language for learners whose Mother Tongue is not English. This paper does not allow space for a full account of all the teaching learning activities that took place at the training sessions. It will therefore highlight the main aspects of the 'new' pedagogic practices used in the December 2012 training. It will also give a brief explanation of the rationale for the approach taken, and by extension, the reason behind the selection of particular methods and strategies.

Old Content, New Pedagogic Approaches

A sizeable proportion of the material presented under this subheading formed part of the discussion presented in the Teachers' Guides produced as resource material for the training sessions. It justifies the position taken on content chosen for the training programme.

The 'old content' that was the focus of the training exercise is the 'Parts of Speech'. This content theme was deliberately chosen because the 'Parts of Speech' are the basis for meaningful communication. They are words we read, speak, hear and even think! They occupy a particular position in any given sentence. This suggests that it is not just the word itself that matters; how it is used in the sentence, its position in the sentence and its meaning also need some consideration if one is to know what part of speech a specified word is. Knowing the parts of speech, as well as their various meanings and functions, are important in understanding how sentences are constructed, how what is written, spoken or heard should be interpreted, which in turn should help to improve writing skills. Such level of importance necessitates that teachers should know, and teach the parts of speech well, if learners are to benefit fully. More importantly, in the Gambian context, English is the official language but other main languages such as Mandinka, Fulfulde, Wolof, Soninke and Jola are widely spoken. It is not unusual for speakers to switch between languages. In fact, in some communities English is hardly spoken. Undoubtedly, such a situation will affect the way the English language is taught and learned; and given that English is the official language of the Gambia, its grammatical structure should be taught in a way that shows a 'respectable' degree of excellence.

The 'language' situation explained above necessitates a renewed emphasis on, and a fresh approach to the teaching of the Parts of Speech. It was in this light that eight *Guides* (one for each Part of Speech) were produced to be used as the core material for the training of the teachers. *The Guides* employ a back-to-basics style with a poetic/musical base. The reason for this method is to allow teachers to gain mastery of the foundation principles of the grammatical structure of the English Language. I assert that this technique does not only provide a solid basis for teachers to tackle the higher tiers, but it also boosts their confidence to perfect the 'complex' aspects of language.

About The Guides

The Teachers' Guides are user-friendly handbooks designed for English Language teachers in The Gambia. They cater for all grade levels but focus is on mastering the basics. There are eight in total – *The Notorious Noun*, *The Versatile Verb*, *The Adaptable Adjective*, *The Amazing Adverb*, *The Practical Pronoun*, *The Positional Preposition*, *The Clever Conjunction* and *The Intervening Interjection*. Each Guide is presented in two parts – *Part I: About the Guide* and *Part II: Content and Suggested Activities*. The content of the Guides is underpinned by a constructivist philosophy. The Guides' principle aims are to:

- Equip teachers with all the basic information they need to become efficient and successful English Language teachers.

- Supplement teachers' knowledge of the English Language content material.
- Enhance and improve teachers' pedagogical practices, which in turn should enrich the students' literacy.
- Build up teacher quality, which should eventually improve learner quality, and ultimately the general quality of education.

Each *Guide* supports two other main features (1) a '*Part-of-Speech-ogram*' that presents a breakdown of the parts in the radial diagram; and (2) a song bearing the same name as the *Guide*, which encapsulates the essence of the Part of Speech that it tells about. The *Guides* advocate and demonstrate that learning can be a 'fun thing' that brings essential, significant and lasting results. Teachers are therefore encouraged to plan lessons to include activities with pupil involvement as the focus. All lesson plans should demonstrate a *Presentation-Practice-Production (PPP)* format, where the beginning, middle and end sections of the plan reflect PPP. The PPP approach should emphasise less 'teacher talk' and more 'pupil participation'. Positive results from well-planned PPP lessons will bring a sense of satisfaction and achievement to the pupils as much as they do to the teachers. The PPP style is an appropriate catalyst for English Language learning via poetry and music.

Why a Poetic, Musical Style?

The 'poetry-music approach' opens up many opportunities for teachers to present lessons in a variety of interesting and exciting ways. Poetry and music are inextricably linked. A famous quote by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow states: "music is the universal language of mankind". Another well-known quote by William Hazlitt notes: "poetry is the universal language which the heart holds with nature and itself". Given that poetry and music are universal, this *Guide* advocates the use of these 'universal tools' in the teaching of English Language, which itself is universal in scope. Both poetry and music are easy to 'digest' because of their rhythmic nature. They also have the power to evoke deep-seated feelings, which suggests that these tools can be used not only to help children to learn, but also to help them 'bring back to mind' what they have been taught. The all-embracing nature of poetry and music puts them in a strong position to be the 'perfect' catalysts for teaching and learning.

Thinking – the Fifth Essential Skill

It is generally accepted among English Language teachers that the four essential skills necessary for mastering a language are *speaking, listening, reading and writing* (English Club, 2012). Undoubtedly, these skills are essentials for the attainment and maintenance of high literacy skills. But none of these seems fully functional without *thinking* – the fifth skill that I have added to the language skills list. I view *thinking* as having as much value as the other four skills. Thinking is ever present throughout the learning process. I contend that whichever mode (receptive or productive) is engaged, neither of the two is complete, or is fully operational without a degree of thinking.

An activity-oriented approach for English Language teaching is recommended in the *Guides*. Learner engagement and involvement is highly recommended for it is this level of participation that encourages, and sustains thinking ability. I contend

that meaningful and structured activities are the training grounds for the development of perceptive powers and capabilities that foster creativity and an analytical mind. This is yet another way in which *thinking* has earned its rightful place as the fifth language development skill.

For every lesson, teachers should have structured activities that will allow the five language skills to work in harmony so that learning the fundamental principles of the English language is seen as a necessary good, rather than a difficult chore. This helps to create an ‘our’, rather than an ‘us-and-them’ atmosphere, where the teacher is seen to be ‘*the guide on the side*’ rather than ‘*the sage on the stage*’. Teaching and learning go hand in hand, so teachers and pupils alike should participate fully in a given lesson. Pupil participation not only aids understanding and memorisation, but also gives pupils a sense of importance as a ‘facilitator in the teaching learning process, a position that can only encourage more *thinking*. As noted earlier the content in the Guide is underpinned by a constructivist philosophy. The next subheading explains.

The Theories behind the Practice

Constructivism, and by extension, social constructivism, is the main theoretical position employed in the *Guide*. Constructivist theorists contend that children are active participants in their learning in that they actively construct new knowledge whenever they interact with their environments (Bakhurst & Shanker, 2001; Smith 2002). In other words, new knowledge is processed mentally, when the ‘old’ meets the ‘new’, and then the action follows. Social constructivist, Lev Vygotsky contends that learning cannot be, and should not be *separated from social context* (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 128). He further stresses that social interaction aids cognitive development. Drew (2012) sees school as school as the perfect place to begin cultivating student’s social interaction.

The main theoretical perspectives used are from Piaget, Bruner and Vygotsky:

- *Readiness* (Piaget)
- *A spiral organisation* of content and activities (Bruner)
- *Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD)* (Vygotsky)
- *Scaffolding* (Vygotsky)
- *Cognitive development happens in a social space* where people influence each other (Bruner, Piaget, Vygotsky)

(CUREE, 2012; Schunk, Pintrich & Meece, 2008; Vygotsky, 1978).

Maslow’s motivation theory – Hierarchy of Needs, Gardner’s multiple intelligences and learning styles, Ausabel advance organisers and Bloom’s Taxonomy of learning Objectives also influenced the content used for teacher training. Within the discussion of the appropriate use of this broad range of educational theories, care was taken to emphasise the ‘pedagogic shift’ that has evolved over time. The shift is played out on this theoretical continuum: from instructivism to constructivism to social constructivism. In practice, this is demonstrated as: a teacher-centred approach, to a teacher-learner interaction, to learner-learner-teacher interaction with the teacher as a guide or facilitator.

Conclusion

The paper makes a case for using a poetic musical approach to boost teaching learning activities in the teaching of English Language to learners whose Mother Tongue is not English. It contends that during this era educational change a rethinking, as well as a redesigning of pedagogic activities is necessary. It utilises the case of The Gambia MoBSE that is currently organising training programmes to enhance its English Language teachers' content knowledge and pedagogic skills.

A Teachers' Guide was developed for the purpose of the training programmes. The paper presents the rationale behind the suggested content and activities and highlights the main theoretical position that underpinned the strategies and methods used. It concludes by illustrating the reason for the pedagogic shift. The 'new' programme is a practical one; but only time will tell whether The Gambian teachers, pupils, students and adult learners will eventually see English as a 'window' to a multi-dimensional academic realm and a related knowledge economy, and not just 'an official language'.

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