Strategies for Enhancing the Communicative Competence for Students with Learning Disabilities

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Abstract *the essence of language teaching in Nigerian schools is to improve the communicative competence of students in English Language. The frequent poor performance of students in English Language means that language teachers need to reconsider the appropriateness of the teaching methods. In view of the fact that there are students with learning disabilities in mainstream schools, this paper highlights some motivational strategies that can enhance the communicative competence of students with learning disabilities. The paper explains in details these motivational strategies and the benefits. Finally, the paper concludes by calling on language teachers to adopt an eclectic method in language teaching through the use of the pedagogical strategies examined. It is hoped that these motivational strategies would be adopted for corrective and remedial instruction in language teaching.*

Introduction

It is unnecessary to stress the importance of language. The reason for this is not far fetched. Language is the instrument of communication and as a social being, man needs language to communicate with other people in the society.

In Nigeria, English Language is the language of education. For this very reason students study English Language from prenursery to the university. The essence of this is to increase the communicative competence of these learners when they leave school for the larger society.

Unfortunately, students with learning disabilities have the attendant problem of language impairment. This would mean that they may not be able to go through the normal educational and social system(Yul-Ifode, 2000).

It will not be wrong to say that students with language impairment are in a sense handicapped because language permeates all aspects of education and human life(Akpan 2004). Variably, this means that these students may not understand and use language effectively in a communication situation.

In view of the importance of language in education and social life, students with learning disabilities need all possible help to enhance their communicative competence. In this regard, language teachers must come to the rescue. The Nigerian language teacher needs to be empowered with instructional choices if he must still retain the role of an instructor, a facilitator, a motivator, an experimenter, a therapist and an effective communicator(Emenanjo 1995). This is important because it is only when language teachers are empowered that the communicative competence of students with earning disabilities can be enhanced.

Communicative Competence

According to Trask(1997), communicative competence refers to the ability to use language appropriately in social situations; knowing how to begin and end conversations, when and how to be polite, how to address people and so on. He adds that the term also includes the knowledge of Based on this, it would not be wrong to state that a person's idiolect is a mark of his communicative competence. Because as Conale and Swain (1980) want us to believe, communicative competence can be defined in terms of grammatical competence and strategic competence.

Still on communicative competence, Lawal(2002) proposes a pragmatic theory which is a model of the hierarchical structure of competence which is semantically presented in the order of linguistic, situational,

psychological, social, cultural and cosmological representations. He notes that communicative competence is the ultimate goal of any useful language teaching programme. In precise terms, language teaching is for communicative competence in real life situation.

Learning Disability

Learning disability encompasses everything that causes learning difficulties. Harris(2006) uses intellectual disability instead of learning disability and defines it as impairments in both cognitive functioning and adaptive skills.

Learning disability is an umbrella term for several disorders in which a person has difficulty in learning in a typical manner. Different typologies are used in the classification of learning disability. Here, we shall use the typology that is related to general processing(Learning Rx 2010).

1. Attention- The ability to stay on a task in a sustained way.
2. Working memory- The ability to retain and process information for short time periods.
3. Processing speed- The rate at which the brain handles information.
4. Long term memory- The ability to both store and recall information for later use.
5. Visual processing- The ability to perceive, analyze and think in visual images.
6. Auditory processing- The ability to perceive and conceptualize what is heard.
7. Logic and Reasoning- The ability to reason, prioritize and plan.

These processes affect a person's competence in language and at such may be function impaired. This could mean any of the following condition.

a. Dyslexia- A reading disability. The student has trouble reading written words.
b. Dysgraphia- A writing disability.
c. Dyscalculia- A math disability.
d. Dyspraxia- A motor coordination disability.
e. Dysphasia- A language disability. The students have difficulty with reading comprehension.
f. Aphasia- A language disorder. The student has difficulty with understanding spoken language.
g. Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder- The student has difficulty in sustaining attention.

These conditions affect the communicative competence of students as exemplified by their experience of language difficulties.

Instructional Strategies in Language Teaching

Language teaching in Nigeria is majorly English Language teaching because English is the language of education. The goal of language teaching is learners' communicative competence. A learner is linguistic competent only when he can translate theoretical rules of the modalities of language to real life day to day communication.

There are two major themes in language teaching behaviourist/structuralist and mentalist/cognitive themes. These are classified under two major language acquisition theories: behaviorism and mentalism. Subsumed under these two themes are the following language teaching methods; grammar translation or traditional method, direct method, audio lingual method, cognitive code learning method, communicative competence method, eclectic/ integrated method and discretional method(Odo 2007, Ezeude 2007).

Each of these methods has merits and demerits. In order to optimally benefit from each method, it is most appropriate to use a variety of instructional methods. So as to meet the special needs of the diverse learners in the classroom. Allegiance to a particular instructional technique would mean that some students would not benefit from the lessons presented in the class.

Language learning is in no way easy. For students to gain mastery of English Language or a target language, the learners need to be intrinsically motivated(Gardner 1991). The adoption of an eclectic method

would enable the language teacher to nurture learners to be motivated "from the outside"(Maclean 2003). Greathead(2007) proposes the following motivational strategies for the enhancement of communicative competence: feedback, repetition, simple task, memory mapping, story telling skills and diffused patterns. These are explained below.

1. **Feedback**- This would mean teachers response to students learning activities. It is important that teachers make remarks on the language exercises of student. In the same vein, teachers must ensure that students react to such remarks positively. This is important in all language activities.

2. **Repetition**- Repetition technique is useful in the presentation of vocabulary development and pronunciation exercises. Through repetition technique, the language teacher drills and models the right pronunciation of words.

3. **Simple Task**- Simple task technique demands that a language teacher presents a lesson from known to unknown or from simple to complex task. Where a lesson is presented from simple tasks, it will be possible for the language teacher to guard and track the learners to complex task. This is important because repeated failure in an exercise might create fears in the learners. In order to boost a good self esteem, lessons should be presented as simple tasks. Thereafter, progress can be made to complex task.

4. **Memory Mapping**- Memory mapping would be the application of such cognitive strategy as imagery. Chamot() defines imagery as a strategy that relates new information to visual concepts in memory via familiar retrievable visualizations, phrases,or locations. The adoption of memory mapping might mean the use of mnemonic strategies. Rubin(1987) elaborates on mnemonic strategies this way:
   - finding some sort of association or group,
   - using one word to recall a number of others,
   - using some kind of mechanical means to store information(taking notes, writing out items),
   - selective attention in which students focus on certain details to aid in recall,
   - directed physical response in which students aid retention by associating the items with their own physical movement.

5. **Story Telling Skills**- This strategy aims at improving the coordination of ideas in composition. This strategy will be useful in the presentation of composition or writing essays. By this technique, students would discuss with the class what they intend to write. A language teacher can adopt this technique to help students brainstorm and coordinate their ideas before writing an exercise like essay writing.

6. **Diffused Pattern**- Diffused pattern would mean that a language teacher divides a learning task into bits. For example the language teacher would do the students disservice by talking all through the allotted time. It is important that the lesson is diffused into bits with students actively involved in discussion, writing and if need be, relating what is being presented to real life experiences.

Conclusion

The importance of the use of eclectic method has been proposed in this study. The use of eclectic method is geared towards the application of the pedagogical strategies for the enhancement of the communicative competence of learners with learning disabilities. Ogunkunle(2009) quotes Butter et al who notes that teaching should embrace the following:
- teaching for understanding,
- teaching for assimilation,
- teaching for transfer, and
- teaching for performance.

The adoption of the presented strategies would go a long way to improve the communicative skills of

students with learning disabilities. This is important if these students must use language for communication in real life.

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