



Literature

Elixir Literature 58A (2013) 14659-14662

Elixir
ISSN: 2229-712X

Best approaches to the teaching of English as a second language towards effective literary studies

Matthew Q. Alidza

Department of African Studies, University of Cape Coast, Ghana.

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received: 24 August 2012;

Received in revised form:
17 March 2013;

Accepted: 2 April 2013;

Keywords

Curriculum,
Segregated,
Harmonized,
Language,
Integrated.

ABSTRACT

For some time now, researchers in pedagogy have been finding ways of improving language teaching and learning in schools in Africa. In Ghana, various governments have sought assistance/cooperation from professional as well as donor agencies, both national and international, to improve language teaching methodology in schools. Until then, language teaching in the basic schools had depended rather extensively on the 'Segregated Method'. With the coming of these interventions, however, teachers are becoming more and more aware of the 'Integrated Approach' to teaching language. Even then, the focus has been on what is popularly referred to as 'Language across the Curriculum'. This paper seeks to reinforce the fact that language is better learned as a whole, and that students of ESL learn better when the various language skills are integrated in a single lesson, and that there is no single 'best method' of teaching English.

© 2013 Elixir All rights reserved.

Introduction

There is no denying the fact that one's ability to read literature either as a field of liberal studies or a critical field of inquiry depends heavily on one's linguistic proficiency. There could not be literature without language. Therefore, in countries that adopt non-native languages as lingua franca (such as English is used in Ghana), efforts must be made to employ best practices in the teaching of such languages in schools so that the individual develops both capacity and interest to successfully undertake further studies in literature.

The fact that language teaching in Ghana is undergoing trying moments is not an understatement. Every now and then, assistance in the form of donor funded interventions is sought from richer nations to assist in capacity building for teachers at various levels of pre-university education. Initially, concentration had been on improving the curriculum of the Colleges of Education. This has resulted in the recruitment of British subject advisors under the Over Seas Development Agency (ODA) Programme mainly for English, Mathematics and Science. The Japanese International Cooperation Agency (JICA) is also providing assistance to build capacity in science and mathematics, while the Quality Improvement in Primary Schools (QUIPS) seeks to build capacity in teachers at the basic level in Ghanaian schools.

It is worth noting that though the interventions are primarily targeted at the basic school teacher, the direct beneficiaries are the tutors in the colleges of education. This is understandable because the various interventions come with them methodology experts in the relevant subjects. And since tutors in the colleges of education hold monopoly over the teaching of methodology of the various subjects, the various interventions decide to build capacity in the tutors teaching at this level. The direct result is that approaches to the teaching of specific subjects tend to vary from one donor agency to the other depending on what is in

vogue in the donor country. The case of language teaching is no exception.

Skill development

The essence of language teaching is the development of the primary language skills of listening, speaking, reading, and writing (Alidza, 1997:5), as well as the related skills which include vocabulary acquisition, spelling, pronunciation, syntax, semantics and usage. The fact remains that the desired level of communication is attained only when the various skills-both primary and related ones are integrated during instruction.

This means that though during teaching, a particular skill is in focus (example reading), much more than that is what actually happens. This is natural because language by nature lends itself to integration.

The point has earlier on been made that approaches to teaching language especially in Ghana vary from one consultant to the other. And for a fuller appreciation of the integrated approach, it is necessary to examine the two most commonly used approaches with the view of establishing a clear contrast.

Purpose of the Paper

The purpose of this study, therefore, is to adopt the comparative method to examine the segregated-skill approach and the integrated-skill approach to language teaching with the view to arriving at a harmonized methodology that, it is hoped, will suit all purposes, including serving the interest of the student of literature.

The Segregated-Skill Approach

Also known as the language based approach, segregated skill instruction considers the various aspects of language as independent entities. The teacher under this approach teaches 'language for language's sake' (Oxford, 1996) with language remaining the focus but according to Oxford, not authentic communication. Moham (1986) asserts that under the segregated

skill approach, the mastery of discrete language skills such as reading and speaking is seen as the key to successful learning. This clearly is opposed to the integrated approach in which people use language skill in normal communication. It also contrasts sharply with modern trends of language teaching being suggested by language teaching experts.

Under the Segregated-Skill Approach, practitioners resort to presenting aspects of the language in a manner as though each aspect is dispensable of the other. For instance, a lesson on writing is completely separated from speaking, or a lesson on reading is isolated from listening. In view of advocates of the segregated skill approach, it is virtually impossible to concentrate on more than one skill at a time.

Pre-Teaching Vocabulary

In a reading lesson, therefore, there is the need to pre-teach vocabulary as part of the Segregated-Skill Technique. Individual words usually tagged 'key' words/'new' words, or 'focal' words are selected and listed on the board. The teacher then drills pronunciation of the listed words with students. The process entails students repeating the individual words after the teacher. After this mechanical drill, the teacher, having satisfied himself that the students have mastered the pronunciation, proceeds to teach meaning of the words independent of the context in which they appear in the reading text. The lesson ends after about thirty minutes for the actual reading lesson to be tackled probably in the next lesson.

The impression thus created is that vocabulary acquisition is an entity by itself and should be separated from the reading lesson. The major setback of the segregated-skill approach is that, granted that it was even possible to develop each of the four language skills separately, the approach, according to Oxford, 'would not ensure adequate preparation for later success in academic communication, career-related language use, or everyday interaction in the language'. She cites the extreme example of the grammar-translation method which teaches students to analyse grammar and to translate from one language to another, and she comes to the conclusion that this method restricts language learning to a very narrow, non-communicative range that does not prepare students to use the language in everyday life.

Alidza (1997) points out that the grammar-translation method, apart from its mechanical style which is in contrast to the natural language learning process, also leads to the generation of unidiomatic and unacceptable expressions. This is especially true because while the European languages are intonation languages, African languages are basically tone languages.

One feature of segregated ESL/EFL classes is the presentation of lessons in terms of skill-linked learning strategies or techniques such as techniques for teaching reading, or techniques for teaching listening. Very often, experts demonstrate strategies as though they could be linked to only one particular skill, such as reading, writing, listening or speech at a time (Peregoy and Boyle, 2001).

One major setback of this strategy is the tendency to produce teachers who are self-styled 'experts in the teaching of specific skills.

The Integrated Approach

To offset the weakness of the segregated-skill approach, language teaching experts have developed the integrated method. As a new method still under investigation, the integrated method lends itself to different models. Under the

integrated approach, the teacher embodies multiple skills in one lesson even if it becomes clear that in one particular lesson one skill is the main focus. This way, students are exposed to, and have the added opportunity of practicing all the skills in a natural, communicative way.

The integrated approach recognizes that the segregation of language skills might be only partial or even illusory. In the view of Oxford, if the teacher is creative, a course bearing a discrete-skill title might actually involve multiple, integrated skills.

For instance, taking the technique of pre-teaching vocabulary, which is a hallmark of the segregation-skill approach, it is absolutely impossible to separate the listening and speaking skills. This is based on the understanding that repeating after the instructor implies the listener having listened to, and heard the words pronounced by the instructor. Also, in a course on written composition, the teacher might give instructions orally in English, prompting students to listen. As part of the pre-writing stage, students might be asked to compose essays orally leading to the use of listening and speaking skills as well as related skills such as pronunciation, vocabulary acquisition and syntax.

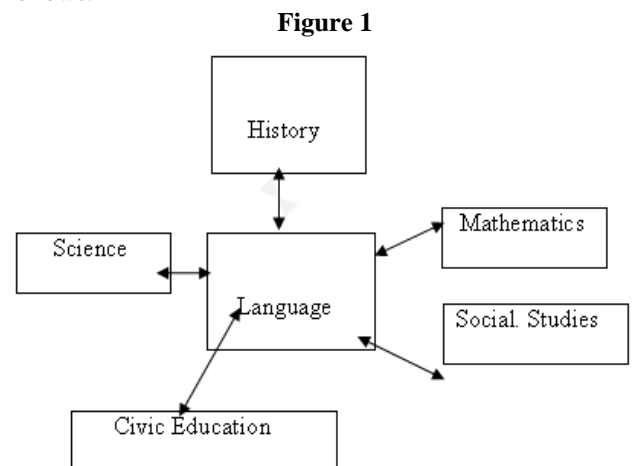
Forms of Integrated Skill Approach

There are basically two forms of Integrated-Skill instructions. These are Content-based language instruction and Task-based instruction.

Content-Based Instruction Model

Under this strategy, Chamot and O'Malley (1994) explain that language learning strategies can be integrated into the simultaneous learning of content and language. Also known as 'Teaching Across the Curriculum', the content-based approach provides opportunities for learners to acquire a new language through the study of academic disciplines such as mathematics, science, geography and history. It is therefore an effective way for learners of ESL to develop their language skills and academic skills at the same time.

This means that the various subjects whether handled by the same teacher or by different specialist teachers, are structured to provide a language base for the learner. Language Across the Curriculum, therefore, involves a conscious effort at integrating language instruction into all other curricular activities. Diagrammatically, the content-based model can be represented as follows:



How the strategy works

Let us consider a course in history for example. While the main focus of the lesson might be the 'Effects of the Slave Trade on West Africa', the teacher does not ignore language. Instead,

he introduces students to the pronunciation of the key words relevant to the topic. The essence is to enable students use the appropriate vocabulary associated with the topic. In addition, the teacher of history ensures that the student speaks and communicates meaningfully in English during instruction, while paying equal attention to content. The same orientation applies to the teachers of all the other subjects. The result is that by the time the students go through all the subjects on the curriculum, they have, not only acquired considerable content on the various subjects but also broadened their language base.

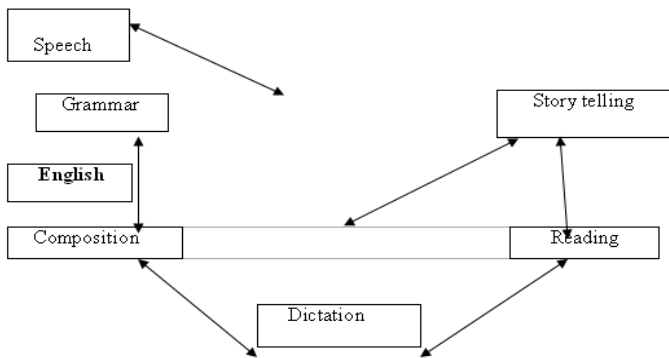
Task based/ whole language model

Under this model, the teacher sets learners language learning activities that can stand alone as fundamental units and that require comprehending, producing, manipulating, or interacting in authentic language while attention is principally paid to meaning rather than form (Nunan 1989). This methodology revolves around the use of strategies that can encourage pair work or group work. The belief is that students learn authentic language when they interact with their colleagues either in pairs or in larger groups.

The model works on the principle that skills in various aspects of English can be developed in a particular lesson. The philosophy of whole language is based on the concept that students need to experience language as an integral whole. According to Goodman, 1986, the Whole Language Approach focuses on the need for an integral approach to language instruction within a context that is meaningful to students.

The French teacher, Wendy Maxwell who, in 1999 developed the Accelerated Integrated Method (AIM), observed that in order to develop language, literacy and thinking skills in any language, there cannot be a better vehicle for the contextualization of the target language than the integral use of most or all the language skills during the same instructional period.

Figure 2.



How the Model Works

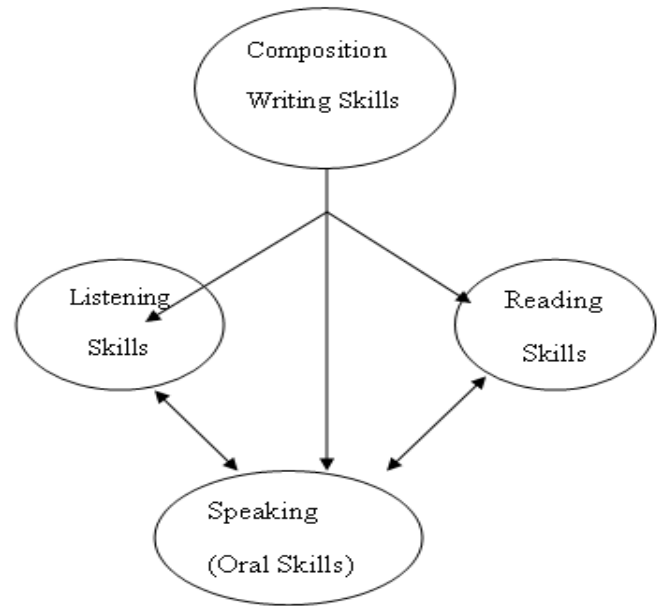
Under the whole language approach, the language is content and content is language. Indeed language constitutes both the medium of instruction and the subject as well.

Let us, this time consider a lesson on writing. The teacher who decides to guide his students to write a composition on ‘My Best Friend’ can model the essay around a funny picture of a human being. Draw the human to look as funny as possible and in a multi-coloured dress. The clumsy picture by itself will no doubt generate interest and allow students to actively participate in the lesson.

As explained earlier, the focus of the lesson is the development of writing skills, but by the nature of the instructional material, it is possible, and indeed, preferable to develop other language skills alongside the writing skills. For example, the multi-coloured dress and the shape of the

man/woman in the picture provide excellent material for a lesson on ‘adjectives’. The same lesson provides for reading as students are made to read over their essays after writing, while the oral preparation that precedes actual writing caters for the development of both the listening and the oral skills.

Figure 3.



Oral Preparation

In the figure above, the skill in focus is writing. However, the other three skills and other related skills can also be developed.

Advantages of the Integrated-Skill Approach

One advantage of the integrated skill approach is that learners are given exposure to the target language most of the time. This is significant because in Ghana where English is learnt only as a second language, students do not have ample opportunity to use English outside the classroom. The integrated approach therefore allows students to interact through authentic language use at least in the classroom.

Moreover, the approach helps the teacher monitor the learning progress of his learners in more than one skill at the same time.

New Trends

Having examined the two major approaches to the teaching of English, it becomes clear that to talk about a best method of teaching any subject, including language can pose difficulties. Though the integrated-skill approach has widely been acclaimed and recommended, the method has its demerits. One must note that using the English language as medium of instruction to develop different language skills simultaneously can really be frustrating to both teachers and learners who are non-native speakers of the language.

Let us consider the following two hypothetical scenarios: a homogeneous language class in the United States in an area where the students are all native speakers, and another class in Ghana where both teacher and learners are learning English as a second language. Assuming also that both teachers in the two environments decide to use the Direct Method and the Integrated-Skill Approach to teach English to primary three pupils, and, all things being equal, the native speaker teacher should find it more convenient to handle his lesson than his Ghanaian counterpart.

This is explained by the fact that once the learners speak the language as language of the home, they are better disposed to assimilate ideas, concepts, structures and instructions in the language as they are being taught than other students who have to learn the language. One would, therefore, say that even the Integrated-Skill Approach is appropriate to some situations more than others. This is because an insistence on the authentic use of language by the approach can lead to a substantial loss of instructional time, especially when non-native learners find it difficult responding to the language.

This then implies that in certain extreme cases, the use of the grammar-translation method is permissible during the teaching of English as a second language.

Again, while the total immersion method may be appropriate and relevant to a student of English as a second language, it is totally irrelevant to a native speaker of the language.

The new trend, therefore, is that language methodologists have begun to agree on certain principles.

1. There cannot be a single “best” method of teaching language. This is obvious because what is appropriate to one situation may not be suitable in another environment.

2. It is becoming more and more relevant to talk about integrating methodologies.

Combining approaches to teaching will go a long way to make language teaching less prescriptive. It will also make the teacher be in a position to shift from one methodology to another depending on the response of the students during instruction.

3. Strategies for teaching language rather than strategies for teaching specific skills must be the focus of the language teacher. The reason is that language, by its nature, must be learnt as a whole, and the skills developed within the learning process.

The Harmonised Method

The result of the new trend is that the “harmonized” method has become the most widely acceptable method of teaching language. By way of definition, the harmonized method refers to “combining whatever methods seem the best or most useful from many different methods rather than following a single method”

Features

Basically, the features of the harmonized method are as follows:

❖ It harmonizes all “best” practices available;

❖ It is more flexible because it admits other methods that were traditionally labeled ‘bad’.

❖ It is more dynamic because it takes the learner’s environment into account, and can be modified to suit his situation.

Conclusion

Having evaluated the two major approaches to language teaching, I wish to stress that there should be room to harmonize the various approaches for better results. In my view, the immediate approach that comes to mind is the method that selects the best practices and blends them. In the literature courses, once the student is used to the harmonised approach to teaching and study, he/she refuses to see language and literature as separate entities, but rather as interdependent subjects each of which helps in the study of the other.

References

- Alidza, M. Q. (1997), *Teaching Specific Aspects of the English Language*, (unpublished lecture notes).
- Blanton, L. L. (1992), ‘A Holistic Approach to College ESL: Integrating Language and Content’, *ELT Journal*, 46. 285-293.
- Chamot, A. U. & O’Malley, J. M. (1994), *The CALLA Handbook: Implementing the Cognitive-Academic Language Learning Approach*, Reading, MA: Addison Wesley.
- Goodman, K. S. (1986), *What’s Whole about Whole Language? A Parent/Teacher Guide to Children’s Learning*, Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Met, M. (1991), ‘Learning Language through Content; Learning Content through Language’, *Foreign Language Annals*, 24, 281-295
- Miller, John (1996), *The Holistic Curriculum*, Toronto: OISE Press.
- Moham, B. (1986), *Language and Content*, Reading, MA: Addison Wesley.
- Nunan, D. (1989), *Designing Tasks for the Communicative Classroom*, Cambridge: University press.
- Oxford, R. (1996) *Language Learning Strategies Around the World: Cross-Cultural Perspectives*, Manoa: University Press
- Oxford, R. (1990), *Language Learning Strategies: What Every Teacher should Know*, Boston, MA: Heinle & Heinle.
- Scarcella, R. & Oxford, R. (1992), *The Tapestry of Language Learning: The Individual in the Communicative Classroom*, Boston: Heinle & Heinle.