

International Journal of Education Sciences (IJES)

Received on 01/18. 07. 2013

REF. NO. IJES-351

(Always refer our Reference No. for all correspondence)

Theory and Practice: Making the Programme Work

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KEYWORDS Emphasis on foreign language teaching and learning should be on the methods of teaching and learning.

ABSTRACT The purpose of this short paper is to establish reasons why methods of teaching foreign languages should be emphasized over and above frequent curricular changes in the discipline done in many institutions of learning with particular reference to Nigeria. Using examples and results from literary and language studies done by experts in the discipline among others, the paper concludes that since there are language studies for different purposes, methods of teaching and acquisition should also differ. This implies that no single method can work for all foreign language learners and that the major concern of people in the field should be to find out the method that works better for any language group.

INTRODUCTION

Theorizing about language teaching and learning is a common phenomenon in every nation. Nigeria has records of foreign language policies, the generality of which remain either unimplemented or partially implemented. Even the United States of America experience a number of developments in modern language teaching and learning which parallel the trends occurring in society and education in general (Chastain, 1976:34).

In Nigeria, as in other nations of the world, multilingual character of the nation remains a cause for continual reexamination and revisiting of the language policies. Experts of second

language learning theories always draw much information from the disciplines of psychology, linguistics, and sociology. In general, modern learning theorists base their ideas on similar conceptualizations to those of cognitive psychologists and linguistic theorist Chomsky. The most widely accepted theories of learning are those that acknowledge the crucial role the student plays in the learning process. The writings of Piaget, Bruner, Vygotsky whose educational theories have been of immense help to teachers of young children in particular, to mention but a few, have had an important impact on the understanding of the cognitive development of the individual. The major concern of the linguists has been to counter or to support parts of Chomsky's theories (Chastain: 36). Considering the said trends in the theories of language and learning, and the location of the individual learner at the centre of learning process, we see the need to be that of structuring the curriculum to suit individualized learning processes. While the NUC (National Universities Commission) in Nigeria takes the decision on the minimum academic standards for different disciplines including our own¹. Our emphasis should lie more on structuring the laid down programme(s) to achieve the desired aims of the actual recipients of what we are offering. It is therefore based on the above mentioned area of emphasis that this paper suggests less theorizing and more practical exposure for the foreign language learner.

The New Benchmark and Minimum Academic Standard: The Case of Modern European Languages

The NUC has identified five major subject areas taught in Nigerian Universities under Modern European Languages namely: French, German, Portuguese, Russian, and Italian. It is expected that the number and types of courses should be the same for the teaching and learning of all the above languages. Again, as in the past curricula, the courses and their contents for bachelor's degree programmes of the universities teaching the above languages have been identified and quantified in terms of number of credits required for four-year programmes. From experience, those identified courses are just old wine poured in new wine skin. We recognize the inclusion of computer characterized courses that are meant to address the electronic age. But even computer courses have been part of foreign language curriculum for over one decade. The only new courses added are philosophy and logic, then an elective course in multilingualism.

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In Nigeria, we emphasize more on what to teach, while very little effort is made by decision-makers to improve on the methodology. The question this paper is asking is: How do we maximize learning when working with the programme before us? We shall attempt to proffer some suggestions.

Foreign Language Learning For Different Purposes

Foreign language as a course of study has a peculiarity that we in the area must keep in mind when at work. Somebody who enrolls in medicine or pharmacy for example, has a defined job on attainment of the degree in the area. Wherever he finds himself, his job is, to directly or indirectly address human health. A foreign language learner may not intend to pursue a profession working with the language when he finishes learning the language. People have various reasons for enrolling in foreign language course. Somebody may be studying a foreign language with a view to getting into other careers in life. He may decide to use language study to get into international relations, or to just travel abroad where the language is spoken in order to do other things. We should therefore have in mind that we are dealing with a heterogeneous group in our language classes. We may start using some form of questionnaire to get to the needs of our students in terms of their reason(s) for choosing the study of foreign language(s). There will be a need to plan and to include some individualized learning strategies in our instructions. The right attitude of the student/learner is very important in the acquisition of the language. The communicative approach to teaching and learning, as the new methodology has been found very successful with our use of Themen, Themen Neu, Themen Aktuell and other like materials for the teaching of German. We can add to the topics in the teaching materials subjects or experiences that the students themselves identify to be of particular interest to them. We find very useful the approach of AATG (American Association of Teachers of German), whereby experts publish on a regular basis research materials and their pedagogical experiences that work, or that are believed to work in the teaching and learning of German². If we could try out such publications, we should separate them from the regular publications of NATOG (Nigerian Association of Teachers of German) journal. PV-seminars sponsored by Goethe Institute, Lagos, should be geared towards such publications since the seminars emphasize the teaching and learning techniques. All the useful discussions we hold at PV-seminars over the years are lost in loose sheets at

some undefined places. There is need for publication of the said discussions in a form that would make it easy for people in the field to consult them when necessary.

The favourite area of study by Nigerian students of foreign languages today is translation. Smaller percentage of the students opts for literary studies. However, it has been shown that literature is strongly needed in the study of any course in language including translation (Van Handle, 2002:123-127). Some translators also opt for literary translations. In her essay on “A New Model for Teaching Intermediate German at the College Level”, based on years of research, Donna Van Handle reports on interconnectedness between reading and writing, which she elaborates with the works of other language trained experts. Literary texts form the bulk of reading materials. Students are required to read several longer literary works and to write three or more drafts of five essays. The results showed “better reading comprehension, writing style, vocabulary, spelling and grammatical development” (Krashen, 1993:23). In our programme the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, we have been arguing against much literature in our second year courses. The above research really counter our arguments. There is therefore the need to also experiment with our own students to find out what is best for them in the learning process. Their needs may not necessarily be the same as those of American students of foreign languages because cultural backgrounds also affect foreign language learning. While Americans have very good reading culture, Nigerians are so poor in reading culture, that writers (creative writers) whose books are not selected for schools suffer lack of appreciation as creative art. It is, and it must be an uphill task getting our own students to read many literary texts. In spite of the poor reading culture in Nigeria, we can try out the said model described above because as Alan Hirvela points out, “literary texts are not meant to be read passively”. They demand and encourage judgments and analysis on the parts of readers, and writing is the means by which these judgments take place” (Hirvela, 19:2001). Extensive reading and writing are therefore a recognized and tested approach in the learning of any foreign language. The method does not rule out other methods and tips that help in learning; like games, puzzles, audio-visual aids etc. While recognizing that every methodology in language teaching and learning has its own merits and demerits, this paper has tried to support the view that no method of teaching can have total success with every group of learners.

CONCLUSION

This paper tries to de-emphasize frequent reviews of curriculum and places more emphasis on teaching methodology. Emphasis on teaching methods therefore calls for more research on the improvement of teaching and learning from members of our association of teachers of German. In the same vein, the paper recommends publication in a more lasting form, of our discussions during PV- Seminars which often emphasize teaching and learning techniques. It is the view in this paper that useful information from these PV-Seminars over the years are lost in loose sheets all of which may not be recovered today.

ENDNOTES

¹*The year 2003 was the University Annual Review forum at the NUC when the current “Benchmark and Minimum Academic Standard” in different areas of study were mapped out. This is what this paper will be referring to.*

²*Die Unterrichtspraxis. Teaching German of the AATG publishes twice a year researched materials of experts who train in the teaching of German. People who are interested in teaching even in a tertiary institution need some course in language education.*

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