

Bridging The Difficult Gaps in Learning and Mastery of English Language Among Students

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Abstract:

English Language is the official language and language of instructions right from the primary school level to tertiary institutions in Nigeria. This status has made its teaching mandatory at the formative stages of primary and post primary schools. Its teaching is confronted with difficulties in inconsistencies and exceptions in grammatical structures which negatively impact in the learners' vocal and written communication. These difficulties can be ameliorated by provisions of instructional assistance and intellectual supports by teachers in identifying and emphasizing the difficult areas in grammatical structure of English language.

Key words: Scaffolding, Instructional Assistance, Achievement, Inconsistencies, Grammar,

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Introduction

An average individual within a contemporary society believes that education is the basic instrument through which a nation can meet up with the global challenges. This accounts for reasons why every country strives to have quality education for her citizens so that the country can achieve greatly among other competitive nations. Egbochuchu and Iyamu (2000) see education as a vital tool, a vehicle for sound change, a prerequisite for societal and national development and the only hope of any nation in transforming the economy and in creating good lives for her citizens. In Nigerian context, emphasis is further laid on education through the National Policy on Education (2004) that “Education will continue to be highly rated in the national development plans because education is the most important instrument of change as any fundamental change in the intellectual and social outlook of any society has to be preceded by education revolution”. Adegun (2013) asserts that the key to national development and modernization is education. Education plays a significant factor in the survival of a child. It is the prerequisite for survival, necessity for development and an inevitable social ingredient for robust interaction.

It is on the basis of this that the Nigerian educational structure is segmented into manageable units of curricula that range from pre-primary school, primary school, post primary school and tertiary institutions. Tertiary institutions in Nigeria comprise of Colleges of Education of three years’ duration, Ordinary National Diploma and Higher National Diploma of two years each while University Education has the minimum of four years, and maximum of seven years depending on the nature of courses being offered. In Nigeria, basic education is by law compulsory for all children of school age in Nigeria (Federal Republic of Nigeria 2013).

At different levels of educational structure, teachers are the professional individuals that interpret the curricula into reality, they are the field workers that have direct interactions with learners, they are the ones that implement the curricula, the mental aptitude and superiority of teachers go a long way to determine the achievement of goals as stated by the curricula. Teachers are central to the development of a nation, Nigeria inclusive. It is therefore important for teachers to be well trained and exposed to recent policies, procedures, methodologies and skills, right attitudes and behaviours, modern approaches and right pedagogical manipulations. Studies on teacher indices revealed the teacher as the greatest singular factor influencing the teaching learning process (Adegun 2010; Omotayo 2007).

There is an assumption that teachers know better than learners, this assumption seems erroneous as teachers are recently found wanting in teaching delivery at all levels of education, there are unqualified teachers most especially at the foundation levels, pre-primary and primary education. Teachers at primary levels are not really specialists except special primary schools which are far lesser in public and private primary schools. Appointments of teachers are done by different states with retrogressive appointment policies as applicants are appointed with Nigeria Certificate in Education (NCE) in any discipline. It is important to stress that primary school teachers teach core subjects like English language, Mathematics, Basic Science and Social Studies without any or adequate mental aptitude which makes learning of English language difficult for learners. Those

teachers in secondary schools that even teach in accordance to their areas of specialization are not so effective as attested by internal and external academic achievements of learners.

It is on this basis that this study is titling towards making teachers as the scaffolders of learners in the classroom setting. Nigeria is a multilingual society where it is too difficult to pick any of its ethnic languages as an official language. This heterogeneous nature of the nation has placed English language into an enviable status above other indigenous languages. Studies have it that Nigeria has over 520 languages claiming supremacy above others which can truncate the existing peaceful coexistence of the nation if anyone is picked as the official language. Sequel to this background, it is on this basis that English language assumes the language of medium of instructions right from primary school levels to tertiary levels.

In Nigeria, it is important to note that the minimum qualification for teaching in Nigeria is Nigeria Certificate in Education (NCE) which most teachers in primary schools have without any special background in English language. English language is a core language that is taught on daily basis by non-competent teachers in terms of mastery of learning contents and the use of appropriate methods.

Ekundayo (2009) submits that the present day teachers are accused of gross inefficiency which affects the teaching and mastery of English language. It is worthy of note that English language has therefore become at least second language (L₂) with its attendant linguistic consequences.

Cognitive Development

Cognition refers to the inner processes and product of the mind that lead to knowing. This includes all mental activities in: remembering, critical thinking, symbolizing, categorizing, problem solving, creating, fantasizing and even dreaming. Indeed, this list of cognition could easily be expanded. Cognitive development of children is central to learning which teachers must critically develop to function optimally for growth, assimilation, retention and recall of what students have been taught.

Lev Vygotsky and his Educational Implications of Learning

Social cultural theory of mind attempts to account for the process through which, learning and development take place. De Valenzuela (2006) points out that cognitive development is seen as unfolding in a biologically driven sequence, but as emerging as a result of interactions within a cultural and historical context.

Vygotsky (1962) indicates that development cannot be separated from its social and cultural context. So the only way to explore mental process is through understanding this concept of mediation that made a breakthrough in understanding learners' development.

Definitely, his contributions have been widely cited and applied in the modern pedagogy to assist learners to attain educational objectives with convenience. His contributions are dimensional which provide ample opportunities for parents and teachers in discharging their primary duty of resolving children's challenges. In accordance to the sociocultural theory that Vygotsky leans on, learning is passed to individuals using three means, namely: instructed learning, initiative learning and collaborative learning. (Valenzuela et al 2002)

Summarily, instructed learning deals with abilities of children to recall instructions given by teachers and put them into practices, initiative learning is when children imitate or copy their peers, (better peers) adults and teachers. Collaborative learning occurs when a group of

persons come together to make significant individual contributions as a team. This brings varied dimensional intellectual outputs which make individuals to learn from the quality of cognition of others.

Two cogent areas of this theory are related to this study; Scaffolding and Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD)

Zone of Proximal Development

The concept of zone of proximal development (ZPD) was developed by Semenovich Vygotsky during the late 1920s. He defined it as the “distance between the actual development level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peer”

This defines a mental aptitude gap between the current or actual level of development of the learner and the next level attainable through the use of mediating semiotic and environmental tools and capable adults or peer facilitation.

This concept is important and applicable to learners as it relates to the gap between what a child can actualize without being helped and the potentials of achieving more seemly difficult tasks as a result of guidance and encouragement from a skilled partner. Relevant instructional assistance from teachers support children’s cognitive development in the ZPD leading to a higher level of higher reasoning which resultantly affect their academic achievements. Hausfather (1996) opines that joint attention and shared problem solving is needed to create a process of cognitive social and emotional interchange.

Scaffolding

Wells (1999) defined Scaffolding as “a way of operationalizing Vygotsky’s (1987) concept of working in the zone of proximal development”. He recognized three key features that give educational scaffolding its particular character: (1) the essentially dialogic nature of the discourse in which the knowledge is co-constructed (2) the significance of the kind of activity in which knowing is embedded and (3) the role of artifacts that mediate knowing (Wells, 1999, p 127). The major goal of scaffolding in teaching represents view the ZPD characteristics of transfer of responsibility for the task to the students (Mercer & Fisher, 1992)

Vygotsky emphasizes instructional concepts such as “scaffolding and apprenticeship” in which teachers give more advanced or superior helps to support learners as apprentices. Scaffolding enunciates the position that assists learners’ learning, reduce anxiety and difficulties, sustain the present existing knowledge and usher in new learning contents that have mental connections with the previous and later withdraw the assistance rendered gradually so that they can attain independence. Scaffolding learners must ensure children’s interest, sustenance of such interests, ameliorating frustration that might arise as a result of encountering new knowledge, emphasis on elements of the task and demonstration of such new tasks. Teachers are expected to function as scaffolders under this context assisting learners with grammatical challenges to resolve them through relevant instructional assistance which can be through emphasis, repetition and giving copious examples.

Statement of the Problem

It has been observed that Nigerian learners have difficulties in learning and mastery of English language in nearly all language skills: listening speaking, reading and writing. These challenges are linked to incompetent appointed teachers at the formative stage of learning at primary level where most teachers are not well grounded in the arts and act of teaching English language because they do not have enough background knowledge in English language. This problem of poor quality teaching and learning lays a solid foundation for poor mastery of English language and further reinforced at the post primary school levels. Poor mastery of English language affects so many areas like spellings, grammar, reading, listening, speaking, pronunciation and writing. The list is endless but the focus of the study premises on the appropriate use of grammar as it affects the spoken and written words in English language.

This study might not be able to address all these noticeable challenges but attention will be focused on inconsistencies of grammatical rules in grammar as they relate to learners' speech and writing. The following concepts are important to be properly taught by teachers: Verbs with emphasis on irregular verbs, tenses formation, past and past participle, third person singular tenses used in present tenses and plural subjects. These identifiable areas constitute major challenges to learners of English language in Nigeria.

Grammar

According to Oxford dictionaries, grammar is defined as the whole system and structure of a language or of languages in general, usually taken as consisting of syntax and morphology (including inflecting) and sometimes also phonology and semantics.

It is the rules of a language governing the sounds, words, sentences and other elements as well as their combination and interpretation. Grammar is central to both spoken and written communication. The knowledge of grammar in language usage is important as it makes ideas clearly stated, it makes reading comprehension possible, it enhances communication skills and it is a mark of proficiency if well mastered. English language puts the subject first, then the verb and then the object, but it is not in the case of all languages. Learners have to be taught basic rules and regulations that guide grammar so that they can perform optimally in English language.

Parts of Speech

Every word is a part of speech. Sentences comprise of different words that belong to different parts of speech. These parts of speech include: nouns, pronouns, adjectives, verbs, adverbs, prepositions, conjunctions and articles. Language educators are advised to teach these concepts in sequential order so as to provide strong background knowledge for learners. It might be difficult for learners to grasp learning contents on adjectives if students are not firstly taught nouns and pronouns, it might also be a waste of energy and resources if verbs are not properly taught before adverbs as a concept is taught.

Difficult Areas that Constitute Difficulties to Learners

Not all areas in grammar of English Language constitute difficulties to Nigerian learners as observed but these concepts: Formation of plurals in nouns, formation, tenses in respect of third persons singular used in simple present participle forms and comparison in adjectives and adverbs.

Nouns and Numbers

Nouns are naming things, places, persons and ideas. Nouns can be either singular or plural and they function as subjects, object (direct or indirect) compliments of sentences. Nouns can be common, proper, collective, abstract, concrete, countable and uncountable.

Numbers are whether nouns or pronouns are singular or plural. It is worthy of note that only countable nouns can be pluralized. During the cause of plural formation, there are noticeable inconsistencies which a strategic teacher must support learners with adequate examples in learning instructions. It is also important to emphasize that singular countable nouns cannot be used alone but always take determiners.

There are some nouns whose formation take only addition of 's' as an inflection to the base words as in:

boy - boys
 girl - girls
 car - cars
 chair - chairs
 book - books
 table - tables

some change their last 'y' to 'ies' as in

lorry - lorries
 mummy - mummies
 baby - babies
 city - cities

some change their final 's' 'x' 'ss' 'ch' to 'es' as in:

bus - buses
 tax - taxes
 marsh - marches
 gas - gases
 lunch - lunches

some nouns change their last 'f' or 'fe' to 've' before adding the 's' to form the plural:

wife - wives
 wolf - wolves

some nouns change their last 'o' to 'oes' as in

potato - potatoes
 tomato - tomatoes but with the exceptions of
 photo - photos,
 piano - pianos,
 halo - halos (This needs emphasis on

some nouns change their final 'is' to 'es' as in the exception)

analysis - analyses,
 ellipsis - ellipses

some nouns do not even change at all as in

sheep - sheep
 series - series

species – species
deer – deer.

It should be noted that some plural nouns are irregular in their format as in

Child – children

Goose – geese

man – men

tooth – teeth

foot – feet

person – people.

From these analyses, teaching of these concepts look complex and seemingly difficult if learners are not guided, supported by teachers through adequate illustrations and copious examples.

Verbs

A sentence remains meaningless if verbs, action words are omitted, that is why verbs are regarded as nucleus words, the heartbeat of a sentence that expresses the action or events that took place. Tenses are related to verbs as they indicate when actions are performed, state of action, either perfective or continuous. All these key concepts are to be well taught to Nigerian learners by teachers who should regard themselves as strategic teachers.

Just like nouns, we have many types of verbs as in: finite, non-finite verbs, regular and irregular verbs, transitive and intransitive verbs, and linking verbs.

Also, it is worthy of attention that verbs have forms which are tabulated below:

Root/Base form	3 rd person singular	Continous form (present and past forms)	Simple Past past form	participle
1.Go	Goes	Going	Went	Gone
2.Come	Comes	Coming	Came	Come
3. Walk	Walks	Walking	Walked	Walked
4.Begin	Begins	Beginning	Began	Begun
5.Eat	Eats	Eating	Ate	Eaten
6.Rise	Rises	Rising	Rose	Risen
7.Put	Puts	Putting	Put	Put
8.Hit	Hits	Hitting	Hit	Hit

From the above table, a strategic teacher will endeavor to engage learners in discriminating formation of tenses in verbs for a clearer understanding. Most second language learners struggle with past tense and past participle of verbs in both spoken and written communication.

Also, learners are to be guided and assisted when it comes to 3rd person singular used in a simple present tense. Emphasis and redigging should be persistently done as students are more confused to know exactly when an action is past. This difficulty can be resolved by provision of examples and painstaking corrections of learners in these areas.

It is common to note that learners are confounded in forming the past tense and past participle of verbs.

For example, learners are fond of making mistakes in the aspect where sentences such as the following are commonly found:

He have to leave the place (wrong)
 He has to leave the place (correct)
 He has came for inspection (wrong)
 He has come for inspection (correct)
 Sun rise in the East and set in the West (wrong)
 Sun rises in the East and sets in the West correct
 It have break (wrong)
 It has broken (correct)
 There are other numerous wrong examples as observed.

Comparison of Adjectives

Adjectives specify the attributes of nouns and noun phrases

In other words, an adjective adds more information about a noun it qualifies.

Adjectives can be used predicatively and attributively and they have their order that ranges from size, shape, age, colour, nationality and material.

Comparison in adjectives is done when an entity or object is compared with another in respect of certain attributes. There are three degrees, positive, comparative and superlative. It should be noted that equality is expressed by the positive degree, superiority is expressed by the comparative degree and supremacy is expressed by the superlative degree.

There are inconsistencies in the formation of comparative and superlative degrees which strategies teachers must be conscious and teach with many examples.

The use of 'er' for the comparative of short adjectives. Superlative adjectives use 'est' for superlative degrees.

Positive	Comparative	Superlative
tall	taller	tallest
large	larger	largest
easy	easier	easiest
dirty	dirtier	dirtiest
busy	busier	busiest
old	older	oldest

The above examples look very simple as 'er' and 'est' are added to the positive degree to form its comparative and superlative degrees. However, there are challenges in irregular comparison of adjectives in the following instances:

Positive	Comparative	Superlative
good	better	best
bad	worse	worst
much	more	most
little	less	least

Another more confusing than the above cited examples are comparative and superlative degrees formed with the addition of 'more' and 'most'.

Example of such formation are:

Positive	Comparative	Superlative
beautiful	more beautiful	most beautiful
handsome	more handsome	most handsome

polite

more polite

most polite

pleasant

more pleasant

most pleasant

Conclusion

It is obvious that learners of English Language in Nigeria are confronted with difficulties in mastering the basic concepts in English grammatical structures which affect their competence and proficiency in oral and written communication. These difficulties are connected with grammatical inconsistencies and exceptions which learners should be given varied instructional assistance in forms of thorough teaching, painstaking explanation of inconsistencies and exceptions, giving copious examples and contextualizing words in sentences to bring their meanings.

Through these efforts, learners' oral and written communication will be improved.

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