

Dr. Momodu Turay

Research Scholar, Professor

Fourah Bay College (University of Sierra Leone)

Freetown, Sierra Leone

momodoturay1@yahoo.com

English Language Teaching: The Need for Change

Abstract

The teaching of English in Sierra Leone has for a long time now focused on the grammatical syllabus which has not adequately addressed the language crisis in the country. At Fourah Bay College, the introduction of the pilot course of Foundation Studies - which has some methodologies of Communicative Language Teaching - prompted the need to gauge the performance of the subjects who were engaged in this course (the mass communication subjects) and those who were not (the main stream Arts subjects). At the end, the mass communication subjects who were engaged in readings on contemporary issues and writing year - long projects performed better than their counterparts. The pilot study is therefore recommended as the appropriate approach that could help address the language problem in the country.

1.1 Introduction

Over the years, the grades of the average university students in English have not only been unsatisfactory, but the language use of the impressive ones has also been noted to be as stilted. This study therefore investigates the performance of selected undergraduate students

from the University of Sierra Leone in relation to the learning of English (henceforth referred to as Foundation Studies) in 2017/18 Academic Year, with a view to making a case for the adoption of topic and task based syllabuses in preference to the grammatical one. Two categories of Arts students were involved, namely students from the Mass Communication Department who were taught the pilot course of Foundation Studies and those from mainstream Arts who were taught the module as it has been in existence for a long time now.

Richards's Process-Based Communicative Language Teaching Approaches which involve Content Based Instruction (CBI) and Task Based Instruction (TBI) are used as the theoretical framework for this study. Richards (2006:27) cites Krahnke (1987:65) who defines CBI as the teaching of content or information in the language being learned with little or no direct or explicit effort to teaching the language separately from the content being taught. According to this approach, a lesson's content should be given premium over all other considerations. Richards (2006:28) discusses the importance of CBI on the following assumptions: people's use of information in language learning is not an end in itself but a means of more successfully learning the language; CBI better signifies the necessities for learning a second language and content provides a framework that can connect and develop all of the language skills. The researcher will attempt to test the plausibility or otherwise of these assumptions by relating the subjects' performance to their tutors' methodologies. The TBI is concerned with creating the appropriate types of interactional processes in the classroom. Richards states that instead of putting emphasis on a conventional syllabus particularly a grammar based one, advocates for this methodology opine that 'grammar and other dimensions of communicative competence can be developed as a by-product of engaging learners in interactive tasks' (Richards 2006:30). Richards (2006:31) highlights two kinds of tasks that stem from this approach, namely, Pedagogical tasks which are designed classroom tasks that are meant for the use of specific interactional strategies and perhaps also

require the use of specific types of language and Real world tasks which deal with world uses of the language and which might be regarded as a display of tasks in the real world. The implications for the tutors' use or non-use of this methodology will be shown in this study.

The subjects' Foundation Studies scores and their interpretations for both the first and second semesters in 2017/18 Academic Year served as the primary source to gauge their performance. The Mass Communication subjects and their mainstream counterparts were selected for this study because they shared a similar academic background. The course outlines and the interviews that were held with the tutors and some selected subjects formed the basis for the discussion. The number of the subjects interviewed was small, but the researcher trusted his knowledge of them to help him interpret their responses.

1.2 Discussion

The following table shows the subjects' performance in Foundation Studies. According to Table 1, 98.6% of the Mass Communication subjects passed the examination in first semester within the categories A to C-, while 1.4% failed the examination. On the other hand, 71.3% of the mainstream subjects passed the examination within the categories A to C- in the semester while 29.7% failed the examinations. A similar performance was also replicated in the second semester when 97.7% of the Mass Communication subjects passed within the categories A to C- while 2.3% failed the examination. Conversely, 73.4% of the mainstream subjects passed the examination within the categories A to C- while 26.6% failed the examination. On the whole, while the subjects performed well in both examinations, the Mass Communication subjects were more impressive than their counterparts. This finding is similar to that of Savignon (1997) whose comparative research shows that the students who were taught through a Communicative Language Teaching approach performed better in grammar assessments than their counterparts who were taught through a traditional grammar

Range of Grades									
		BA Semester1		BA Semester2		Mass Com Semester1		Mass Com Semester2	
		o. of Students	P ercenta ge	o. of Studen ts	P ercenta ge	o. of Stude nts	P ercenta ge	o. of Stude nts	P ercenta ge
-	29	4	1	4	1	0	0	0	0
		2	3.4	0	3.8	1.7	0.0	0.0	0.0
0 -	34	3	1	2	7	0	0	0	0
		6	1.5	1	.3	0.0	1.8	1.8	1.8
5 -	39	1	3	1	5	0	1	1	1
		2	.8	6	.5	1.7	2.5	2.5	2.5
0 -	45	4	1	4	1	8	1	1	1
		7	5.0	1	4.2	1.0	2.5	2.5	2.5
6 -	49	2	9	3	1	9	1	1	8
		9	.2	9	3.5	3.4	1.3	1.3	1.3
0 -	54	4	1	3	1	3	2	1	1
+		8	5.3	3	1.4	0	1.7	5	1.3

-	5 - 59	3 6	1 1.5	3 4	1 1.8	3 1	2 2.5	3 0	2 2.6
-	0 - 64	2 7	8 .6	2 0	6 .9	3 3	2 3.9	3 6	2 7.1
+	5 - 69	2 2	7 .0	2 8	9 .7	1 3	9 .4	1 7	1 2.8
	0 - 100	1 5	4 .8	1 7	5 .9		3 5.6	1 9	1 4.3
	total	14	00	89	00	38	00	33	00

The disparities in the content of the two groups of learner and the different methodologies of their tutors including their grading systems account for the learners' different performance. The subjects' outlines are similar in that they both cover areas such as continuous writing, vocabulary development/idiomatic usage, knowledge of basic grammar and public speaking. However, for the Mass Communication subjects who did the pilot survey, their outline included learning by doing or experiential learning where the students were required to identify, investigate, research and propose a solution to address a community problem and write a 2500 word documented essay/report (with in-text citation and a works cited list) on the experience. This project (which takes the form of the TBI) gave the students the opportunity of not only improving their skills in areas such as time

management, summary and writing scholarly lengthy essays but also their grammatical usage. The outcome of this approach substantiates the view that the best way learners can learn a language is by using it to do things instead of learning how the language operates and practicing its rules. This is also similar to Gooblar's (2018) experience that the best learning occurs when the learners discover something on their own. Moreover, the Mass Communication tutors did not pay much attention to English grammar and usage which was renamed readability to take away the stigma of learning grammar rule. In other words, instead of focusing on rule acquisition, the subjects were "taught specific rules under the guise of readability recommendations in every class (which enabled the students to) learn these rules by examining their use and misuse in the readings – editorials, reviews and scholarly essays of others in real world writing" (Hollist, 2017:1). By this approach which takes the CBI format, the subjects were able to learn English better based on the information they were able to get through these readings which include articles on Gberie's (2017) "Sierra Leone's Disaster Was Caused by Neglect, Not Nature", Jabati's (2018) "2-Sim vs. 1-Sim" and Wondieh's (2011) "Sexual Violence on university campuses; the Case of the University of Bueau". This indirect way of teaching grammar is recommended by Weaver (1979:5) when he states that: teachers need not teach grammar so much as use their own knowledge of grammar in helping students understand and use language more effectively. On the other hand, the outline of the mainstream subjects was principally dominated by grammar topics which made their tutors spend most of their time teaching grammar rules. Mohammed (1995:136) citing Leech and Svartvick (1991:11) observes that this situation can make students suffer from 'excessive grammar fatigue', a tendency that was demonstrated by most of the subjects dealt with from this group. The pilot course of Foundation Studies was also more student focused and communication oriented where the learners were involved in class activities, assignments and readings which enabled them to use the language for meaningful

communication. For example, in order to develop the subjects' public speaking, they were individually asked to deliver a 10 minute presentation either from the selected reading or from specific parts of their year-long projects. The aim was to make the learners be at the center of the learning process as their tutors merely served as guides. On the contrary, the dominant (if not domineering) role of the tutors in the mainstream apparently reduced most of their subjects to passive learners who at best mastered the rules of the language but were subsequently unable to use the language for meaningful communication. While some of these subjects performed well mainly because they had cogitated the language rules, the likelihood is that they will tend to forget these rules subsequently.

Moreover, the tutors in the pilot program taught vocabulary and idiomatic expressions through the words and expressions their subjects encountered in the context of their readings and class discussions. This approach is important because as Harmer (1991:160) states: '...involvement with words is likely to help students to learn and remember them.' On the other hand, the mainstream tutors taught this section through a list of words and idioms which their subjects were expected to study in isolation. The problem with this approach is that students may forget the meanings of these words and expression either before or after the examination. More importantly, perhaps, this approach does not improve the learners' competence as it does not enable them to make finer semantic distinctions between words and idiomatic expressions in specific contexts.

The central position which the subjects in the pilot study occupied in their learning experience can also be seen in the way their readings were organized. The classes were divided into groups and each group had a leader. Group members were required to participate in providing answers to a reading passage. The subjects had the opportunity to be involved in the lessons which made such lessons more learner-centered and communication-oriented. This approach was reinforced by the use of the 'they say/ I say' method which deals with

engaging the thoughts of others and a fundamental skill students need to master in college as it enabled them to understand what they read and to analyze and evaluate it. Apart from the exposure to critical reading, the students also learnt how to write well. This is the most important writing skill because as Graff et al. (2015:4) state:

To make an impact as a writer, you need to do more than make statements that are logical, well supported and consistent. You must also find a way of entering with others' views with something "they say". If your own argument does not identify the "they say" that you're responding to, it probably won't make sense.

On the other hand, the only activity among the mainstream subjects where some semblance of group activity was noticed was reading some passages in the second semester. However, little interaction occurred among the subjects and unsurprisingly with their tutors partly due to the latter's dominant role in the learning process. Little wonder therefore that the mainstream subjects scored the lowest grades in this section.

The tutors' grading systems were also different. For example, the tutors of the pilot course set 80 multiple choice questions in section A where the subjects were asked to identify words that best capture the meanings of some bolded synonyms, antonyms and idiomatic expressions. They also asked the subjects to identify the parts of speech of some words, identify types of phrases, clauses and sentences. These multiple choice questions carried one mark for each correct answer. Section B contained a line of reasoning summary for which the subjects were awarded 10 marks and an additional 10 marks to show whether they agree or disagree with the author's argument in the passage. Three hours was allotted to this paper. The subjects' total involvement in the classes made it possible for them to respond positively to these questions. Conversely, the rubric in the first semester examination for the mainstream subjects required them in section A to write an essay of about 450 words, to explain the meanings of ten words or idioms as used in certain context in section B, and to

answer four questions relating to grammar in section C. Three hours was also allotted to this paper. In the marking scheme, 50 marks was allotted to section A, 20 marks to section B and 40 marks to section C. Significantly, the subjects' assumed knowledge of grammar rules greatly influenced their performance. For example, the breakdown of the 50 marks allotted to the Continuous Writing section is as follows: content 10 marks, organization 10 marks, expression 20 marks and mechanical accuracy 10 marks. Some of the helpful guidelines for a student to be awarded a good grade for expression which is the highest grading aspect include avoiding sentence fragments, paying attention to the sequence of tenses and to subject verb agreement (Osho, 2018:17-18). With regard to the mechanical accuracy aspect, the subjects were expected to lose ½ mark for every grammatical and spelling error. Significantly, some of the expressions that are regarded as errors by these tutors are now part of correct English usage, see Turay (2019), Huddleston and Pullum (2002) and Biber et al. (2002).

1.3 Conclusion

Although Sierra Leone is a tradition-steeped country, language planners and language instructors need to come to terms with the existential reality that the grammatical syllabus should not be used as the only means of language teaching. This is so because for some time now, remedies that have been used with a view to addressing the language crisis in the country have not yielded to any lasting positive dividend. For example, in 2002, owing to the poor performance of candidates in English in the Basic Education Certificate Examination (BECE) and the West African Senior School Certificate Examination (WASSCE), Sellu, a senior official at the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology urged the authorities of teacher training colleges and two of the constituent colleges of the University of Sierra Leone to '...emphasise the teaching of grammar both as a general, core and compulsory course or as specialist/optional course' (Sellu, Ministry of Education, Science and Technology, 2002:1).

This unambiguous call made no change in the candidates' performance at the West African Senior School Certificate Examination in 2008 as shown in the Gbamanja report:

Out of the 23,899 candidates who took the examination, only 1,722 passed in the A to C6 categories. Twenty two thousand, one hundred and twenty seven (22,127) failed the examination.

This crisis of poor performance in English is bewildering considering the fact that English is used as the medium of instruction and a core subject (module) in the country. The poor performance has shown that what to teach and how to teach it are questions that should preoccupy the minds of language planners and language instructors. It is hoped that if for example both the CBI and the TBI methodologies are introduced and if the learning experience becomes more learner-centered, there will be some improvements in the performance of students. To improve the learning process in developing countries like ours, colleges and universities have to try new things.

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