

The Need to Integrate Language Skills and Content Area Instruction

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to emphasize the need to improve the teaching and learning of all subjects in the Nigerian secondary schools, through the integration of language skills and content area instruction. This is pertinent because the performance of Nigeria secondary school students in all subjects is directly linked to their inability to develop their language skills. Therefore, the paper highlights the relevance of language skills in content area instruction. It also discusses the concept, principles, theoretical basis, and teaching approach of 'language across the curriculum'. This is an effective approach that can help students enhance and enrich their language abilities as well as improve their performance in all subject areas. Finally, it points out the positive effects of integrating language skills and content area instruction, in the Nigerian secondary schools.

Keywords: Language skills, content area instruction, school curriculum, learning process, practice

Introduction

The overall aim of teaching English language at the primary and the secondary school levels in Nigeria is to enable the learners acquire communicative competence in Standard English so that they can communicate effectively. For academic purposes, students need to acquire the competencies required for listening, speaking, reading and writing in all subject areas. For example, students need to listen with understanding to the utterances and ideas of the teacher and other students express their ideas orally with clarity and confidence; read books with a level of comprehension appropriate to their academic level, and write letters or essays competently, using appropriate formats and language.

In Nigeria today, the consistent poor performance of secondary school students in external examinations such as the Senior Secondary Certificate Examination, (SSCE), National Examination, Council, (NECO), and the General Certificate Examination, (GCE), over the years, is an indication that students lack the language skills and abilities required by all the subjects in the school curriculum. They are unable to respond to examination questions appropriately because they have poor reading comprehension ability, poor writing skills, and extremely limited knowledge of vocabulary. Generally, their language skills are underdeveloped and this, in turn, leads to poor performance in the various subjects.

The Relevance of Language Skills in Content Area Instruction

In all content areas, students need the resources of language skills to help them cope with the demands of the school curriculum. The language skills: listening, speaking, reading and writing are indispensable tools for learning in all content areas. These language skills

are also learning skills that are shared by all subjects in the curriculum. For example, in all subjects, students acquire information through listening and reading. They express their ideas and thoughts through speaking and writing. Even though listening, speaking, reading, and writing belong to the domain of language, they are very important skills in the learning process.

Also, there is a direct relationship between 'language' and 'thought'. Language is an instrument of thought and thought is expressed through language. If the language skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing), are used for learning all subjects at the secondary school level, students will be able to develop communicative and critical thinking skills required for the effective learning of all subjects.

The Concept of Language Across the Curriculum (LAC)

Language across the curriculum (LAC) is a content-based approach to language teaching and learning that focuses on the integration of language skills and content area instruction. The concept grew out of the recommendations of the Bullock Commission: a British governmental commission, in 1975. It recommended that language skills (listening, speaking, reading, and writing) should be used to teach subjects, such as Mathematics, Basic Science, Social Studies, Music, Fine Arts, etc. The basis for 'language across the curriculum' (LAC) is that language plays a major role as the medium of instruction and learning in all subject areas. Language is the major tool available for students for the formulation of concepts, exploration of symbols, solving of problems, organization of information and interaction with their environment. It is the major means through which students carry out their learning activities, (Richards and Rodgers, 2006).

Originally, LAC focused on the integration of the reading and writing in all the subject areas in the curriculum but today it is concerned with all the language skills. Also, it was originally intended for the teaching of the native language but today it is widely used in teaching English as a second language (ESL) and English as a foreign language (EFL). Language across the curriculum is now being used extensively in the teaching of other subjects especially in Europe and America.

Theoretical Basis for Language Across the Curriculum

The theoretical basis of language across the curriculum derives largely from the recommendations of the Bullock Report of 1975. The Bullock Report is the outcome of a British governmental commission of inquiry, set up in London under the chairmanship of Sir Alai Bullock, in 1975. It was assigned with the responsibility of investigating into the quality of English language teaching and learning. The Report which was entitled "Language for Life" emphasized the need to integrate reading and writing in all subject areas in the school curriculum and not only in the teaching of English language. The Report states that these language skills are to be taught in all the subjects areas by the subject teachers and not left as the job of the English Language teacher, hence the slogan: "Every teacher is an English teacher", (Marland, 1989).

Today, the term 'Language across the curriculum'" has become popular among educators in many parts of the world. It has led to a number of curriculum innovations in language teaching and learning, such as the following:

- The use of classroom texts in various subjects that contain exercises on language practice.
- The emphasis on collaboration between English Language teachers and teachers of other subjects.
- The production of teaching materials that integrate the goals of content area instruction and English Language goals.

The Principles of Language Across the Curriculum

Language across the curriculum (LAC) is a content-based approach (CBI). Other content-based approaches include: English for specific purposes (ESP), English for academic purposes (EAP), and English for occupational purposes (EOP). Like other content-based approaches, it is based on a number of assumptions which are listed below:

1. Language plays a key role in learning.
2. Language is a major tool for learning.
3. Language is a means of acquiring information.
4. Language use involves several skills.

Language Plays a Key Role in Learning: All the content-based approaches agreed that language plays a key role in the intellectual development of the individual. Also, language is central to all school learning. Language across the curriculum seeks to improve student's language skills, because of the central role it plays in learning. Language (both oral and written) is very essential for the enhancement of the thinking process, which in turn promotes learning in all content areas. Language across the curriculum stresses concern for how people learn to use language; how they use language to achieve understanding especially, curriculum content; and how language use influences cognitive development.

Language as a Tool for Learning: Language as a major tool for learning cuts across all content areas e.g. Science, Mathematics, Social Studies, Music and Art. Communication ability is a relevant skill in all subjects. Students need to articulate and express their ideas through oral and written language. Again, language and the thinking process are intricately interwoven. Thought processes such as planning, conceptualizing, analyzing, and synthesizing are expressed through the medium of language, because language is the medium of thought. The aim of language across the curriculum is to help children develop critical thinking abilities through listening, speaking, reading, and writing.

Language is a means of acquiring information: Language learners learn a second language more successfully, when they use it as a means of acquiring information. When students are given the opportunity to acquire information in various subject areas, through extensive practice in listening, speaking, reading, and writing, in all subjects, they acquire English language faster and also gain proper mastery of the subjects.

Language use involves several skills: Language learning requires the use of all the language skills, such as: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. If students are encouraged to listen to recorded materials in various content areas; read a variety of texts,

and write their own notes; respond orally to materials they have read or written, they will enhance their language skills and abilities.

Teaching Approach Adopted by Language Across the Curriculum

The major concerns of LAC are:

- To broaden teachers' understanding and awareness of the significant role of language as a tool through which the curriculum content of different subjects can be taught and learnt.
- To help students understand how they can use language to articulate and express their ideas through listening, speaking, reading, and writing.

To achieve the above objectives LAC adopted a teaching approach that is marked by some distinctive features, such as the following:

- Emphasis on language practice;
- Elaborate use of reading materials; and
- The integration of language skills and content instruction

Emphasis on Language Practice: The Bullock Report stipulates that “for language to play its full role as a means of learning, the teacher must create in the classroom an environment, which encourages a wide range of language uses. This entails that the teachers of all the subjects should create opportunities for students to generate and share their own ideas through listening, speaking, reading and writing activities. Also, students should be given opportunities to ask questions; discuss their ideas; listen to resource persons; take part in free speech; engage in purposeful listening, speaking, reading, and writing activities.

Elaborate use of Reading Materials: Another major aspect of the teaching approach adopted by LAC is its emphasis on the importance of a variety of reading materials. Students are encouraged to read a variety of reading materials that support content area instruction. This means that after the classroom learning activities on a topic, students are encouraged to read textbooks, trade books, newspapers, poetry, novels drama, magazines, newspapers journals, and reference books that are relevant to the topics that were discussed in the classroom. When students read a variety of materials, they are able to benefit in so many ways, such as:

- Gain background information about specific subject matters or topics;
- Gain understanding about the thinking and communication patterns employed in specific subjects;
- Gain knowledge about the writing format adopted in each subject area; and
- Gain understanding about how people in each subject area approach problems.

Beck & Dole, (1992) expressed that, elaborate use of supportive reading materials will help the students to broaden their knowledge and understanding about the topics that have been discussed in the classroom and increase their motivational levels.

The Integration of Language Skills and Content Instruction: Language across the curriculum emphasizes the integration of language skills into the classroom lessons and

topics. Language activities are built into the lessons, as the following example aptly illustrates:

Example: A Lesson that integrated language skills and content area instruction:

Subject: Social Studies

Topic: Pollution

Step 1: The teacher gives the students reading passages on the topic.

Step 2: Through guided discussion, the teacher leads them to develop relevant vocabulary, that relate to the topic.

Step 3: For a listening comprehension exercise, the teacher presents a video or audio material on the same topic to the students.

Step 4: He gives them a written assignment on the same topic that will require them to source for information from a variety of sources, consult various books, journals, reference books, newspaper, etc.

In the situation described above, all the language skills are integrated into the lesson - reading, discussion, listening and writing.

Block (1997) asserts that strengthening the connection between language skills and content area instruction can increase students' comprehension in content areas. It also gives students the opportunity to perform authentic listening, speaking, reading and writing tasks within each content discipline e.g., Mathematics, Social Studies, Basic Science and Arts. In line with the above assertion, Britton (1970) emphasizes that, schools must provide sufficient time for students to talk and write spontaneously about the ideas, values, and issues in the subject matter being studied. Through these, they will create their own interpretations and internalizations of the content.

Positive Effects of Integrating Language Skills and Content Areas Instruction

A lot of benefits arise, if the language skills are used as tools for teaching and learning other subjects. Cairney (1990), believes that strengthening the connection between language skills and content areas is a very important instructional advancement because it enables the students to see how listening, speaking, reading and writing can increase comprehension in content areas. It also enables them to learn thinking patterns used by scientists, mathematicians, artist, historians, and in other subjects.

Britton (1970) and Marland (1989) assert that this integration is necessary to improve student's achievement and urged schools to use talk, reading and writing for real life purposes. They emphasized that this approach, allows the learner to take charge of his/her own learning instead of depending solely on the teacher to bring up new ideas. They believe that if learners are encouraged to carry out a self-directed discovery and comprehension of ideas, skills and issues in content disciplines through talking and writing spontaneously about ideas, they will learn faster.

Moje, Melanre, Nicole, and Kare (2008) carried out a research on adolescent literacy and found out that students do not read widely enough outside the school. They recommended that student should read widely, a variety of materials, in various content areas, in order to improve their achievement in these subjects.

Danling and Hasen (2012) found out that students can improve their achievement in various subjects through writing. This relates to the findings of Cofield,

(2008), who stated that writing can make the learning of Mathematics personal. As a result, she recommended that writing should be an integral part of teaching Mathematics.

Conclusion

The poor performance of secondary school students in various subjects in the secondary school curriculum can be directly linked to students' inability to use the language skills effectively for academic purposes. In other words, the poor performance of students in listening, speaking, reading and writing in content areas has translated to gross failure of students in various subjects. One of the major ways to bring about the desired change and enhancement in the academic performance of secondary school students is to integrate language skills and content area instruction. As far back as 1975, the British Government, through the recommendations of the Bullock Report saw the need to integrate language skills and content area instruction. Here in Nigeria, curriculum planners, teachers, and students need to follow the British example, as this will bring about the desired improvement in the performance of students in various subjects.

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