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# Pragmatic Approach to Improve the Teaching of English in Primary Schools in Nigeria: Teaching as an Art and the Teachers, Artists

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## Abstract

English language plays an inexorable role in Nigerian society and holds prestige in the educational system. Consequently, it is both a compulsory subject and a medium of instruction from the fourth year of schooling. Because of its prestigious position, much concern has been shown to ensure that students receive adequate support in the classroom to acquire the skills (listening, speaking, reading, and writing) for their language development. Nevertheless, some scholars (Obanya, 2002; Adegbite, 2005; Amuseghan, 2007; Ajibola, 2008) have discovered that the methods used by teachers in the classroom do not give room for practical language use, and as a result, students are not well equipped with the skills to understand the application and use of English as a medium of instruction and as a subject. To address the problem of not having a practical pedagogy in English language classrooms, this paper describes how English language teachers can assume roles as artists and embrace the teaching of English as art in elementary school (grade 4).

**Key Words:** Teacher, Arts, Classroom, Artist, Rhetorics, English Language, Primary school, Skills, Books, Literacy, and Pupils

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## Introduction

To address the multilingual and multicultural situation in Nigeria with its lack of a national unifying indigenous language, the government adopted English as the principal language of communication in politics, the media, commerce, and education (Fakeye, 2006; Fakeye&Ogunsiji, 2009). Although English, as a foreign language that was bequeathed to Nigeria, has also assumed the position of a second language, every child should learn English in addition to the language of the immediate environment.

Consequently, it became an important subject studied at every level of education and has been important for students to pass or receive a credit grade in any externally administered examination. Against this background, this paper is concerned with how the language is being taught in primary school, in particular, students in grade 4.

Obanya (2002), for instance, claimed that teachers were not using good methods. Similarly, Aduwa-Ogiegbaen and Iyamu (2006) found that poor learning outcomes in English were occurring among secondary school students in Nigeria because teachers did not always use modern instructional techniques in their English language lessons. This study is premised on examining the pragmatic approaches for improving the teaching of English in Nigeria, especially at primary school (grade 4), which is the foundational class for students to build their educational experiences and is important for their subsequent success.

### **Objectives of this Paper**

To address the problem of the non-pragmatic teaching approaches in the English language classroom, this paper is concerned with the following specific objectives: a) examining the classroom environment; b) investigating the activities that take place in the classroom, and c) examining the facilities that are available for teaching English in primary school. To begin examining the problem of the non-pragmatic approach for teaching English in Nigerian primary schools, in particular, grade 4, the National Policy on Education (NPE) clearly states that the objective is “to inculcate permanent literacy and numeracy, and the ability to communicate effectively” (NPE, 2004, p. 14).

### **Methodology – Rhetoric**

In considering the problem, we need to first look at the method of rhetoric. In its long and vigorous history, rhetoric has been defined in various ways and included different points, to accommodate different purposes. Rhetoric was famously defined by Aristotle (1980; 1988) as “the faculty of observing, discovering in any course the available and appropriate means of persuasion” (p. 160). Similarly, Hardesty (2013) described rhetoric as not only an activity or area of study that gains powerful influence over the audience, but also suggested that rhetoric is part of the everyday interactions with others, with the power to display love or hate; listening or silence, inclusion or exclusion; and acknowledgement or rejection. From these descriptions, rhetoric holds the power to justify perspectives through clarification, explanation, suggestion, or recommendation. However rhetoric is adopted, it is strongly implied for use in education as a means to suggest or recommend a new perspective about something.

For the purpose of this discussion, we need to ask if teaching is more of an art or a science, an incessant debate in education. Fogel (2004), for instance, described the scientific approach to teaching as educators have been taking up the role of researchers. For researchers, a problem is conceptualized and a hypothesis is developed for handling a given matter. The researcher then tries out an idea to see what might happen and records

information to analyze the results, to eventually draw some conclusions. Some opportunities exist to make revisions to the processes so that a better approach can be developed for handling a similar situation. This approach appears to have value, and of course, the scientific approach is used in education.

Nevertheless, beyond the analytical processes of science, individuals are also needed to engage naturally in the world around them, and interactions (vs. observations) are promoted. For these interactions to become a lived reality, certain skills are required, the most common of which are those acquired from the arts. Dewey (1934) described art as “every shade of expressiveness found in objects... [ordered]... in a new experience of life” (p. 104). For instance, a language is a form of expressiveness that individuals engage in daily. More specifically, verbal language works when individuals speak, sing, use poetry, music, etc., to bring about a new experience of life. Similarly, non-verbal expressiveness, like dance, play, drawing, painting, melodrama, etc. is also used for the purpose of a new experience of life. To effectively achieve the goal of a new experience of life, skills need to be acquired for using language, according to the purpose, situational context, and appropriateness. This helps teachers to identify their roles in the classroom as being significant (with power) for assisting students to engage meaningfully in learning. The art and science view also presents a different and alternative way to define what constitutes an argument so as to embrace a non-traditional model of teaching English. Although education research has found that to be a great teacher, a reflective teaching perspective about the arts and science is necessary, this paper is focused on developing rhetoric for teaching English from an arts perspective.

### **Understanding Teaching as an Art**

The importance of the arts is based on the centrality of the imagination to aesthetic experience, and the consequent relations among imagination, language, thought and feeling (Langer, 1957; Egan, 1992). To describe the aesthetic experience, Greene (1988) referred to a pursuit of meanings, where the distinctiveness of the artistic-aesthetic helps learners to question the old order of doing things and encourage critical thinking. In other words, the challenges of the art empty formalism, didacticism, and elitism, which are common in the methods used by teachers to teach English to elementary students (grade 4) and achieve the objectives stipulated in the NPE. In addition, by implication, students are allowed to generate, analyze, and synthesize concepts. For instance, as language is recognized as a system of symbols, it can distinguish humans from other types of animals and can help decode concepts and articulate perceptions. Thus, the arts can give a voice to students to express their views and perception about issues; inviting their intellectual curiosity (Bain, 2004).

Teaching as the art makes teaching and learning student-centered and consistently emphasizes creating an environment to promote freedom for the student. Promoting student-centeredness has been articulated in the works of Rousseau in his book, *Emile* and by other revolutionary scholars (Dewey, 1934; Adler, 1986; Greene, 1988; Pinar, 1988).

Teaching as art is then the marriage of a teacher's ability to lovingly orchestrate the subtle strings of classroom dynamics with the students' expectations to learn with the truth that each class session is unique and an unrepeatable incarnation of shared presence. To unfold in a unique way how students freely express themselves through discoveries and creative processes makes the teacher an artist. In other words, teachers see themselves as agents of transformation and not just as implementers of the curriculum. In sum, with regards to rhetoric, teachers use unique ways to teach English, which makes them more than teachers who want to train or mould (the general aim of education), but to identify themselves as artists whose interest is to challenge and facilitate the students' intellectual curiosity.

### **The Artist-Teacher in the English Language Classroom**

The aesthetic experience creates an environment for exploring things in varied qualities and forms, which the artist-teacher consciously uses to make learning meaningful for students. Although the approaches used by artist-teachers to teach English are innumerable, this paper considers six approaches, as summarized by Farrell (1965): 1) a wide general knowledge and a sound specific knowledge of the subject; 2) certain skills connected with the physical manipulation of classroom conditions; 3) creativity; 4) enthusiasm; 5) a sense of humor; and 6) the ability to communicate effectively.

#### **a) Wide general knowledge and a sound specific knowledge of the subject**

For teachers who understand that teaching goes beyond training and molding, it can also be viewed as the development of skills and abilities to think critically. Teachers as artists suggest the importance of being exposed to other disciplines that may be interrelated. Gropius (quoted in Padgham, 1988) described the possibility of self-exploration and self-discovery for both teacher and student. He said that

a teacher who communicates to his students nothing but the syllabus laid down by the authorities, using methods he learned at the teacher's training college, can be compared to the dispenser of pills made up according to prescription, who can never be a true physician.

Using the arts as an approach to teaching, the teacher can draw examples from other disciplines (things can be done from multiple perspectives) and stimulate the awareness of students for their capacity to transcend themselves and the world (Huebner, 1967, quoted in Padgham, 1988, p. 363). For English language teaching, teachers are not expected to teach in the same way that they were trained. Language, as an important hub where other disciplines oscillate, can be explored by having a good grasp of the vocabularies/ words and meanings associated with it. For instance, to understand politics and knowing the language of politics and the words used in politics could assist students in understanding the literature or the composition associated with politics.

Just like an artist-painter, who uses different colors to beautify an object, or a designer who explores the blend of materials to achieve an artistic design, a language teacher is expected to use self-discovery to explore how true life experiences (subjects in other disciplines) could be used for students to engage in collaborative and interactive discussions. Thus, language is used and communication skills are built, encouraged, and polished. Similarly, students learn to participate effectively by contributing to the activities inside and outside the classroom, through being exposed to multidisciplinary subjects or topics.

## **b) Creativity**

Creative teachers constantly seek new ways of doing things. Artist-teachers also bring creativity into making the old order of things to appear new and different. For language teaching, teachers should have a flexible mind and be ready to try out new things. Just as a sculptor works differently with metal than he or she would work with marble, language teachers are also expected to work differently with students of low intelligence than they would work with students of high intelligence. Through creativity, teachers can keep an open mind to ensure that all students in the classroom are involved. According to Hare (2005), “open-minded teachers invite and encourage students to develop their own ideas in a thoughtful way to [be critical]... of the opinions they encounter in textbooks or from teachers, and they cultivate an atmosphere in the classroom [where]... a spirit of open inquiry predominates and where ideas are advanced tentatively and provisionally” (p. 18).

Teachers are implied to bring creativity into the classroom, not just adopt new ways to make their teaching different. Students need to have an avenue to share their views and opinions truthfully without the fear of being criticized or looked down upon. When creative mindsets are creating the classroom environment without bias, meaning-making can be negotiated. Thus, the objectives of primary education can be achieved by providing students with opportunities to develop manipulative skills so they can function effectively in the world (i.e., in society).

## **c) Enthusiasm**

Although working with young students can be highly demanding, since they abound with energy and take every chance to play, language teachers are still expected to be enthusiastic with the students and achieve their goals. Artist-teachers would incorporate the energy of young students to help them reinforce their learning. Eisner (1985) described the action of artist-teachers as a craft, distinguishing between craft and art. In the former process, skills are used to achieve a predetermined outcome, but in the latter process, skills are used to discover the end. In other words, the teachers' enthusiasm is a craft in that the tone, pace, tempo, and students' readiness to create an enthusiastic atmosphere will make the learning more interesting and meaningful. In a similar vein, molding the character of students, developing their attitude and morals, and teaching the students when and how to use language (i.e., creating awareness) is equally important.

**d) A Sense of Humor**

William Shakespeare in his play, *Twelfth Night* (2008) said, “If music is the food of love, play on...” In the play, music was used metaphorically to indicate a bit of humor. In teaching, humor also has its place, to relieve the tension or distract students at a crucial time. The appropriate use of humor can save the situation, and relax the unwanted tension. Language teachers, as artists, can quickly get the class on their side while enjoying a laugh together. Bonds can easily be made through laughter, which shows that teachers care and want their students to get something out of the lesson. Young students (grade 4) are usually great fans of comic humor and enjoy lessons when their teacher uses comics to explain the use of language and communicate effectively.

**e) Ability to Communicate Effectively**

Artist-teachers should be able to communicate with their students, using skills for talking easily, clearly, and vividly. An inarticulate teacher is like “an armless pianist” (Farrell, 1985). When teachers communicate effectively, they can correct the dos and don’ts in language lessons. Teachers need to be interested in language, intrigued by words, curious about word origins, and fascinated by the myriad of word combinations. They need to be read broadly in the different genres of literature, such as prose, poetry, and drama. Above all, teachers should always practice the act of writing, to corroborate the popular saying: “practice makes perfect.” Whatever language is practiced by teachers, being familiar with it will automatically make it a part of them, and will naturally make it easier to assist students in the classroom. Likewise, practicing a language will allow students to adapt to a changing society and be prepared for further educational advancements and activities outside of the classroom and school.

**Implications of Students’ Language Development**

The implications of using arts in the English language classroom in primary school (grade 4) can be summarized as follows:

1. An interactive classroom environment begins with the way in which the seating arrangement is coordinated. The seating arrangement should allow students to interact in pairs and groups, and the teacher should have access to every student in the classroom to facilitate the interactions.
2. Students are not just passive learners but should be actively involved in the activities in the classroom.
3. The facilities in the classroom are not abstract entities but should encourage the students to feel, manipulate, and interact with them.

In conclusion, the rhetoric (persuasion, suggestion) used by language teachers in primary schools in Nigeria should support them as artists and should be helpful for their self-reflection. The rhetoric should not be used by teachers to exert power, but it should help teachers to identify themselves, not just as teachers but as agents of transformation. In addition, the arts should be used as a form of human expression. In teaching, the human expression should be used to reveal the unfolding and ever-changing way in which

we think and learn about the world. Ultimately, students need to be able to use language meaningfully both inside and outside the classroom.

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