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TOWARDS THE COMMUNICATIVE APPROACH IN THE TEACHING OF GERMAN

ABSTRACT

Over the years, so much emphasis has been on the direct, audio-visual and audio-oral teaching methods in the acquisition of foreign languages in Nigerian institutions of higher learning and particularly at the University of Nigeria Nsukka, with German as one of them. It will be of interest to us then to note that in today's world, the communicative approach in the teaching of foreign languages to non native speakers, which stresses competence in situations of communication is gaining much grounds, especially with the French, given their aggressive linguistic expansion policy. The Germans too are not left out, given the number of pedagogical materials harvested in this direction in the last few years.

This paper will therefore seek to explore the usefulness of this approach in meeting the demand of the moment as contained in the philosophy of the Department of Foreign Languages and Literatures at U.N.N, which is to produce at the end of four years in the university, those who will possess a good mastery of the languages taught and therefore express themselves appropriately therein wherever and whenever the situation arises.

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Introduction:

The contemporary situation of our world has made it imperative for all of humanity to continue to fraternize with one another through the medium of language, so that we can easily pass across information and also communicate our ideas without inhibition in this age of globalization. Although this linguistic heritage has projected itself into an indispensable constant, the truth remains that every socio-linguistic group has uniqueness different from others. In the context of our presentation, it will be made clear that some of the major world languages have succeeded in imposing their presence and are being taught in foreign lands far away from their roots, with German as our point of reference.

Basically, we will be looking at the need for a change in the method or approach towards achieving the goal of acquiring German as a modern and living language, which Feuser (1992:25), in the words of Achebe quoted in his article: "30 Years of Modern Language Teaching in Nigeria" referred to as one of "any living language which is taught in West Africa outside its country or countries of origin".

We will take into consideration the evolution of the different methods of modern languages teaching together with their strengths and limitations. This will lead to the core of our discussion which is the U.N.N situation or experience. We will also point out why it is necessary at this stage to introduce an intensive communicative approach as the method which will help realize the philosophy of the Department of Foreign Languages and Literatures in U.N.N, especially in the German unit, which is to produce at the end of four years, students who will be competent enough to communicate appropriately in German given the measure and the level of their learning experience and exposure.

Background

Because of the strategic importance of these modern languages of international communication to the developmental need of the nation, particularly in the area of opening up the national economy to the challenges encountered daily at the global level, they featured amongst the very first courses to be taught in our universities from inception as recounted by Feuser (1992). Over the years, these languages French, German, Spanish, Portuguese and Russian have been taught in Nigeria through the use of different methods that have come, one after the other, sometimes adapting them to the need of the society at a particular period. In fact, some of the methods introduced were not only very alien, since they all seem to be, but did not fit into the socio-cultural milieu of our context. Reflecting on this issue, Sonaiya (2001:199) wrote that in a bid to teach these modern languages:

> *We simply took whatever methods came to us from abroad, methods that were designed for learners with totally different cultural backgrounds and, possibly, educational objectives than our own and put them to use in our language class rooms.*

This seems to be the position of Witte (1992.30) too, who, considering the situation critically wrote that:

> *Somit wurden europäische Bildugsinhalte, -ziele und strukturen perpetuiert und ein Rekurs auf eigene innovative und productive Bildungswerte verhindert.*

The result of such a practice was that, though some measure of success was recorded in most cases, such methods never resulted in a complete integration of the languages acquired into the sub consciousness of the learners at the end of their school programme. This is because of the lack of direct contact with these foreign languages, especially here in Nigeria, with our different linguistic history from the countries where they constitute the mother tongue. Therefore, one would expect difficulties in their assimilation in situations where the learners are not opportune to go and live and experience for themselves what it takes to be saddled with situations of communication in these linguistic communities. From the aforementioned, it can be deduce therefore that for any foreign language teaching method to be seriously considered, there must be a set of goals or objectives to be attained vis-à-vis the socio-cultural milieu of the learners which serves as the receptor linguistic environment. This will obviously make for a dynamic enough method to reflect and accommodate the necessary changes, whenever the need arises.

The Various Methods Of Modern Language Teaching

Right from the inception of modern languages teaching and acquisition, it has been observed that the various methods in use today, are basically extensions, modifications or additions to the previous ones. The methods are either didactic based or take into consideration other factors like the specific need or needs of the learners and the learning and teaching situation. However, in making a case for a change to a particular method or methods, the objectives to be achieved and the situational context in which they will be applied are generally strong factors. According to curriculum planners, the change in method factor will always be motivated by the desire to reappraise the approach in use and in so doing improve the curriculum standard for those who will go through the process of acquiring the body of knowledge being offered, as well as ensure continuity by introducing a new dimension to the previous one. The overall effect of an

eventual change in method will therefore be to make the curriculum content flexible to reflect the necessary changes encountered in such a learning process. This has always been the reason why curriculum specialists of course content are quick to identify the areas that need to be improved upon in each discipline, in order to streamline the process of change into the input which invariably determines the output. It is therefore in the light of this that we will look briefly at the various methods used in the teaching and learning of these modern languages.

The very first was known as the traditional or classical method and it sought to facilitate the process of foreign languages teaching through the aspect of translation in grammar. Here, language was considered a totality of rules to be compared with the ones in the mother tongue of the learner. According to Puren (1988), the basic strength of this method was seen in its paving the way for the emergence of other methods in the future. Its shortcomings were found in what Besse (1980) described as the grammatical limitations of learners and the artificial nature of the sentences used in teaching these languages. This method experienced an internal revolution which resulted in the direct method.

The direct method on its part is historically considered the first systematic approach to the teaching of modern languages. It resulted from the need to have an appropriate medium of communication to facilitate and encourage existing socio-economic, political, cultural and touristic relations. This approach taught grammar through the observation and comparison of the forms of the languages involved and gave priority to oral expression alongside phonetics. It followed the line of the natural approach in the teaching of foreign languages by observing the process of how a child acquires its mother tongue. It envisaged a break from the past but was limited in implementation because of the over inflation of lexical items and the uncontrollable use of mother tongue structure in the foreign language.

Afterwards, the active approach gathered momentum in its presentation of a blend of the traditional and direct methods, to strike a balance, because it was no longer acceptable for a single method to be in use in foreign languages teaching. The blend eventually came in the form of an intensive repetition mode of teaching grammar and vocabulary, though later the repetition took an extensive view on the language structure.

The audio-oral / audio-visual methods will take over from the active. The former emerged during the Second World War and drew inspiration from behavioural

psychology and structural linguistics through the teaching of grammar from the point of view of syntax. For the latter, its base was in the sequence of images which translated the semantic content of the messages into the subconscious of the learners to be reproduced on demand. It was a little shift from the direct method as it explained grammar through what is implied in exercises. It also favoured the use of grammatical structures in situational contexts. The process of transpositional intuition and repetition also played major roles with the memorization and the dramatization of dialogues to enhance situations of communication in the foreign language.

A Case for the Communicative Approach

This method was conceived in France in the 70's when the situational approach to modern languages teaching was practiced in England and Chomsky's generative transformational approach was at its peak in the U.S.A. In Germany, this will be seriously enhanced through the work of "das Fernstudienangebot Germanistik, Deutsch als Fremdsprache (Daf)". With this approach, the linguistic considerations of structure, style and semantics were not the only basis for teaching and acquiring foreign languages. On the contrary, it bears a close relationship with the functional teaching of languages to diverse target groups. The choice of this approach lies in its strong consideration of the intuition of learners in generating enough responses, mostly oral, in situational context which demands expressions. In explaining this approach, Bérard (1991:17) looks at it from the point of view of not only that which will make the learner to communicate his ideas and pass across information, but also that which enhances the capacity of the learners to acquire a higher competence in communication situations in the foreign languages. She explains it thus:

> *L'approche communicative recentre l'enseignement de la langue étrangère sur la communication : il s'agit pour l'élève d'apprendre à communiquer dans la langue étrangère et donc d'acquérir une compétence de communication.*

From Berard's explanation, it is not assumed that the learner will always understand all that will be taught and reproduce same without errors, unlike the premise upon which the audio-visual and audio-oral methods are based. This is because theoretically, the communicative approach is not an end in itself but that which borrows extensively from the practice in other methods and

diversifies them to achieve the ultimate which is communication, since no single method is exhaustive in itself. Thus Berard (1991:17) still goes ahead to explain further in the following words that:

> *Par rapport aux méthodes audio-visuelles, l'approche communicative a comme particularité de divisifier les emprunts théoriques auxquelles elle a recours. Cette diversification se fait à un moment où la linguistique n'est plus dominée par un grand courant et où se développe un ensemble de discipline qui se donnent des objets de travail spécifiques : sociolinguistique, psycholinguistique, ethnographie de la communication, analyse de discours, pragmatique...*

Therefore, it can be adjudged at this stage that foreign languages like German should be taught through a process which allows the students room enough to freely express themselves and acquire oral as well as written competence in spite of the initial errors they may encounter at the beginning of the learning process. The advantage of this attitude is expatiated by Hymes (1972), in an article entitled "On Communicative Competence", with the example of a monolingual community. He exposed that those who share the same language in a given environment operate from two points of view; first and foremost they possess the requisite linguistic knowledge and secondly the sociolinguistic context necessary to see them through in situations of communication. This obviously includes the competence to manipulate the grammar and also the strategic competence of inheritance, which tends to resolve problems arising from difficulty in grammar and the ability to express the right things in situations of communication. This is the kind of atmosphere the approach tries to initiate the students into. Also in support of this approach is its consideration of language in the Saussurian sense, where language as a phenomenon serves the collective purpose of the linguistic need of a community, as well as the individual in the form of "parole" (speech). With this, learners can be freely but carefully guided from the beginning to make use of the appropriate registers in situations of communication. For instance in the verb class, this can be encouraged through what Austin (1970), referred to as "the performative verbs", that is, those that define the action they carry and also create the mental picture of what is to be named. Some examples in German, especially for beginners can be found in German verbs like "trinken", "tanzen", and "singen" as seen in these sentences:

i) Ich trinke gern Wein
ii) Er tanzt im Zimmer
iii) Erika singt in der Kirche

In the above sentences, for the Nigerian learner who already possess such background conception of the verbs to drink, to dance and to sing in his language of departure, English, it will be easy to match the action expressed in the verbs and what is named to ignite situations of communication, making use of the cognitive ability which merges the two together, since the same mental picture exits in the faculty of the learner. This will therefore enhance steady progress in the process of acquiring German. Nevertheless, it has to be stated, and clearly too, that the relationship between the intention to communicate and the realization of communication is quite a complex one. The suggestion therefore in such cases is for the learners to be initially guided towards familiar communication areas like those of the family, school and leisure, which will ordinarily excite learners, so that they can be consolidated and later moved to much more complex ones.

Application of the Approach

In this section, we will propose that this approach be applied to the UNN experience in order to achieve the twin objective of acquiring German and also achieving competence in communication which is required of those who go through the course content and duration of study of the Department of Foreign Languages and Literatures U.N.N.

First and foremost, the principal objective of the approach will be to produce in the course of student-lecturer interaction in four years an appreciable knowledge of the language content of the programme, which leads to the award of BA German and BA German / French, and also to impart skills necessary to make the students communicate appropriately wherever the need arises. This will then answer the questions of if and how the students put to good use the linguistic resources available to them during and after their stay in the university. In the UNN experience, a couple of texts are presented to the students as guides to what has been stated above. They include; "Deutsche Sprachlehre für Ausländer", "Auf Deutsch gesagt", "Deutsch 2000", "Deutsch Aktiv", "Lernziel Deutsch", "Stufen", "Themen, Themen neu". But, to a large extent, they are presented more or less from a rather foreign optic with very little

local colour or content and most of the examples or situations are linked to every day life in Germany or Europe, so much so that competence in terms of situations of communication becomes hindered, particularly with concepts that are unfamiliar like the seasons of the year in Europe and the names of food items not found in Africa. In making a case for the inclusion of local content in texts used to teach German in Africa to facilitate communication amongst the non natives, the Teachers of German in Africa during their Congress in Yaoundé Cameroon in 1989, had insisted, as narrated by Arndt Witte (1992:27), in his article "Der Deutschunterricht in Nigeria anders als anderswo" that:

> *Das sprachliche und kulturelle Referenzsystem der afrikanischen Student(in)en muß systematisch in den Deutschunterricht einbezogen werden (Kulturkontrastivität bzw. Anknüpfbarkeit)*

This means that for the students to easily communicate in German there has to be an introduction in the texts to be used, aspects of their every day experiences. This will generate the additional advantage of enhancing their quest to always interact with one another in the language both in and outside the class room, since the terrain will become a rather familiar one. In addition to this, there should also be, at all times, available pedagogical materials like good text books, magazines, video films, computers and audio cassettes, in fact a kind of multi media arrangement can be put in place, which should have a bias in the direction of self training because of the short supply of the necessary man power. The supply of power to facilitate the use of electronic gadgets should also not be overlooked.

Secondly, it will be noticed that this approach serves to remove the fear usually associated with making mistakes when learning how to communicate in a language which is not yours. Thus, the students can perform more on their own by correcting one another in the absence of the teachers, thereby bringing them to a level whereby they will try to understand the structure of German without recourse to that of English, their language of departure. The progress evaluation level can then give room for external assessment from the teacher during normal teaching hours. To elaborate more on this we will use the following example to present a typical situation with beginners.

Objective

To acquaint adult beginners with communication situations in German

Stage one

For the entire class

It presents a situation of introducing oneself. Emphasis will be on the name, place of origin, profession of parents and place of residence. This stage takes into consideration a strong local colour, so that the German to be acquired can be brought home to make the students feel relaxed during their presentations.

For non-beginners

They will consolidate the aspects of introduction which they are familiar with, and also continue with dialogues which have to do with their every day experiences (school, family, leisure, and house)

Stage two

The teacher can go ahead to introduce a topic that will ignite communication amongst the students or a recorded audio or video cassette. The idea will not be to make the learners understand every thing that will be said, but to an extent, some aspects can be understood through gesticulations and movements in the case of the audio-visuals. The overall effect will be to pave the way for an immediate and future explanation as to the pronunciation of difficult expressions and words, especially in the case of vowels that have umlauts. To the beginners, this will constitute a kind of linguistic bath aimed at clearing the air that will be helpful later towards the comprehension of the vocabulary necessary to introduce situations of communication in German, so that they can take advantage of such in expressing themselves.

In support of aforementioned, Behme (1992:10) says it is possible because: ""Ich gehe von den theorischen Prämissen aus, daß Sprechen als Handeln zu verstehen ist". With such as background, comprehension in communication situations can progress from the individual to situations of two, then three and thereafter the class can be divided into little dialogue groups to facilitate the process amongst the students. This will help the students to apply correctly the rules grammar which the teacher explains at the beginning of each new lesson. The implication is that the rules will be properly internalised as they practise them in speech with one another paving the way for a better usage in the future.

At this stage, it will just be stating the obvious to say that the implementation of this approach is learner oriented and friendly, and that its inclusion in the method already in use in our Department in Nsukka can only be made possible

through the input of curriculum planners in their elaboration of the course content to accommodate it. Here curriculum is taken to be what Brubacher (1961:155) considers the "grounds which pupils and teachers cover in order to reach a goal or objective of education"

In the University of Nigeria Nsukka where the current curriculum of modern languages teaching is under review, our findings have shown that the reason behind the move, is the need for a practical communicative approach, that will lead the students to a higher competence in communication in the languages they are studying. This is because, such a method has the tendency of aligning itself with the accumulative cyclic teaching technique, which encourages to a large extent, both linguistic and communication competence to achieve the purpose of language acquisition.

Conclusion

In view of the reasons advanced to support the use of the communicative approach in language teaching and acquisition, we will suggest that it should be given priority in future curriculum planning. This is because there are examples of its application which have produced the desired effect of propelling not only introvert students but also others, to a good command of the language in situations of communication. Going by our findings in recent years on the performance of students of French in the Department of Foreign Languages UNN before and after their participation in the year abroad programme at the Nigerian French Language Village in Badagry, the result shows that a greater percentage of them start to communicate and also perform better in situations of communication after the immersion package, otherwise known as the "Year Abroad Programme". In the French Village, the communicative approach serves as the method of teaching and acquisition of French. The stress areas are the oral and written communication aspects, particularly as the students all stay together within the confines of the village. The situation becomes more disturbing for those studying German, now that they can no longer go to Germany for the mandatory third "year abroad programme". This means that students who are undertaking the combined honours programme in French and German may not have the expected communicative competence in the languages after four years of study in the university. The result has always spoken for itself in terms of an overall low output when it comes to the quality of those who eventually graduate. To further complicate issues, the situation of the

year abroad programme at the Goethe Institute Lagos where the students leave apart with great distances from one another is everything but an advantage. Such a situation does not encourage the normal student interaction sessions observed after lecture hours. This therefore speaks volumes in favour of the communicative approach in the teaching of German in our institutions of higher learning and particularly at UNN, because it is an idea whose time has come.

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