Teaching English in a Multi-Grade Classroom: The Dramatic Approach

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Abstract: *The problems that face the art of teaching and learning in the Nigerian education sector are multi-faceted. In some areas, there are no classrooms to accommodate the teeming population of pupils; while in some places there are not enough qualified teachers to carry out the teaching exercise. So many experiments carried out by policy formulators and implemented in the past seemed to have failed to provide the desired solutions. Available literature has shown that the inculcation of communicative competence into pupils has become a herculean task in view of the problems identified above. This paper, therefore, opts for the adoption of the dramatic approach to English language teaching in a multi-grade classroom setting as a way out of the perceived challenges.*

1. INTRODUCTION

The Multi-Grade system of teaching and learning is not an entirely new method of teaching. It has been in use for quite some time though in different designations. Abhayadeva (1989) observes that the Multi-Grade teaching refers to the teaching of students of different ages, grades and abilities in the same group or classroom. The literature of Multi-Grade teaching is replete with various terminologies for this same teaching method. In some texts, it is referred to as 'Multilevel', 'Multiple classes', 'Composite classes', 'Vertical group', 'Family classes' and so forth. According to Aikman (1994), this system of teaching is distinguished from the 'Mono-Grade' teaching where students within the same grade are assumed to be more similar in terms of age and ability. Little (1995), also opined that Multi-Grade teaching should be distinguished from 'Multi-age-within-grade teaching which occurs when there are wide variations in age within the same age grade. This, according to her is common in developing countries, where the age of entry to school varies and where grade repetition is common. However, in North America, where age and grade are more congruent, the terms "multi-grade" are often used synonymously (Little, 1995).

The position of this paper is anchored on the premise that the much-desired communicative competence in language teaching and learning can be enhanced in a multi-grade classroom through an interactive approach. Agu (2006) citing Stern native speaker possesses to use and interpret language appropriately in the process of interaction and in relation to social context. This process of interaction in the process and social relation are the essential ingredients that have been lacking in the normal lecture method of language teaching. To provide this missing link, therefore, this paper advocates the use of the dramatic approach to the teaching of language in a multi-grade classroom situation.

2. REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Play seems to be a sine-qua-non of the very existence of every normal child.

It provides him the opportunity of interacting with peers and even other adults around him. A very resourceful teacher can effectively employ the play method in teaching virtually every subject. This is even more apt when the teacher desires to improve the communicative ability of his pupils in a multi-grade setting. One form of play is dramatization. According to Jowett (1948:86), "Most children are fond of playing parts during which their imagination leads them to act in the capacity of known or imaginary individuals". Accordingly, this is of utmost value to the learning process, for it can be utilized with good effect in almost every subject.

Stretching the point further, Onwuka (1981), opines that play is a happy activity which consists, in the early years, primarily of running about and shouting. It is usually spontaneous and free from restraint.

Gradually, it begins to call for some skill. Pointedly, Onwuka (1981:171) declared that in addition to the pleasure in "make believe," there is the desire on the part of the individual players to excel others or even to be a cause of some event. Since the players are trying to do something definite, play has a directing idea. This type of play demands some mental control. Whether for the tired child or the tired adult, play creates new energy. Therefore, play is a recreation. Play recreates both body and mind.

This method of teaching-learning situation brings joy to pupils. This joy, in turn, elicits a kind of learning experience that will propel them to improvise some of the desired objectives. Since this is the case, it becomes very pertinent to state that every teacher should retain some kind of play in the class. Every teacher should ensure that the pupils are in a state of happiness since not much could be achieved without happiness in the classroom. Another great advantage of the play method is that it makes room for spontaneity which in turn brings out the sense of creativity and initiative in the child. The position of play in the multi-grade classroom cannot be undermined by any teacher who desires to achieve his instructional objectives. It is in this regards that Onwuka (1981:171) asserts that play is helpful in achieving socially desirable ends. Play is shared activity. Therefore, it embraces other people. It is a means of fostering the team spirit. Properly applied, the play method enables the pupils to learn with ease and to accomplish much without strain because it stimulates interest and provides variety in classroom. Thus, play, role-playing or make-believe, develops worthwhile values and attitudes. It also helps in understanding the feelings, emotions, and prejudices of other people. Above all, it develops insight and understanding of basic principles and concepts.

The play method has really impacted positively over the years in the teaching-learning situation. When a teacher handles it appropriately, there is no limit to its advantage over the conventional 'one-way- teacher-dominated approach'. In a recent study entitled "The Effects of Teaching Play Strategies on Social Interaction for a Child with Autism: A Case Study" Francke and Geist (2008) reported the tremendous influence of the play method in multi-grade classroom over an autistic child. In this case study, research was conducted in an integrated preschool setting, which included children with a variety of disabilities as well as children who were considered to be typically developing. "Jay," the subject of this study, was a 3-year old boy who, at 2 years of age, had been diagnosed as having autism and a "global delay," meaning he had a delay in all areas of development. Participant observation research was used in this study. Play skills were taught in a structured teaching method, which was modelled after Treatment and Education of Autistic and Related Communication Handicapped Children, otherwise known as division TEACCH. Researchers sought answers to question such as, "If play strategies are taught (such as how to play with age-appropriate toys), what would be the effect on social interaction of the autistic child with typically developing peers?" Observations were conducted during structured teaching, free choice pay time, and group activities. At the end of the nine-week period, the data were analyzed by looking at the partners and categories that emerged. In assessing the results of teaching play strategies in an integrated preschool setting, significant changes were observed in how Jay engaged in social play with adults and peers. The implication here is that he is mixed with both peers and adults. It is multi-grade in its outlook.

3. THE PLACE OF DRAMA IN MULTI-GRADE CLASSROOM

Drama is not all together a new theory of language teaching. Rather, it is a technique that can be employed to make a classroom more vibrant and involving. Pupils who usually stay docile in the class will have to be active in a play-oriented classroom. In language teaching, drama should be viewed as a technique of communicative language teaching. This is currently the dominant theory of language teaching. It emphasizes the role of the learner as an active participant rather than a passive receptor (Wessels 1987), the value of drama as an educational tool consists in fostering the social, intellectual and linguistic development of the child. This in the view of Heathcote (1984:56) has led to isolating the following as being significant especially in Multi-grade classroom:

- Drama demands the co-operation of the participants

- It draws on previous experience

- It creates situations in which there is a need for precise communication

- It is experiential, thereby affecting students in other than a purely intellectual way

- It challenges students to discover new truths or insights by confronting them with previously unknown predicaments.

The above points can be realized and put into significant advantage through various drama activities in the multi-grade language classroom. Some of these activities as proposed by Dougil (1987) are examined below:

3.1. Warm-Up Exercises

It has been discovered that a good number of teachers do not know how to 'tune into their pupils personalities and prepare them psychologically for the language classroom (Agu 2008). Just like a good footballer tries to warm-up before the actual game of soccer, a good teacher should engage the pupils in a kind of intellectual warm-up in the language classroom. The aim of exercise is to foster an atmosphere of trust and unity which in turn will bring about the creativity needed for effective communication. There is, however, no hard and fast rule about the most appropriate time of introducing the exercises. Every teacher is a liberty to introduce the events at the time he adjudges most appropriate for the production of the desired effects. They could be introduced at the beginning of the lesson, the middle or towards the end of the lesson but available literature (Savignon 1983) show that warm exercises introduced towards the beginning of the lesson have a way of impacting positively on the psyche of the pupils. Three board warm-up exercises are identifies by Dougil (1987) for effective teaching of language lessons in a multi-grade setting. These include:

3.1.1. Introductory Warm-Up Exercises

The aim of these is to break barriers which may exist as a result of pupils coming from different backgrounds or grades. For instance, pupils who are much younger than the rest in the class may not feel free to interact with the older members of the same class. But the teacher may just enter into the class and pass the following instructions: "Every pupil should stand up, walk around for five minutes; stop and shake hands with the pupil in front of you". The pupils will do this. Now the teacher continues: "Tell the pupil your name and ask after his own". Again the pupils will comply. The teacher will continue: "tell that same pupil the name of your village, district or street, tell him how you feel about the weather today'. This activity is repeated as often as the teacher sees the need. The implication here is that the initial barrier which the pupils had created about one another is broken and at the same time the foundation for a communicative classroom is being created irrespective of the different age gaps or grades of the pupils. This same ice-breaking game can be varied depending on the specific lesson objective(s). For instance, Wessels (1987) describes situations where students sit in circles of not more than ten each. The first person starts off by introducing himself: 'my name is X.' Turning to the left he asks the next person, 'and what about you?' that person responds, and passes the question on, until it comes back to the first speaker. Alternatively, the question can be asked of any person sitting in the circle instead of consecutively.

3.1.2. Verbal and Vocal Warm-Up Exercises

This is a type of exercise targeted at making the pupils tune up to the communicative language classroom. In this exercise the pupils are encouraged to inhale air to a count of 2 and exhale to count of 2. This continues up to the count of 4 and then; they begin to make some short phrases as they exhale. This is quite analogous to the technique described by Wessels (1987:76) in "Dramatized play readings with extension activities" which takes the following pattern:

Choose a text with very simple vocabulary and short utterances. Give each pupil a copy, and read it aloud to them. Ask them a few comprehension questions, and then encourage them to speculate about the context of the scene-what preceded it. And what will follow? Then divide the class into groups according to the number of characters in the scene. They now practice reading the scene aloud. They should look at their lines briefly, and then look up when they saw them. As a follow-up activity, then can be asked to improvise continuations of the scene.

A close examination of the above scenario, will automatically qualify it for a communicative language class in a multi-grade setting. In the first instance, there is every tendency to believe that the class is composed of pupils with different reading and speaking abilities. But they all listen to the teacher for the instructions. Thus the pupils, who are faster in speaking, as they pair up with the slow speakers, tend to draw the latter along. In the same vein at the time they speculate about the context of the scene, the verbal and vocal warm-up exercise will come to play. Some of them, as they think of what to say will engage in some kind of dramatic monologues or they will employ the dramatic technique of aside as they verbalize their thoughts.

3.1.3. *Trust and Sensitivity Exercises*

There are four major language skills which should be taught in the classroom especially at the primary school level, these are: listening, speaking, reading and writing. Listening is at the core of every language lesson in the primary school. Unfortunately, this language skill has received the least attention principally because the teachers lack dramatic skill that could make the teaching to look very simple. Pupils of various grades and age brackets who happen to fall into one classroom in a multi-grade system can play the Trust and Sensitivity Game with much ease. For instance, the teacher could pair the pupils. One of them will have his eyes tied with a piece of cloth. Thus, he is temporarily blind. The partner give instructions by way of tasks which the blind pupil is expected to carry out. The teacher at this point will automatically become a facilitator of the learning process. He may decide to suggest the tasks which the pairs will carry out. For instance, he may tell them to write on the board, turn on the light, and open the window and so forth. After an interval of say, five minutes, he tells the pupils to swap roles or change partners and repeat the exercise. This exercise helps the pupils to build trust for one another. This of course, does not discriminate according to age or grade. Thus it is adaptable to a multi-grade language teaching. Apart from that, this game exposes the pupils to a variety of the language skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing all in the same setting.

Having examined one of three drama exercises that could aid language learning in a multi-grade classroom, it becomes expedient to consider mime.

3.2. Mime

Is a form of dramatic performance that does not involve the use of language. In the words of Savigon (1983:207), "One of the best introductions to Theatre Arts in pantomime. Pantomime helps learners to become comfortable with the idea of performing in front of their peers without concern for language" (pantomime is the American term for mime). But the curious question that arises then is this: if mime is a performing without words, how will it facilitate language teaching? This is where the teachers' pedagogical dexterity is put to maximum use. In a multi-grade classroom situation, the teacher will have to divide the pupils into groups of three to seven depending on the class population. He will generate a list of activities like drinking tea, catching fish, swimming in a hot afternoon, wrestling in the village square and so forth. He will invite a member of the group and whisper the particular situation to him. The pupil in turn will stand before his peers and attempt acting the particular activity which the teacher has whispered into his ears. As he finishes his performance, members of other group who have not been to the teacher, will try to explain in words the situation which the child from the other group has just mimed. This will continue for some time with a possibility of reversal of roles among the groups and with the introduction of a variety of activities. The game could be improved or modified from time to time. For instance, the teacher could place a real or imaginary box full of words in front of the class. He will mime removing a word from this box and invite a pupil to guess the particular word or the activity associated with this word. He may invite a pupil to the box and whisper a word to him. This pupil will mime taking that word from the box while the rest are encouraged to guess what the word is. This game continues with the other pupils until the list of words is finished.

3.3. Role-Play, Improvisation and Simulation

Assuming a role is an essential ingredient of drama; because in a dramatic performance, an actor impersonates another person. This has far reaching implications for the language teacher. This mode of language teaching endeavours to introduce elements of reality in teacher-learning situation. Instead merely talking about situations, teachers contrive or stimulate a variety of learning environment. Often, teachers provide imaginary situations in which pupils merely describe what they think should have been taking place in such situations. They may also interpret what goes on in such circumstances (Onwuka 1981). The main benefit of role-play form the point of view of language teaching is that it enables a flow of language to be produced that might be otherwise difficult or impossible to create. For example the different types of register and formality that occur in language use would not be employed in a classroom where everyone knows are mixed-up irrespective of their age gaps or grades, the teacher will realize that role-play will facilitate the process of language teaching. He may not have to search all day before getting pupils of different age brackets or backgrounds who will play various roles. One of the big pupils may play the role of a father and the other becomes the mother. These two could be seen complaining about their five-year old who is fond of watching television all the time to the detriment of his school work. These pupil-actors will automatically be compelled to use words and phrases that will reflect their assumed roles.

4. CONCLUSION

What is very obvious from the above discussion is that the multi-grade system of teaching has not gained great popularity within our education system. With the current shift in education policy, the nation needs a teaching system that will cater for a good number of school-age children who have dropped out of school either as a result of lack of funds or for other very obvious reasons. What this paper has attempted doing is looking at the possibility of teaching of teaching English language in a multi-grade classroom using the dramatic approach. The choice of this approach is deliberate. It is one of the methods that can present language teaching in an atmosphere devoid of the rigidity that had characterized the grammar or lecture method. Again, using of the dramatic approach in a multi-grade classroom will make pupils who are 'over-aged' sit comfortably with their younger colleagues in the same language classroom. The relationship that exits among them is that of complementation and not the unhealthy competition witnessed in mono-grade classrooms. This paper, therefore recommends that more teachers be trained in the area of multi-grade teaching; English language teachers should make the communicative competence teaching their ultimate goal through the dramatic method.

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