

LANGUAGE ARTS FOR FUNCTIONALITY AND SELF-RELIANCE

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Abstract

Government owes it as a duty to provide her citizenry qualitative formal education. It is, however, not enough to provide just formal education; it should be education that provides for self-realization, self and national economic efficiency, social and political progress, national consciousness, national unity and above all, functional and self reliance. This paper traces the history of attempts by successive governments in Nigeria to provide her citizenry with formal education. It further examines the concept of Language Arts and how functionality and self-reliance can be achieved through it. It finally recommends how Language Arts can be used to produce functional and self-reliant individuals for the overall benefits of all.

Introduction

The history of formal education in Nigerian is punctuated with efforts of successive governments to provide more qualitative education to the citizens. Such efforts included the promulgation of education codes and ordinances; conveying of regional and national conference and workshops leading to the production of policy documents among others. Prominent among these codes and ordinances during the colonial period were the 1882 code and 1929 ordinances both of which increased the quality and quantity of curriculum offerings in the schools for the setting up of schools and for the training and certification of teachers.

With the attainment of independence in 1960, the limitation of the colonial curriculum became discernable and so inspired the 1969 National Curriculum Conference which evolved new national education goals (Fafunwa, 1974). Since then, the Nigerian School curriculum continued to be reviewed to make the country come to terms with the latest development around

the world. This is as far as scientific and technological break-throughs are concerned.

What is Language?

According to Leleji (2006), a standard definition of language is elusive. She says that different branches of study define language from different perspectives. Linguistics define language in terms of their internal structure such as morphology and syntax whereas others attempt broader placement of language used in context such as sociolinguistics focusing on the relations between language and society or psycholinguistics which investigate the ties between language and human brain (Asseburg, 1999). Larsen – Freeman (1987) defined language as a systematic means of communicating by use of sounds or conventional symbols. Simpson (1968) said language refers to all systems of speaking and writing as in the sentence, “Human language can talk about infinite number of topics” or a particular type of speaking or writing felt to be typical of or appropriate to a given type of situation as in the phrase – “Scientific language.”

Another writer who has tried to define language is Wareing (1999) in Leleji (2006). According to her, language is a system, or rather a set of system (a system of sound, a system of grammar, a system of meaning; variations in usage are often systematic as well). Within these systems, she says that there is a scope for creativity and invention. How individuals use the system available to them varies according to who the speaker is, how they perceive themselves and what identity they want to project. Language

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use also varies according to the situation, whether it is public or private, formal or informal, who is being addressed and who might be able to overhear.

Language is an invaluable asset to man. This is because man employs language in his attempt to explore, understand and relate harmoniously with the world in which he lives. Language is a vehicle through which various facts of people's cultural heritage is perceived and then transmitted to the younger generation. Language too, is used for interaction in both formal and informal situations. It does appear that man can achieve little or nothing without language. This is why Sinai (1957) posited that, "man is language and language is man."

Concept of Language Arts

A well-know writer in Obanya (1981) once said that "language is man's unique accomplishment. More than anything else, it sets man apart from the animal world. It is the basis of all creative thought. Without language, there would be no progress, no civilization, no culture.

Language is thus a very important tool to us, humans, for it is the most important form of communication which distinguishes us, human beings from non-humans. Its acquisition is, therefore, of particular importance for the processes of humanization and socialization.

Right from the time a baby is born, the first language is the sound which is the first cry. In most societies, unless a baby cries immediately at birth, it will not be picked up. Nurses and doctors, on the other hand will do everything possible to ensure that the baby makes this first sound either by giving him a slight beating to stimulate this action or by throwing the baby gently up and down (Fromkin and Rodman, 1978).

According to Obanya (1981), different persons use language in different ways and with varying degrees of success and competence. For instance, the pupil who listens very attentively to his teacher is more likely to understand the lesson

better than another who listens less attentively, or who does not listen at all. The politician who can speak very well, whether in Hausa, Igbo, Yoruba, Idoma or in any other Nigerian Languages (or in English) is more likely to convince his followers or supporters better and more easily than another politician who can not speak well. The student who is able to read many books rapidly and with concentration and understanding is more likely to perform better in his examinations than the student who cannot read fast enough, one who cannot understand what he reads, or one who does not read at all. The journalist who writes a clear and interesting report is more likely to get a wider readership than the one who cannot write in a good and clear language.

To be able to communicate effectively through the use of human language, therefore, one must learn the art of using language.

Obanya (1981) posited that right from the time one begins to learn to use language in communication, one will be involved in trying to improve on one's performance, in the same way as a basket maker strives each time to make more beautiful baskets, by improving his skill in basket making. The language learner is, therefore, involved in learning to use language as a skill. The language arts are concerned with training the users of language in the language skills and helping them to develop these skills to the fullest in order to carry out the activity of oral and written communication effectively.

The four basic skills of language are listening, speaking reading and writing. The first two, (listening and speaking) are concerned with oral, or spoken language and are called audio-oral skills. They are also referred to as the skills of oracy. The last two skills are concerned with written language (as

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the one you are reading now). They are usually referred to as skills of **literacy**. The reader will remember that the literate person (one who has acquired literacy) is usually one who can read and write.

There was a time when the skills of listening and reading were referred to as the “passive” skill and those of speaking and writing as the “active skills. This distinction is no longer accepted by most students and teachers of language arts. This is because a great deal of activity is involved in the arts of listening and reading. A listener for example, has to hear the sounds uttered by a speaker. He has to pay attention to it (as has been pointed out earlier) in order to really understand what is said. If the listener does not actively pay attention to the speaker, he will not understand the message that is being conveyed. In a situation where the speaker speaks and the hearer does not understand, no communication has yet taken place. In the same way, the reader has to pay attention to what he is reading. He has to understand the individual words. He has to understand the sentences. Sometimes, meanings are hidden in proverbs and other forms of expression and the reader has to dig them out. A good reader, therefore, has to go through a written text carefully (with his brain and reflexes very active) in order to understand the message conveyed by the writer.

It is therefore, common these days to distinguish between receptive and expressive language skills. In the receptive skills (listening and reading), the language user actively receives, interprets and reacts to a message. In the expressive skills, (speaking and writing), language user actively expresses himself, striving hard to ensure that his intended message is conveyed to his intended audience in such a way that it can be easily understood.

The language arts, then are concerned with the art of using the language. It deals with the development in the individuals of the four basic language skills (listening, speaking, reading and

writing) necessary for communication through language. With particular reference to language teaching and learning in school, the language arts deal with an attempt to treat language as an integrated entity. Some schools has separate Periods for Reading, for Composition, for Speech work etc. An integrated language arts curriculum sees language as a combination of all the skills, thus a reading passage can be used as an occasion to teach vocabulary and grammar, as well as opportunity for speaking, reading aloud (which is also speech), and for expressing oneself in writing. It is worthwhile to note at this juncture that integrated language arts is very much in keeping with integration in other school subject areas (e.g. integrated science and social studies).

Language Arts for Functionality and Self-Reliance

It is said that the youths are the leaders of tomorrow. Therefore, train the youths today to be functional and self-reliant and tomorrow, they will utilize the knowledge for their own benefits and that of the nation in general. Even the Holy Book (the Bible) says, “Show them the good way and when they grow, they will not depart from it.” The Nigerian new school curriculum is anti-white-collar job. That is what the nation can do for individuals and preaches what individuals can do for themselves and the nation at large.

Language arts can be employed to make individuals functional and self-reliant in a variety of ways. For instance, a student who is well-taught in school through participation in quizzes, debates and drama can graduate to become a comedian and or master of ceremony and in this way, become functional and self-reliant. A typical example is a popular NTA programme titled “Nite of a Thousand Laughs” where different

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comedians take their turns to entertain the public. At school, language arts teachers should train students in the arts of reading both at class and school levels as they (students) are assigned and taught different forms of reading activities such as reading news items in class and school assembly ground. They thus, graduate later in life to become newscasters and can even be employed at private functions by examining bodies to tape-record reading passages for Oral English examinations.

Language arts teachers should train their students in the art of various forms of writing in school. The students are taught how to write essay, reports, stories and so on and they practice writing in class. When they graduate, they can become self-reliant by writing novels, short stories, plays and can also practise freelance journalism.

Conclusion

Language Arts if properly and effectively taught at school by language arts teachers, can bring about functionality and self-reliance in a number of ways. This is because through it. Comedians, speech writers, newscasters, novelists, playwrights, journalists of various types are produced. All these professionals can be self-employed thereby becoming functional and self-reliant individuals.

Recommendation(s)

Language Arts teachers should be encouraged and adequately motivated to effectively teach their students the basic language skills- listening, speaking, reading and writing. This done, different categories of professionals such as comedians, speech writers, news casters, novelists, play wrights, journalists can be made.

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