

Using newspapers in teaching English as a second language

Amina Gogo Tafida • Bala Muhammad Dalhatu*

General Studies Unit, Communication Education Department, Federal University of Technology, Minna, Nigeria.

*Corresponding author. E-mail: bala_yaman@yahoo.com. Tel: 08030408982, 08033838377.

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Abstract. Language can be read, written, spoken, and used to teach and establish relationships as well as develop ourselves and our societies. In Nigeria, English language is used to play these and many other roles. As a result, its proper teaching and learning become mandatory not only to achieve the myopic aim of passing examinations but to communicate properly at national and international levels. These can be achieved right from the classroom and at the teacher's resourcefulness in teaching. This paper aims to encourage resourcefulness in teaching English language by highlighting the importance of using newspapers to develop the speaking, reading and writing skills of learners. The paper contains language learning activities using newspapers to teach learners at elementary, intermediate, and advanced levels. At these levels, newspapers can be cut, marked, clipped, pasted, filed and recycled. Discussions can be organized in class based on the articles in the newspapers. The paper offers recommendations that would improve the teaching and learning of English in general and the use of newspapers in teaching and learning English language in particular.

Keywords: Newspaper, resourcefulness, elementary, intermediate, advanced, communicative language teaching.

INTRODUCTION

Awoniyi (1982) defines language as one of the most important attributes of mankind. Its roles in education are multifarious because teaching and learning are based essentially on language. Without language, the field of education, for instance, could hardly exist. Language permits us to teach and be taught. Language is the very essence that makes us human, and is the most complex form of communication used by any culture.

The complex nature of language makes its proper teaching and learning a tasking exercise, requiring time and dedication on the parts of the teacher and the learner. In Nigeria, English language plays a dominant role not only in the field of education but also in other spheres of the Nigerian society such as the economic, social, political, and religious. According to Jowitt (2000) English language began to play a significant role in the Nigerian society in the nineteenth century when White men began coming into Nigeria in increasing numbers. The establishment of British rule in 1900 brought with it

fresh influx of White officials to fill the new Government posts. The colonialists promoted the use of the language as the official language and language of education. In this regard, Ike (2001:17-18) notes that:

The ascendancy of English language in Nigeria was the brain-child (sic) of the Education Ordinance of 1882 which formally made English language a compulsory subject in all Nigerian schools as well as the main channel of instruction and a vehicle for the training of the much needed manpower to run the fledgling government services.... The Education Ordinance of 1882 was followed in quick succession by those of 1896, 1918 and 1926 all ingeniously aimed to (sic) promote the new language for general internal use.

English is a status symbol among Nigerians. It should be

observed that the dominance of English language did not end with the termination of colonialism in Nigeria in 1960 but has gone beyond it, as the language now enjoys a dominant position both as an official and a second language.

The Nigerian National Policy on education also gives prominence to English Language as a medium of instruction right from primary (grade) four to the other levels of the country's educational system. This implies that English is a means of teaching itself and other subjects on the school timetable. This emphasizes the importance of the communicative teaching of English as stipulated in the National Policy on Education and supported by Nwoke (1987). According to Nwoke (1987), the overall aim of language teaching is to create in the learner a capacity to communicate in the target Language. This entails exploiting different worthwhile resources and activities that would ensure effective language teaching and learning. In most public secondary schools, the use of resources and activities to ensure communicative language teaching and learning is non-existent. As obtained from researches and anecdotal evidence, English language teaching and learning in public schools is overshadowed by the following phenomena:

1. Over-reliance on textbook and English as a Second Language (ESL) course books (Ohia and Adeosun, 2002).
2. Teacher - centered method of teaching (Ogunniyi and Famuyiwa, 2011).
3. The motivation to pass English and having no intent to master it (Obanyu, 2002).
4. Inability to use the available local materials as teaching aids (Ogunniyi and Famuyiwa 2011).

As for the phenomenon of over-reliance on course books, Ohia and Adeosun (2002) emphasise that it is common among teachers to get into a class and ask the students to open a specific page of a text and rely entirely on the text throughout the duration of a lesson.

Obanya (2002) also states that interaction which should be in form of multi-way and multi-media exchanges (verbal and non-verbal) in the conduct of classroom teaching and learning activities is significantly absent. This makes language learning stressful and kills the interest of the learners not only in reading but in other language skills. Nwoke (1987) observes that a number of language activities in our language textbooks carried out by English language teachers do not conform to the true nature of communicative teaching. The National Policy on education (1981) also adds that "most of our textbooks at present are unsuitable, inadequate or expensive".

With the above challenges facing English Language teaching and learning in Nigeria, efforts should be made to remedy the situation. As noted by Oguniye and Famuyiwa (2011), the practice of teaching goes beyond just being competent to being able to make the lesson interesting and lively as teaching becomes more

interesting and learning permanent when a teacher uses materials to enhance his teaching process. As a result, this paper aims at emphasizing the importance of using newspapers to develop the speaking, reading and writing skills of learners. As noted by Grundy (1993) newspapers may be used naturally as one of a number of sources of authentic language in a communicative classroom as they provide stimulation for learners to think, talk, and write about the things that matter to them.

Education World (2011) outlines ten reasons why newspapers are effective classroom teaching tools. Such as:

1. They are an adult medium that students of all ability levels can be proud to be seen reading.
2. They deal in what's happening here and now, providing motivation for reading and discussion.
3. They make learning fun
4. They are extremely flexible and adaptable to all curriculum areas and grade levels.
5. They bridge the gap between the classroom and the "real" world.
6. They build good reading habits that will last a lifetime.
7. They can be cut, marked, clipped, pasted, filed and recycled.
8. They give everyone something to read-news, sports, weather, etc.
9. They are a cost-effective way to educate.
10. They contain practical vocabulary and the best models for clear and concise writing.

Ajayi (2002) emphasizes that newspaper are a highly rich source of information; convey local national and international affairs, up-to-date information on political, health, music, sports, entertainment, arts, fashion, law, economics, medicine, science and technology issues. This implies that newspaper provides information on different spheres of life and provides appropriate linguistic applications. In language teaching, it offers the teacher authentic, practical and easily assessable materials, it provides activity- based teaching and learning situations, self-instruction, freedom and learner centeredness. Using newspapers in class provides real life situations of effectively acquiring and using English as a communication tool (Education World, 2011). Using newspapers in the classroom improves vocabulary skills, increases knowledge and makes learning fun and more interactive. Since newspaper articles are written in final draft status, with few errors, they are good reference for teaching students (that is, they can help students to check their own writing for grammar and punctuation errors and can allow them to engage on studies on correct subject verb agreement, capitalization, punctuation, summarizing and smooth transformation of ideas). According to Clandfield and Foord (2011), since newspapers are current and contain of a lot of information written by experienced writers, they consist of different kinds of texts such as narrative, stories, letters,

advertisements, reports etc. Clandfield and Foord (2011) opine that using newspaper to teach reading and writing demonstrates the concepts of the structures of English language. It helps students to see realistic examples of the practical applications of grammar and comprehension that can be used in reading and writing experiences in and outside the classroom.

The aim of this paper is to provide exercises, based on different levels of learners, using newspapers to develop the speaking, reading and writing skills of English as a second language. For beginners, the newspaper headlines containing recognizable symbols, numbers, colours and photographs can convey information that students can easily understand. At the intermediate level, the newspaper provides exposure to print, graphic devices and to punctuation and sentence structure. At the advanced level, learners can read newspapers to skim and scan some articles, read some articles completely and ignore those parts that are of little interest to them. The following is a detailed analysis of exercises that can be done with a newspaper to develop speaking, reading and writing skills at different levels.

NEWSPAPERS FOR TEACHING BEGINNER OR ELEMENTARY ESL LEARNERS

At elementary level, the teacher can cut out pictures from a newspaper and write sentences about them. These sentences are read to learners who also learn to read them and grasp what they mean. The sentences are also written in their exercise books. Secondly, learners can on their own use simple pictures found in the newspaper, write sentences about them noting the relationships between them and read to the class while the teacher monitors the activity. To develop the writing skill, it is suggested that the teacher can read out a few stories or advertisements from a newspaper and ask the students to write them down.

Moreover, to encourage the development of reading and vocabulary skills of learners using newspaper at elementary or beginner stage, it is also suggested each learner can be assigned an alphabet and be told to read through the newspaper in order to locate ten unfamiliar words beginning with the assigned letter. The learners should also look up for the meaning of those words in the dictionary, indicating the pages of the dictionary where such words were found. They may also look for other things from the newspaper such as compound words, plurals, words in present or past tenses, possessives, words with a particular prefix or suffix, etc.

NEWSPAPER ACTIVITIES FOR INTERMEDIATE ESL LEARNERS

At this level, students can be asked to read short articles from the newspaper and work in small groups. Each

student reads a paragraph and highlights the important details to his or her group. The other member of the group each does the same. They, then paraphrase these details into sentences that best capture the event in the article.

Also, it is proposed that students can be asked to circle words they do not understand after reading a newspaper and ask them to find their meanings from the context or look up the meaning from the dictionary. They should also make sentences with these words and write them in their books. In some newspapers, there is a news summary section consisting of many short letters (e.g. on-line reactions section in Daily Trust), students should be given one of these news items and asked to write a headline for it on a separate sheet of paper. Students could also be asked to collect all the stories and the headlines, put them on the table and match stories and headlines. The photograph captions can also be cut and learners told to match captions with the photographs.

Another method that this article suggests of using newspaper for intermediate ESL learners in developing speaking, reading and writing skills is to ask them to analyze the advertisements in a newspaper. Each learner should write his/her findings on an item advertised. These findings should be read in class and shared among the students.

Learners could also collect newspaper photographs of people and make up stories about them. These stories are read in the class by each student writer and discussed with class members. Newspapers can be distributed to students on group basis. A group consisting of five to ten learners (in view of large class size in Nigeria language classes) can be formed each with a newspaper. Each group should be given time limit within which to skim through the paper. When the time is up, join the two groups together and let them report to each other whatever they can remember from the news. Reference should not be made to the news again. The teacher should monitor the groups and provide feedback when necessary. The report given by each group can be harmonized by the joint groups and recorded in their exercise books.

Another approach to using newspaper at intermediate level is by giving each learner a newspaper to work with at home. With the newspaper, students should choose an article and prepare a report on it to their classmates. The report should not be longer than number of words and should include peer teaching on new vocabulary that the learner encounters in the article. This encourages reading outside the classroom as well as the use of dictionary. A schedule should be set up and a learner or learners should devote the last five minutes of every class to news reports. This project can be made part of class routine.

USING NEWSPAPER AT THE ADVANCED LEVEL

At this level, the teacher can bring or ask the students to

bring newspapers to the class. Teacher asks them to read, for instance, letters to the editor's section of the newspaper. Students discuss in groups, the letters noting the simplicity, complexity, or controversial nature of the letters. The teacher should provide feedback to the class at the end of the exercise. Learners can also be asked to write their own letters to the editor or respond to the ones they have come across. After they have written the letters, they should be asked to compare the letters with a partner and correct the errors. The teacher should monitor the process and ensure that the letters are circulated and that every student participates effectively in the exercise. Those selected to respond to letters to the editor should cut out such letters. They can also be encouraged to write letters directly to an editor. The publication of such a letter would be an event and would motivate others to write.

Another suggested activity involving the use of newspaper is to cut out several photographs of people found in the newspaper and mandate students to write descriptions of them. Those photographs or pictures should be those that are familiar, relevant and of interest to the learners. They should also match the photographs with the descriptions and speculate about what the news story could be.

Furthermore, students can be asked to choose a newspaper article, follow its process over a period of time and discuss the events that occur. They could be asked to write down a comprehensive report that is exchanged by the class members.

Moreover, the students can be told to read an article that describes a problem and discuss its causes and effects. The teacher can divide the class into two groups. The first group takes a look at the problems while the second looks at the effects. In all these cases the teacher acts as a monitor and also offers assistance where necessary.

Another suggested activity that teachers can engage in with advanced students involves asking learners to choose a short item of news that they find interesting and rewrite it by changing some of the details or changing from present to past or vice versa. The students should exchange the news item with a partner and work to spot the changes made from the original news items in the newspaper.

The learners could also role-play the news contained in a particular portion of the newspaper. They should choose an interesting article or story from the newspaper and make copies for every pair of learners. The learners could first read the newspaper and then improvise a short role-play.

In order to encourage reading, and writing, newspaper can be used to set quiz. In the cases, the teacher divides the class into five groups and gives each group a plain sheet paper and a section of newspaper. A ten or fifteen minute quiz based on a section of the newspaper can be given and different types of questions depending on the

content of the paper can be set. For instance,

1. Where is -----

2. How long has he/she been in -----

3. How many people are involved in -----

4. What happened in -----

5. Who is -----

6. How much did -----
--pay/cost
7. Who won the -----
and when did he win it etc.

In each group, similar questions can be set based on the content of the section and answers are provided for them by reading the section of the newspaper concern. This means that newspapers provide excellent materials to test students' comprehension of a text. The teacher monitors the activity and checks grammar and spelling used in the questions and answers. When all the groups have finished, they change their works. The teacher goes through all the works and offer feedback where the need arises.

Students at this level may be asked to look for examples of similes, metaphors, irony, hyperbole, satire and other literacy principles found in newspaper. This is not only to develop their English language but also encourage reading activity.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In view of the importance of the English language in Nigeria and the problems associated with its proper teaching this paper recommends the following:

1. English language lessons should be activity-based. This should include using worthwhile materials such as newspapers to make the language class interactive.
2. Curriculum designers should take advantage of the inherent potentials of newspapers in language teaching and learning by using them as teaching materials at secondary school level.
3. Textbook writers should integrate some features of newspaper in English language textbooks.
4. Secondary Schools should be provided with functional libraries and regular supply of newspapers.
5. English Language teachers should exploit the available local materials in their domains in language teaching.
6. Teachers should design activities and materials that promote active students' participation.
7. Newspaper should not be used as an up-to-date course text book activity. This means that the teacher

should not apply the same teaching principles and recommended exercises in course text books to newspapers so that it does not become time-consuming for teachers and uninteresting for students.

CONCLUSION

This paper has highlighted the problems facing the communicative and interactive teaching of English language. It has also dwelt on how newspapers can be used by teachers to develop the speaking, reading and writing skills of different levels of learners. Newspapers are affordable, available, and written in their final drafts, and so with minimal errors. This makes them a worthwhile language learning resource. It is therefore hoped that, this paper will have a positive impact on the teaching and learning of English as a second language.

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