

IMPROVING THE STUDENTS UNDERSTANDING AND APPLICATION OF SKILLS IN LANGUAGE ARTS

Barr. Henry E. Asemota and Mrs. Okonte, Esther

Abstract

For convenience in presentation, and the benefit of listeners, the plan of the work is as follows: the first part explains the concepts and operational definition of Language Arts as a discipline, appropriately concerned with the study of the receptive and creative use of language in communication; the second part deals with its significance; the third part examines the development of student's conscious knowledge of and insight into the nature of language; contemporaneously, it treats the development of student's understanding of the interrelationship between the receptive and productive skills; the fourth part is an overview of the expressive language arts which promotes intellectual growth; the fifth part makes some recommendations that might effectively nourish the skills of the language arts education; and the final stage concludes, that there is no obvious reason to exaggerate the importance of one activity at the detriment of the other aspect of the language arts education.

Introduction

Traditionally, Language Arts as a discipline was viewed in terms of the feeble attempts, by well meaning and dedicate teachers and research workers, to discover ways and means of identifying and improving the basic language skills of learners and communications in primary schools. These efforts were largely directed at the improvement of spelling, handwriting, vocabulary development and other basic language skills at the pre-primary and the primary education levels. This traditional view of Language Arts is well documented by a number of writers, notably: Gray (1990, pages 26-31) and Squire and Applebee (2000, pages 391-402).

Even though Language Arts has literally come a long way from such humble beginning, the traditional aspect of the discipline still persists in the form of Elementary Language Arts, which is essentially a pedagogical and child-centred study of language and communication skills, at the primary school level. This forms an important bridge between Language Education and Language Arts. What, then, can we regard as an acceptable definition of Language Arts as a discipline?

Concepts and Operational Definitions of Language Arts

According to Lefevre (1970:337-338), the broad teaching objectives of Language Arts as a discipline are:

- (1) a continuous spiral programme indicating the need for sequence and articulation in the instruction of listening, speaking, reading and writing;
- (2) the development of the student's conscious knowledge and insight into the nature of language;
- (3) the development of the students understanding of the inter-relationships between oral and written language;
- (4) an interdisciplinary approach to the study of language, such that language becomes functional in terms of human concerns and activities; and
- (5) the development of the student's capacity for independent inquiry and study.

Another distinguished Language Arts specialist, Higginbotham (1971:33) suggested that a good Language Arts curriculum must provide courses of instruction in:

- (1) the acquisition of primary communication skills (i.e. listening and speaking) and secondary communication skills (i.e. reading and writing);
- (2) relationship between verbal communication and thought processes, with emphasis on hierarchical patterns of development;
- (3) language as it relates to learning in all areas of the curriculum;
- (4) recognition and understanding of conditions operating to produce individual differences in linguistic competence and performance;

- (5) development of specific objectives for instructional (speech) communication; and
- (6) selection and implementation of ameliorative, developmental, and enrichment communication experiences.

The objectives of Language Arts instruction, as stated by Lefevre and Higginbotham certainly provide a good explanation of what Language Arts is all about.

In essence, according to Onoh (1982:5), Language Arts is a problem-oriented and communication-centred study of language. Its main concern is to promote understanding and application of the principles, theories, research findings, and the practical procedures that are relevant to the development of the four communication and language skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing) in all their ramifications, as well as to the diagnosis and remediation of deficiencies in these areas, at various stages of human education, learning and communication.

It is for these reasons that Lefevre had rightly observed that Language Arts makes the study of language "functional in terms of human concerns and activities". Related disciplines, such as Linguistics, and English, have tended to be mainly analytical, descriptive and evaluative of language and/ or literature, as valuable by-products of culture, whereas Language Arts has tended to be not merely evaluative, but diagnostic, prescriptive, corrective, didactic and creative in its approach to the study of language and communication.

Significance of Language Arts

Richards and Rodgers (2002:3) maintain that Language Arts has a significant role to play in promoting and facilitating the intellectual development of individuals and nations. It is argued that the four language or communication skills that constitute the Language Arts, namely, listening, speaking, reading and writing are important tools of learning. If properly studied, understood, developed and applied, they can facilitate intellectual development, but if ignored, poorly understood and/or left to develop accidentally or merely incidentally, they are likely to result in retarded and inadequate intellectual development. It is further argued that since Language Arts as a discipline is concerned with the study of the productive and creative use of language in communication and learning, it can provide sound principles, theories, research findings, and practical procedures on which to base the development of communication and language skills, the improvement of learning through (the medium of a language, and the remediation of deficiencies and problems in these regards.

Improving Students Skills in Language Arts Studies

There is the futile debate as to whether the proper base for Language Arts is the Faculty of Arts or Education or even the Social Sciences and the absurd suggestion that Language Arts is a duplication of English, Linguistics or Theatre Arts. Because of its interdisciplinary character, Language Arts obviously has affinities with these and some other disciplines which have academic concerns that cut across artificial faculty boundaries.

Even so, it belongs essentially to the Arts or the Humanities. As Stevick (1998:305) correctly points out, "At the center of the humanities lies the study of human expression in all its manifestations". The study of communication or Language Arts certainly involves a study of human expression in all its manifestations.

According to Borg (1994:61-74), many students can cope with a higher level in receptive skills than they can in language production.

Readers or listeners employ a number of specialist skills when reading or listening and their success at understanding the content of what (they see or hear depends to a large extent on their expertise in these specialist skills. We can look at six of these skills:

- a) **Predictive Skills:** Efficient readers or listeners predict what they are going to hear and learn; the process of understanding the text is the process of seeing how the content of the text matches up to these predictions. One of the main functions of the lead-in-stage when teaching receptive skills will be to encourage predictive skills.
- b) **Extracting Specific Information:** Very often we read something or listen to it because we want to extract specific bits of information - to find out a fact or two. This skill when applied to reading is often called scanning and we will concentrate on the skill of extracting specific information.
- c) **Getting the General Information:** We often read or listen to things because we want to get the general picture. When applied to reading this skill is often called skimming and it entails the reader's ability to pick out main points rapidly. Listeners often need the same skill too - listening

for the main message and disregarding the repetition, false starts and irrelevances that are often features of spoken language,

- d) **Extracting Details Information:** A reader or listener often has to be able to access texts for detailed information.
- e) **Recognising Function and Discourse Patterns:** We understand paragraph structure and paragraph organisation and we recognize devices for cohesion. We know which phrases are used by speakers to structure their discourse, or give them 'time to think'⁷. We need to make students aware of these features in order to help them to become more efficient readers and listeners.
- f) **Deducting Meaning from Context:** One of the things we can do for students is to help them to develop their ability to deduce the meanings of unfamiliar words from the context in which they appear.

All the skills mentioned here are largely subconscious in the minds of experienced and frequent readers - in other words, most literate adults. Our job, then, is to reactivate these skills which learners have in their own language but which may be less effective when they are faced with English. If we can make students feel less conscious and thus, remove some of the barriers, that alone may dramatically improve their receptive abilities.

Larsen-Freeman (200:148) asserts that the relevance of the study of writing to intellectual development may not be obvious at first sight.

It is, however, obvious that writing is one of the surest ways by which we demonstrate our intellectual development and maturity. Well written materials of all kinds do provide a good evidence of the writers' intellectual maturity and cognitive ability. It is also true that the study of well-written materials can and does serve as an intellectual stimulant. Furthermore, a systematic study and application of the mechanics and principles of effective writing (be it creative writing, textbook writing, or various other types of scholarly writing) can be an important aid to the achievement of cognitive growth and intellectual excellence.

Richards and Rodgers (2001:164) state that either speech or writing is a better or more proper objective in language teaching, particularly in the context of a general language course. In recent years, it has been argued on both linguistic and psychological grounds that spoken language should be the principal objective in language teaching. The various reasons are that linguists have concluded that speech is the primary form of language and that writing is secondary to it and derived from it. For not-dissimilar reasons - man learns to speak but not necessarily to write. The child learns to speak but is taught to write, which makes psychologists come to the same conclusion. As a result the study of language has focused very much on speech. Sometimes explicitly, sometimes implicitly under the influence of these views methodologists have argued that speech should be the main aim of language teaching.

There is another argument that can be used to support the view that greater prominence should be given to speech. There is the possibility that pupils may be more motivated to learn spoken than written language where they lack intrinsic motivation, the fact that language is a means of day-to-day communication needs to be kept continually before them, and this can perhaps be more easily appreciated if the language is in its spoken form.

Scott (1997:66) states the fact that comprehension can develop ahead of production and is something that should be recognized and exploited in language teaching. As it is, it tends to be suppressed in the belief that it is confusing for the learner to be in contact with forms that are not fully within his productive repertoire. Since this is an inevitable part of anyone's day-to-day language experience, it is better that the learner should be prepared for it.

Secondly, since the learning experience to production guarantees a very slow and thin exposure to language, it is seen that language acquisition is based on a rich, varied and intensive contact with language. In language learning, the time available for contact is already considerably reduced. If we insist too much on language production, because this requires maximal repetition of specific linguistic forms, we offer a still weaker exposure to language even within the learning time available, if we give a larger place to receptive activities, not only do we ensure that the receptive

abilities themselves are better learned, we give the learner the opportunity to learn what is not taught. In language learning a rich exposure to language can only be provided through extensive reading and listening. The transfer of linguistic knowledge from receptive to productive repertoires is probably a relatively slow process, but it does take place, as the study of language acquisition shows. There are good linguistic reasons why in teaching we should do our utmost to take advantage of the wider exposure that reading and listening activities offer.

The nature of linguistic meaning is such that the acquisition of meaning is a continuing process.

Since it is the product of highly complex networks of relationships between linguistic items, it can be learned only if the language is experienced sufficiently for those networks to be built up in the learner. This is, of course, a target that no foreign-language learner can hope to reach.

However, an adequate knowledge of semantic systems even for the language learner requires a good deal more than the textbook usually provides. The planned content of the textbook cannot give him knowledge of collocational restrictions in the language either. This is something that is better learned through wide exposure.

Syntactic knowledge cannot be built up fully through step-by-step productive procedures. Since the number of actual sentence structures in a language is potentially infinite, they could not all be enumerated in any course and could not be acquired by a simple additive process. The structural content of the first years of language courses certainly does not include all the possible structures in the language. Learners must have the opportunity to learn those aspects, structures which are not explicitly taught. If their syntactic experience is limited to what the course book provides, there will be a severe limitation in their capacity to exploit the grammatical system of the language. By being exposed through reading and listening to language where linguistic content is not kept wholly within what the productive syllabus contains, they can gradually build up this wider syntactic knowledge.

According to Denis (1978:102), reading is a more easily planned of the two receptive activities. In most languages there is a wealth of reading material available. Initially, simplified and structurally controlled readers can be used so that sound reading practices are inculcated, but there is no need to insist that the linguistic content of readers should in no way go beyond that of the general course book. The reading materials used can move progressively towards texts, which have been produced for the native speaker and are not specially edited for the language learner. If the texts are not narrowly literary, as in much more traditional language teaching, and have been drawn from a wide variety of types of writing, the learner will simultaneously be acquiring some of the distinctive characteristics of stylistic and sociolinguistic variation. Once sufficient classroom time has been devoted to reading to establish a sound pattern of reading techniques, the major portion of reading can be done out of class time, so that effectively encouraging reading is one way of increasing the pupil's* language contact time.

Listening, on the other hand, presents rather greater problems. Any productive classroom activity almost inevitably demands some listening activity too. However, what the pupil hears is scarcely language in use for communication. One would not easily take classroom language for natural language use. Furthermore, much of it is produced either by the teacher or by other pupils. Learners are rarely used to the sound of the language spoken by native speakers and consequently have problems of understanding when they do hear native speakers. Anyway, what the teacher says is usually controlled in just the way that would prevent listening from providing the rich linguistic exposure that one is seeking. Where the resources are available the teacher can provide what is needed through film, tape, radio or record, but this is probably better kept within the classroom until the learner has reached advanced stages of learning.

On these vexed issues and insights in Language Arts, Squire and Applebee (2004:391-402) together emphasize that, since receptive abilities are erroneously thought of as passive, the demand for active participation becomes a demand for the learner to engage principally in the production of language. Materials are planned for each newly introduced linguistic form, be it a grammatical structure or a lexical item, is thoroughly practised by the learner. 'Practised' here means that he himself is given repeated opportunities to produce the form - orally, because of the simultaneous emphasis on speech. To make this possible there is a strict limit on the number of new forms in any learning unit, so that the burden of what must be covered productively is not too great.

As might be expected, the results of this productive emphasis in the method will be a strengthening of productive skills and a weakening of the receptive skills. In spite of all productive expectations, reading is even at this present age the core of the syllabus. Books provide most pupils with the situations in which learning takes place. Where there is little reading, there will be little language learning. It is impossible in any secondary school to provide direct experience of language used as part of real life in the way the native learner gets his first language; one is defeated by the multiplicity of the contexts required: house, street, garden, sea shore, woods, streams, mountains, boats, church, club, doctor, hospital, traffic, Sunday, food, farm, factory, office, birds, insects, trees, flowers, fish, birth, death, marriage, divorce. Something can be done with films and photographs, more could be done with television, but it will be (rue for a few years. The student who wants to learn English will have to read himself into knowledge of it, unless he can move into an English environment. He must substitute imaginary for actual experience.

Only by reading can the pupil acquire the speed and skills he will need for practical purposes when he leaves school. In our literate society, it is hard to imagine any skilled work that does not require the ability to

read. Professional competence depends on it.

Further education depends on quantity and quality of reading. All the important study skills require quick, efficient and imaginative reading.

General knowledge depends on reading, as any teacher who has been lumbered with a general knowledge period is painfully aware. The 'background' or cross-cultural problem can only be tackled by wide reading. We have here a virtuous circle: the more the student reads, the more background knowledge he acquires of other ways of life, behaviour and thought and the more books he finds he can understand.

The Nature and Functions of Studies in Expressive Language Arts

A brief discussion of the nature and functions of studies in Expressive Language Arts is essential to an understanding of the role of expressive language skills in intellectual development. The study of expressive language arts is the study of Speech and Writing in all their ramifications.

The study of oral communication skills, speech composition and criticism, and situational public speaking aids the systematic development of the interaction of oral language and thought and sharpens the rhetorical tools of learning and communication in the well established Aristotelean and Socratic traditions of scholarship. The study of theories and principles of speech development, speech diagnosis and remediation, and speech pathology and audiology, all tend to create an awareness of the complex processes and problems involved in the acquisition of speech. They also shed light on the relationship in speech problems to learning difficulties, and provide guidelines and techniques for the diagnosis and remediation of various types of difficulties in speech.

Similarly, the study of interpersonal, cross-cultural and mass communication can and does' lend to a better understanding of the principles and strategies that can prove most fruitful in learning and communication settings involving interaction with individuals, with persons from other cultures and races, and with the masses. The study of instructional communication has also tended to provide helpful insights into the best strategies to adopt in transmitting or imparting knowledge, skills and attitudes from one source to another, in the complicated processes of extending the frontiers of learning and aiding intellectual development. Finally, studies of the relationship of speech to other language skills have revealed the interdependence of listening, speech, reading and writing, and the way deficiency in one, or some, of the language skills can affect the other skills and the entire process of learning. Several researchers, notably Blalock and Parton (1996:7-16), da Fonseca (1996:114-117), and Yasutake and Lerner (1999:1-4) have produced convincing research evidence in support of the complex relationships of these language skills.

Recommendations

- 1) In some schools, separate periods are devoted to the teaching of reading, speech work, writing (composition), etc. In some others an integrated approach is adopted. An integrated language arts curriculum sees language as a combination of all the four skills, in such approach, a reading passage can be used as an occasion to teach vocabulary or grammar as well as opportunity for speaking, reading aloud (speech) and for expressing oneself in writing.

Reading is a very complex process, requiring very specialized skills on the part of the reader. For the child, reading is the key to success in school, to the development of out-of-school interests, to the enjoyment of leisure time, and to personal and social adjustment. Over the years, educationists and psychologists have focused attention on the problem of reading, understanding what reading is, how reading facility may be developed, and what adjustments in methods and materials must be made in order that learners may benefit optimally from reading instruction.

Reading is an activity that must be learned and in the Nigerian society, learning how to read must start as early as possible especially when viewed against the fact that English is a second language.

- 3) Teachers need special knowledge of English phonetics in order to teach speech most effectively.

Conclusion

There is no reason, therefore, for under emphasizing the importance and usefulness of receptive language abilities in defining the objectives of language learning and teaching.

The general conclusion to be reached on the role of the four language activities is that where objectives are of some fairly specialized kind, the distribution of the activities in the teaching programme should reflect their distribution in the objectives. A reading knowledge is best acquired by doing lots of reading; a

writing knowledge by doing lots of writing; a speaking knowledge by doing lots of speaking and so on. Where courses are making a more general language provision, there seems no reason to exaggerate one activity to the detriment of the other, nor will it matter significantly how the different activities are ordered in relation to one another.

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