

Improvisation/Teaching Aids: Aid to Effective Teaching of English Language

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ABSTRACT This paper stresses the need to make English language lessons easy and enjoyable through the use of instructional aid/improvisation. The poor performances in English language in most schools are the fact that the teaching of it is textbook dominated. Teachers do not have regular supply of the teaching aids and where they are available they are so inadequate and obsolete. The cost of purchasing of these visual aids is quite enormous. Unfortunately, though the Federal, States and schools private owners are aware of the importance of facilitating learning with teaching aids yet, they cannot do much because of high foreign exchange rate and the poorly monitored economy of the country. Besides the high foreign exchange rate, is the fact that some of the visual aids do not readily fit into the cultural milieu of the users. It therefore becomes necessary for teachers and facilitators to improvise aids so as to bridge the gap between learners real world and the abstract foreign English language world.

INTRODUCTION

Teaching is communication. In a good communication there are three important aspects. These are: the person giving the information, the message/information that is to be passed and the receiver. This can be represented graphically as in figure 1 in the appendix.

For effective communication the message must be decoded rightly, if not, the message becomes distorted. According to Asokhia (2005):

“Language is a code restricted to those that are familiar with it. To non-users, it is mysterious and complex. For good understanding therefore, teachers must be aware that learners are abstracting. Meaning does not exist in isolation or in the words but in the context which the words are used. L² users/learners must be well exposed to usages of words through teaching aids as guides to learning grammar, concepts, spellings and even pronunciation.”

To avoid distortion the sender of the information/message must make himself/herself explicit and present the information as best as possible. Odejide

et al. (1995) in Omo-Ojugo and Egede (2005) emphasized that oral reports require research writing and speaking skills as well as effective use of audio visual aids and improvisation. It is therefore important that teachers of English use teaching aids or improvise to make learning easy, enjoyable and permanent. For example, in every day usage, there are confusing pairs of words in English. The confusion can be resolved through the teachers ingenuity of improvisation.

	Word	Class(es)	Meaning
1.	Accept	Verb	To receive or agree
	Except	Preposition	Not including; but not
2.	Assay	Nouns	Test of question
	Essay	Noun	Piece of writing
3.	Alter	Verb	Change in character
	Altar	Noun	Place of worship
4.	Differ	Verb	Unlike
	Defer	Verb	Put off to a later time
5.	Cite	Verb	Give or mention as example
	Sight	Noun	Power of seeing
	Site	Noun	Location for a building

Besides the confusing pairs are words pronounced alike, but with different meaning and spelling as given below

Words	Class(es)	Pronunciation	Meaning
a. Ewe	Noun	/ju:/	a Female sheep.
b. You	Pronoun	/ju:/	Used as subject or object of a verb or after preposition referring to a person.
b. Quay	Noun	/ki:/	a platform in a harbour where boats come in to load.
Key	Noun/adjective/verb	/ki:/	(1) metal instrument for locking, door, car or truck. (2) a thing that helps one to understand or achieve something. (3) any of the buttons you press to operate a typewriter or computer. (4) any of the wooden or metal parts you press to play a piano. (5) a set of related musical notes. Pieces of music are usually written in keys, for example, D Minor, A Major. (6) set of answer to exercises or problems. (7) an explanation or the symbols used on maps or tables.

In addition to the above are words that have the same spellings, pronunciation but whose meanings are different as in:

(a) Comfort

1. Comfort – Name of a person.
2. Comfort – Free from pain; the state of having a pleasant life.
3. Comfort – Consolation to the sad or bereaved.
4. Comfort – a thing that makes life easier or more comfortable.

(b) Deliberate

1. Done on purpose.
2. To think very carefully about something before making a decision.

The list is inexhaustible and very importantly are concepts and ideas that are very foreign to L² users of English language. Intonation, stress and diction are better learnt first hand. Since it is not possible for users to migrate to English territories, there is serious need to improvise the situations that will make for near perfect learning.

The teacher teaching sends out information/message to a group of learners as shown in the examples above. Sometimes, the message comes in abstract form unknown to the young learners. Learning becomes compounded and somehow mysterious. In most cases, learners from low socio-economic background, who are not exposed to the intrigues, cannot cope. When this happens little or no learning takes place because the message somehow is distorted.

If teachers bear this in mind, they will see the need to create atmosphere conducive to learning. An effective learning situation will require the use of teaching aids. Froebel Frederich (1782-1852) formulated the theory of play and activity as being the young child's most powerful learning tool in all areas. Most advanced countries, societies and even many classy private schools here in Nigeria have incorporated this method in their educational curricula and are deriving a lot of benefits by doing so. The American Froebelian kinder-garten started around 1856. The British, French, Russians and virtually all advanced countries of the world employ play-way system of teaching/learning for infants and young children. The good foundation the children are exposed to accorded them the giants stride those countries are making in all spheres of life. While the aids are very adequate for the younger learners, it is not as relevant to advance learners because their ability to create, construct, comprehend, make deduction and make value judgment

are required. To be able to make English language lessons enjoyable improvisation becomes necessary at this level.

Teaching at the higher levels may not easily be achieved through the mere use of teaching aids. At such level improvisation becomes very necessary. According to Henry (1993), improvisations are task-driven opportunities designed to stimulate spontaneous peer interaction in the target language. Gur-Ze've (2005) says:

Improvisation, when true to itself, transcends any limited context, border, dogma, regulations, drives, habits and fears dwelling in the moment of the ecstasies of the here and now. He further stressed that improvisation is not rhetorical, rational and ethncial in the traditional western concept of knowledge and inter-subjectivity.

The focus of teaching/learning English in this regards is on the natural reciprocating of comprehension and production in communication; on the functional and collaborative practice of the target language in flexible learning environment, on transformation at participation rather than on (measurable) outcome and individual's possession of skills. Berlinger (2004) posited that improvisation greatly enhances dialogues, scene, plays that approximate real life communication, provide a dynamic format in which language skills can be introduced and reinforced. Improvisation is interaction, which is a strong booster to improving language processing ability.

Nigeria's system of teaching English can be compared with the TEFLSPEAK – G, a non-native language discourse in Germany. Kurtz (2008) argues about its not being vibrant because it is based on the individual native teacher's belief of how English works. It is more dominated by the teacher, the classroom scene so that little chance is left for exploration and on the spot use of the language by the learner. He refers to it as 'textbook talk' that is often tightly controlled and generally lacks many substantial elements of authentic conversation. Although numerous researchers have emphasized the effect drama/theatre can have on a learner's cognitive and affective development, Eric Digest 2004 confirmed that there exists a gap between understanding its value and actually applying it.

Unfortunately here in Nigeria, English language remains a major problem in the public schools, as indicated by public primary/secondary schools' terminal examination results. In line with Froebel, this paper reiterates that high returns

occur in English Language and educational output in general when appropriate instructional materials are provided and well-utilized. On the other hand, teaching and learning become defective in the absence of appropriate instructional materials/improvisation. According to Ibeneme (2000) instructional materials are those materials used in the classrooms or workshops for instruction or demonstration purposes by students and teachers. Froese (1972) saw them as actual equipment used as a “hands-on” process by learners in order to develop the degree of skills sought by the course requirements. In English Language such instructional materials include word cards, pictures, objects, puzzles and so on. These materials can be grouped into three sections.

- a. *Audio*: dealing with what is heard; music, drums, radio, tape recorder, projectors, DVD and any sound effect that can be heard.
- b. *Visuals*: things that can be seen; comprising of posters, charts, chalkboard, flannel graph, flashcards, puzzles, objects – (real), projectors, cartoons, television, computer CD, internet and so on.
- c. *Multi-sensory*: where pupils learn through the five senses – see, hear, smell, taste and touch. This can take the form of role-play, demonstration, models, simulation, experiments, excursion, visits and so on.

According to Saunders (1979) speakers and listeners who have the same language background can understand one another because their common culture provides the common meaning whereas without the common culture such kinds of word are often misunderstood as illustrated in the introduction. If the new language is to be properly understood, they have to be rooted in the learners’ personal experiences. Richard (1981) in his study found that human being remember 10% of what they hear, 50% of what is heard and seen, and over 80% of what is heard, seen and done. Dale (1957) also used the old Chinese proverb to express the same view:

I hear, and forget
I see, and remember
I do, and I understand.

PROVISION OF INSTRUCTIONAL MATERIALS

According to Ibeneme (2000), though the Federal and State Governments are aware of the importance of instructional materials in teaching,

they cannot do much because of the high foreign exchange rate and poorly monitored economy in the country. Chute (1990) observed also that it is hard to get teaching aids because the foreign exchange rates have made the cost of the materials unaffordable. For instance a dollar to a naira has risen in an alarming way from less than a ₦100 to almost ₦200. It is therefore imperative and necessary to look for other means of providing the needed teaching aid. Improvisation becomes the option of coping with the demands of teaching/learning. In a depressed economy every individual is expected to be creative and resourceful in order to survive. Oxford (2000) defines improvisation as using whatever is available because one does not have what is really needed. Ibeneme sees it as using alternative materials and resources to facilitate learning whenever there is lack or shortage of some first hand teaching aids. Eze (1995) refers to it as a substitute for the ready-made or imported material. Okeke (1990) urged teachers to produce their own aids in order to teach effectively. Everybody can be involved in the production of these alternatives – the teachers, learners, parents and all stakeholders in education. The locally made are usually tailored to meet the local challenges at very cheap or no cost at all. According to Anyakoha (1992) the involvement of teachers and learners in improvising materials gives students and teachers the opportunity to concretize their creativity, resourcefulness and imaginative skills.

Sainn and Ugwuegbu (1980) described how children through play, learn to discover ideas, concepts of likeness and differences, sort, match or organize experiences. This will not be possible if the visual aids are not available.

How to Improvise for the Lower Levels

- i. Make cut-out alphabet from old calendars and cardboards.
- ii. For older children use flash card to depict the new words in a passage. Make them as bold as possible.
- iii. The cut out letters or words can be used in matching or organising experience.
- iv. Drawings fascinate learners. Teachers and learners can engage in the art.
- v. The available space in the classroom should be orderly and neatly managed. The following can be stored:
 - a. General supplies: paper, pencils, eraser, grease

- graph paper, rubber bands, plastercine, empty cartons, tins and so on.
- b. Create shopping and junk corners.
 - c. Counting devices: counters, frames and shapes
 - d. Improvise television sets with old cartons roll create scenes on old calendars and roll with a short wood inserted as control.
 - e. Allow each learner keep a folder of his work. Exemplary work should be displayed for others to see.
 - f. Organise periodic quizzes and debate.
 - g. Bring in other resource personnels.
 - h. Present puzzles and games for relaxation. Pupils will readily supply materials by bringing the ones they have at home if they are well motivated. Below are examples of how to improvise. Cut-out alphabet can be used like these as in figure 2.

The letters can be jumbled together and pupils asked to sort and organise.

In similar playway manner, differences in mean-ings of same words can be taught. Plays are also used to teach foreign vocabularies or quizzes. Flashcards are used to teach spelling, or introduce new ideas.

Through association learners are taught the number of days in each calendar month. Thus we may learn the verse:

Thirty days have September, April, June and November.

All the rest have thirty-one
Except February alone
Which has twenty-eight days clear
And twenty-nine in each leap year

They also learn the language register through drama and recitation:

Tom, Tom, where are you going? “ *Head Teacher*.

I am going to the hospital “ *Tom*.
Hospital for what? “ *Head Teacher*.
Hospital for medicine “ *Tom*.
Medicine for what? “ *Head Teacher*.
Medicine for my cough “ *Tom*.

Are you coughing? “ *Head Teacher*.
Yes sir “ *Tom*.

Cough and let me see “ *Head Teacher*.
Co ‘fha’ a chinah chi’ “ *Tom*.

In the above, the ‘hospital’ register is introduced.

Duties and roles of people are also learnt through singing as in

What does the father do?
Brings home money.

What does the mother do?

Spends all the money.

And what does the baby do?

Eats up the goodies.

Parts of the body can be taught in rhymes as in

My head, my shoulder

My knees my toes

My head my shoulder

My knees my toes

They all belong to Jesus.

They can be guided to choose between good and bad behaviour.

I know a little girl

She had a little fur

And when she is good

She is **very very good**

But when she is bad she is **horrid**.

Asokhia (2002) in a study found that the use of play and instructional materials in teaching witnessed a great revolution in Britain in the early 1960s. Edith Briggs (1968), Unkel (1988) reported that as a result of the adaptation of the Froebelian Kindergarten system in Britain, learning became a joyous experience for elementary school children in Great Britain.

Tips: Improvising for the Upper Levels by English Teachers

Going by Phillips style, one way of improvising for those in advance classes are listed below.

He emphasizes borrowing from the improvisational theatre to develop spontaneity and adaptability. In improvisation no script is provided. The actors create the dialogue and the actions as they perform. Sometimes the actors get suggestions from the audience or class members.

To begin with, it can be done in pairs and this can later be in small groups. The structures that were taught are being practised before the class.

As a follow-up, competitive variations are introduced. These allow for healthy competition as the groups try to out do others. Competition in itself makes life interesting as people face the challenges.

Part of improvisation in learning the register may take them out to the various establishment, for instance in engineering, hospital, offices and even markets. If well-handled, the learners learn as they improvise the actions.

English language programmes in public and the ‘mushroom’ private schools today is text-book dominated. This abstract thinking is too rigorous for the young children. The types of

programmes we need today are such that are very much alive, vibrant, relevant and meaningful, Adewoyin (1991); and Oboro et al. (1999).

The teacher has a lot of homework to do to develop such a vibrant programme. He must develop or select the activities, experiments and problems which will interest the pupils. The teacher of course, needs the assistance of the Parent Teachers Association (P.T.A.) and government in equipping teachers for the teaching of English language. They need money to afford materials that will make the learners develop interest in the class. Money is also needed to make improvisation a part of teaching/learning in the upper levels so as to ease the tension of the rigorous task of learning English language – their second language.

Children, according to Saunders (1979) and Federal Ministry of Education and Youth Development (1993) find it easy and joyful learning the new language in a play-way method through imitation, chanting, singing, dancing, modeling, dramatizing, watching projected pictures, visiting, matching, arranging and going on excursion. Advanced learners will find role playing, simulation, debate very interesting.

Rays and Thomas (1973) recommended manipulative materials as teaching aids. Manipulative materials here mean objects or things the children are “able to feel, touch, handle, and move.” Teachers should device ways of effectively utilising available materials and situations in teaching/learning. However the materials are not to be over-used or abused. Efforts should be made to properly manage and maintain whatever materials are provided/improvised.

CONCLUSION

The importance of teaching aids/improvisation cannot be overstated in teaching and learning process. They are more apt in the teaching of English Language effectively in Nigeria situation where English language is a second language. Observation of Stephen Speight one of the formal colleagues of Kurtz from the University of Dortmund Germany sets cautious warning as to the importance of improvisation. Teachers of English should borrow a leaf from it.

Situational teaching’ sometimes means that learners memorise their roles in playlet, and can rattle off a telephone conversation or a chat around a tea-table in a grand style. As a rule the

ability to ‘think’ on one’s feet’ which is so essential a feature of any real conversation is not taught, the slightest variation in the dialogue is likely to cause a breakdown. Improvisation on the other hand tends towards naturalness and its aid to learners been vibrant in class as opposed to the stiffness experienced in textbook dominated classes.

Finally, the Total Quality Management (TQM) philosophy as deduced from Logothetis (1991) in Lysons (1996) ensures that:

Every job, every process is carried out right, first time, every time that the participant within (the English language teachers) in an organisation (schools) particularly do the right all the time in a “zero defect approach.”

The English teacher sets the foundation for all the other subjects and if the foundation is poor the whole system crumbles. Corrections are expensive and take longer time. So teachers of English language at all levels should take the necessary precautions and dish out a “zero defect approach” while teaching the greater tomorrow in their classes. This can be accomplished through adequate use of aids and improvisation.

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APPENDIX

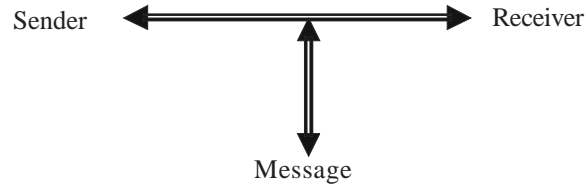


Fig. 1. Communication

- A - APPLE, ANKLE
- B - BOY; BOX; BREAD
- C - CAT; COAT; COT
- D - DOG; DOLLY
- E - EGG; ELEPHANT

Fig. 2. Using alphabet to teach words



Table of Contents



Acknowledgements	x
Dedication	xi
Chapter 1	1
Chapter 2	30
Chapter 3	67
Appendix	i

Fig. 3. Same word with different meanings