

Using Traditional Tales to Teach English Composition: The Curriculum Recycle Paradigm

Abstract

The neglect of learners' language experience, especially those they acquired from the mother tongue environments, presents serious impediment to their attainment of required level of proficiency in English as a second language. This shortcoming is most emphasized in the composing/writing ability of the students, where there are often complaints about the shallowness of content/ideas in the texts produced. The study therefore determined the effect of the use folktales in teaching composition writing on students' attitude to and achievement in composition in English. The result indicated that folktales are highly effective in enhancing students' ability to generate ideas and even the linguistic structures required by the writing task. Teaching techniques that make use of students' prior language experience could serve as good alternatives to the conventional method of teaching composition and are therefore highly recommended.

Introduction

The continual decline in the level of competence and usage in English Language at various educational levels has been a major source of concern to almost all the stakeholders in education. Many scholars, (Brandt, 1966; Banjo, 1969; Adesanoye, 1978; right & Macgregor, 1978; Ubahakwe, 1979; 1991; Gbenedio, 1984; Obemeata, 1995; Kolawole, 1998 and Ayodele, 2001) have variously drawn attention to this. Results published by the West African Examinations Council (WAEC) annually offer a dismal picture of students' performance in English. In 1997 and 1998, WAEC observed that the performance of candidates in English have been steadily deteriorating and extremely disappointing (The WAEC Chief Examiners' Reports, 1997/98). This was also echoed by Omodiaogbe, 1992 and Kolawole, 1998. Ayodele (2001) concluded that the percentage of Nigerian candidates ending up with good passes in the examination in English Language is lower than what obtains in other West African countries. This disturbing trend is illustrated in the performance statistics provided in Table 1.

Table 1: Performance of Nigerian Students in English, May/June SSCE (1997-2001)

YEAR	TOTAL SAT	CREDIT (A1-C6)	PASS (P7-P8)	FAIL F9	ABSENT
1997	618,139	40,488 (6.5%)	165,533 (26.8%)	412,118 (66.7%)	4,294 (0.7%)
1998	636,777	53,990 (8.5%)	136,873 (21.5%)	417,312 (65.5%)	3,849 (0.6%)
1999	752,233	73,531 (9.7%)	171,098 (22.6%)	471,593 (64.9%)	3,827 (0.5%)
2000	784,129	84,932 (9.8%)	172,158 (21.4%)	523,117 (65.9%)	3,922 (0.6%)
2001	1,025,027	267,251 (26.07%)	316,767 (30.9%)	441,009 (43.02%)	15,074 (1.45%)

Research findings and suggestions on ways of improving English language teaching and learning, and invariably performances, have followed this concern which yielded little or no encouraging result. The cause for concern therefore is that, in spite of the tremendous efforts made to improve the quality of English teaching in schools, things have not improved even in one area of English language usage, let alone all other aspects of language skills. Omodiaogbe (1992) identifies this situation as a 'crisis' in English usage in Nigeria.

A close examination of students' failure in English has shown a gross deficiency in composition writing. Kolawole (1998) observed that the mass failure in English has its roots in failures in composition, which accounted for a substantial allocation of marks (forty-two percent of the total marks obtainable in the paper). Given this status, Ayodele (1988) described the composition aspect as the paper that often makes or mars the students' results in English. Composition tests are designed to test the candidates' ability to use English as an effective means of communication in a given situation; that is, the ability to express oneself with clarity and coherence, in a manner appropriate to the audience, purpose, topic and situation (WAEC, 1998). It therefore brings into play a variety of skills and aspects with which students are expected to communicate effectively. Adegbite (1996) also attested that writing is the ultimate of all language skills and is a skill that determines the future of a candidate in the final examination.

However, writing is more than an examination-oriented skill. The ability to communicate in writing is an important part of day-to-day life and is absolutely critical to many professions (Glover, Ronning and Brunning, 1990). Wal'she (1981) emphasized that writing, apart from being central to the school learning process, is also significant in the social and personal life of the individual, and indispensable in many ways to modern society. Also in line with this view are Emig (1978), Graves (1981) and Obi-Okoye (1989) who described writing as the most powerful instrument for learning. Based on this importance, Rivers (1968, cited in Ajayi (1990)) emphasized the point that writing

should take precedence over all other language skills because students need it to lay the foundation for future academic pursuits.

Composition, therefore, involves a good grasp and knowledge of basic language skills which many students lack. The West African Examinations Council (WAEC) in 1997 and 1998 reported that, though the essay topics given to candidates were well within the experience of average students, candidates' performance was extremely disappointing. They also reported that the types of mistakes encountered in the scripts make one wonder whether the schools gave their students any preparation at all. Such mistakes include the inability to express ideas correctly, immature vocabulary and use of words out-of-context. Others include poor spelling, bad grammar and wrong punctuation. Ezeokoli (1999) noted that the learners' poor conception of composition writing skills manifests in the construction of random sentences, which hinder the development of coherent thoughts and ideas; hence the sentences presented though sometimes grammatical, often lack co-ordination and coherence. Ekong (1999) similarly argued that students' poor writing performance results from the basic problem with the content of their composition, which does not enhance the logical organization of thoughts and development of ideas. Tomori (1971; quoted in Lasisi (1990)) also identified lack of coherence as a major learners' problem. According to him, the language of students' composition is halting and uninspiring, not only because linguistic ability is lacking, but also because poverty of ideas has a further adverse effect on the linguistic ability which in any case is not good enough. Other studies such as Odejide (1980), Oden (1998), Okereke (1992), and Iyagba (1993) agreed with the argument about candidates' lack of composing skills in English. With this inadequacy, composition is considered more problematic to students than summary and comprehension (Okolo, 1990; Ezeokoli, 1999).

Available literature tends to blame students' poor writing skill on ineffective mode of teaching composition (D' Angelo, 1981; Adesanoye, 1990; Kolawole, 1991). According to Weaver (1988), the traditional teaching methods obviously have failed many students with the consequent increase in dropout and illiteracy rates. Compositions are taught without any theoretical basis since most teachers, according to Scully (1974), lack a good grasp of the basic writing skills themselves. Against this background, Ajayi (1990:32) queried:

Do we expect the bunch of the incompetent teachers to make conscious decision on the appropriate types of essay topics, text, enrichment materials, choice of audience and relevant exercises that will be of practical values and sources of sustaining pupils' interests?

Oden (1998) also noted that the curricula in composition are not organized around the most fundamental principles of the discipline that could make them meaningful. William (1990) argued that teaching could be a hit-and-miss affair if it is not guided by clear-cut principles underlying its content and method. The fundamental principle is the

recognition of the peculiar nature of English in Nigeria in the choice of methodology of teaching. Allen (1984: 63), along this line of thinking, observed that:

Where English is serving as lingua franca or second language, course materials for use need be firmly rooted in the culture and traditions of the country where the teaching is to take place. English can be presented realistically and naturally in its role as second language in use for a variety of purposes within the learner's own country. This has the advantage that learners can see the direct relevance of English to their daily lives and future prospects, with all that it entails in terms of positive motivation

Such realistic and natural teaching, according to Williams (1990), include the awareness of the problems faced by students who are required to express themselves in a language that is not native to them. Allen (1984) further recommended that our teaching must have at its base a consideration of what our students need to learn, that is, what they will do with English on completing their course. This involves teachers looking beyond the confines of the classrooms into the outer world and focusing their attention on the use individuals would make of what they have learned in a situation that is not primarily a formal learning context.

Communicative competence, as the ultimate goal of any worthwhile language-teaching programme (Widdowson, 1978; Lawal, 1989; Adeosun, 1998), entails the need for integration in language teaching. This could be emphasized in the proper connection between the rather isolated skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing to lead to effective language communication (Williams, 1990). Again, language learning should be made natural by relating language teaching to other subjects in the curriculum as well as the linguistic and the socio-cultural background of the learners (Weaver, 1990; Ubahakwe, 1999). This study therefore responds to the need to teach language through holistic, integrated strategy. It specifically tries to show how folktales could be employed as enrichment materials in teaching composition.

The Problem

Given the persistent decline in senior secondary school students' performance in English and despite the several measures taken to improve the situation, the study attempted to determine the relative effect of prior language experience on students' achievement in and attitude to composition.

Theoretical Framework

Williams (1990) observed that in the classroom where students speak several different mother tongues, the teaching of second language becomes complicated, hence the learners' linguistic experience as well as their socio-cultural background needs consideration in selecting the content and context of language teaching. Brisk (1998)

noted that students in English as a Second Language (ESL) classrooms manipulate more than one language and are influenced by more than one culture and that their experiences in these languages and cultures influence their learning. Allen (1993) also asserted that where English serves as lingua franca or second language, course materials should be firmly rooted in the culture and traditions of the community where the teaching takes place. Freeman & Freeman (1992) posited that since second language learners of English bring a rich and varied background of experiences and talents to the classroom, teachers should find a way of using students' knowledge, including their first language and culture, to promote the second language acquisition. Also, Harste, Short & Burke (1998) opined that learning is always a process of connecting our current experiences to our past ones. The more we know and explore our past experiences, the greater our potential exists for making richer and more complex ties with our current experiences which in turn enhance learning.

These positions are packaged into Curriculum Recycle Theory (CRT), which emphasized the recycling and processing of the children's imaginative and creative talents acquired informally from their environments into the formal school curriculum. The underlying assumption of the theory is that the goal of the education process is to optimize the learners' affective, cognitive and psychomotor talents appropriate to a given learning situation and to develop the capacity to apply and utilize what has been so learnt in a new situation (Ubahakwe 1999; Ohia & Ogunbiyi 1999). It then posits that creative learning is optimized in formal learning situations under two conditions:

- (1) The learning item is presented by utilizing the inputs of the learner, the society, the environment and the school.
- (2) The learning process begins from the position of the learner and incorporates inputs of the society, the environment and the school in that order and ends with the learner.

According to Ubahakwe (1988; 1991; 1990), creative learning is optimized in a formal situation when the learning process integrates the inputs of the learner, the society, and the environment in a sustained harmonious relationship such that the learner is the starting and end-points in the learning experience. It further posits that any displacement in the integrated harmonious relationship of the components in the learning process gives rise to educational maladies like interrupted creativity, rote learning, boredom learning, unproductive learning, higher illiteracy syndrome and cumulative cognitive deficit syndrome. The theory thus provides a framework which integrates the needs of the learner, society, environment and school in such a way as to ensure continuity and change in the education process of maximizing the human, social and environment material resource potentials. Continuity and change are emphasized because the present knowledge and skills are built on past experiences just as the present constitutes the foundation for the future and because growth in any form or context is dependent on flexibility, sensibility and adaptability to a given environment (Ubahakwe 1991).

CRT originated from the observation that in the African environment, children of pre-school and primary school age are creative in their use of language and inventive in the way they convert discarded tins, cans, bicycle tyres, wheels and package containers into functional toys. Also, in the process of first language acquisition children pick up songs, rhymes, folktales, which are used as basis for creating further songs and stories. This imagination tends to disappear somewhere along the line in the formal educational system (Ubahakwe, 1999). Smith (1982) and Goodman (1986) pointed out that learning seems easy outside of school but difficult in school. In relation to writing, Graves (1983) captured this scene:

Before they (children) went to school, they marked up walls, pavements, and newspapers with crayon, chalk... anything that makes mark. The child's marks say, '**I am**' No, **you aren't**, says most school approaches to the teaching of writing. We ignore the child's urge to show what he knows. We underestimate the urge because of lack of understanding of the writing process and what the child does in order to control it. Instead we take the control away...and place unnecessary blocks in the way of their intention. (p. 3)

This observation agreed with CRT hypothesis that there is something in the formal school system that interferes with the creative talent the child manifested earlier in life. CRT then argues that it is possible to rekindle the child's imaginative and creative talents through a 3-step process:

- (1) Identification and isolation of the learner's creative potentials.
- (2) Re-aligning the critical components of the curriculum to suit learner's creative potentials.
- (3) Recycling the traits and the newly processed curriculum to the learner.

One possible way this can be done in language learning is to transform traditional tales into modern ones to connect reading and writing (Ohia & Ogunbiyi 1999) and enhance students' writing abilities. The traditional tales are in the process regarded as the students' prior experience derived from their linguistic and socio-cultural environment.

Sipe (1993) experimented with this concept of transformation using stories that are based on old models. This is done through what he tagged parallel, deconstructed or extended versions of the original tales, or through illustrations. According to him, the goal of such transformations is to enable the students develop literary insights and re-experience the fascination of the traditional stories while also enjoying the humour and creativity in the transformations. Also to develop fluency and skill in writing through brainstorming, small and whole groups writing process from talk to first draft, to revision, editing and publishing. These efforts, borrowing from the words of Hansen (1987), are meant to enable students read like writers and write like readers, thus making the reading-writing connection. Such connection is achieved because, according to Sipe (1993), children love to revisit and re-experience favourites from their childhood, and because

the old fairytales and folktales lived again in their imaginations. With these demonstrations, CRT emphasizes learning process that is learner-centered, practical and activity-oriented, self-propelling, environmentally sensitive and contextualized, and balances the cognitive, affective and psychomotor attributes.

Curriculum Recycle Theory is related to Schema theory which lays out a picture of how people organize the amount of background knowledge that they accumulate about the world. Such knowledge is organized into mental units called “schemas” and new information is processed according to how it fits into existing schemas. According to Armbruster (1996), the most important implication of Schema theory is the role of culture and experience in creating an individual’s knowledge. For learners to effectively process information, their existing schemas related to the new content needed to be activated; therefore, educators must pay attention to the cultural references in the materials they present to students and avoid potential cultural bias.

Use of Folktales in Composition Writing

The African intellectual heritage is made known primarily through oral traditions. As there were no written records of the ancient past of the people, all that has been preserved in their philosophies are verbally rendered from generation to generation through myths, folktales, songs, proverbs and riddles. The aim of these oral traditions is to enable generations to imbibe what is good about life, hence moral values are often exalted through these renditions. Africans believe very much in hard work, but as “all work and no play makes Jack a dull boy,” the people devise means of making themselves feel relaxed after a hard day’s work. In the evenings, especially at moonlight, they gather together to share stories and experience, riddles and songs among themselves. The cultural and physical content of such tale is often related to the basic human values that the tale may attempt to state, justify or recommend. Such values are part of the cultural traits that influence people’s behaviour and form the basis upon which their individual personality and group interests are built. Ogunjimi and Na’Allah (1991) summarized the following as significant functions of folktales and other oral literature:

- (1) They foster man’s understanding of his universe and the conduct of his existence.
- (2) They give historical accounts of the past together with the remarkable performances of the ancestors from one generation to another.
- (3) They enhance spirit of cultural and historical continuity.

Also, according to Ajayi (1995), the aesthetic potentials of folktales lie in their performance and use of language in that they employ lofty and impressive language, which makes them interesting and pleasant to listen to. The language employed is often richer in structure and meaning than the day-to-day language usage. It enhances the listeners’ ability in composing and is used as source material in modern literature. Also, apart from epigrams and proverbs, the themes in folktales are often related to

contemporary socio-political issues which can be a good source of composing ideas. The mode of performance and narration also encourages communal and co-operative learning that is often advocated nowadays in language learning. One can therefore conclude that with these attributes, folktale performance enhances language development.

In relation to composition writing, Singer (1976) posits that the development of the skill of essay writing has always taken storytelling at its point of departure, storytelling being the basis of any powers of written expression. According to him, what children see as writing should be drawn from their own immediate world, one of which is listening to and sharing stories as one finds in the traditional African setting. Wiseman (1979) observes that high school students have not forgotten the stories they loved to listen to or read as children and are not too far removed from childhood experiences. Second-language learners of English bring a rich and varied background of experiences and talents to the classroom; hence teachers should find ways to use these in promoting language learning.

Methodology

Hypothesis

The following two-in-one hypothesis was formulated for the investigation:

There is no significant difference in the achievement in and attitude to composition of students who are taught using folktales and those who are not.

Research Design

The study adopted a pre-test, post-test, control group quasi-experimental design. It employed a 4 x 2 x 2 factorial matrix in analyzing data.

Selection of Subjects

The subjects for the study consisted of two hundred and ten (210) senior secondary II students drawn from four secondary schools in Ifako-Ijaye local government area of Lagos State. The schools were purposively selected based on the following criteria:

- (a) They devote the same number of periods to composition (two periods per week).
- (b) Their teachers have B.ED in English or B.A. English with PGD in education with at least five years of teaching experience handling the English classes.
- (c) They have presented candidates for senior secondary certificate examination for minimum of ten years.

Research Instruments

Two response instruments were used: English Composition Achievements Test (ECAT) and English Composition Attitude Questionnaire (ECAQ). Instructional Guides

constituted the stimulus instruments. The mode of construction and validation of each treatment is discussed below:

English Composition Achievement Test was designed to measure the attainment level of students in composition before and after the treatment. It consisted of four essay topics of SSCE standard, which was presented to experts in English Language curriculum for face and content validity. The reliability coefficient was established using test-retest method and was found to be 0.8. English Composition Attitude Questionnaire comprises a 33-item Likert (four-point) attitude scale, consisting of Strongly Agree (SA) Agree (A) Disagree (D) and Strongly Disagree (DS); graded on points ranging from 4, 3, 2, to 1 respectively for positive statements while the reverse was the case for negative statements. It was validated using Cronbach Coefficient and the alpha value was found to be 0.78.

Procedure

The study lasted twelve weeks; two weeks for training of research assistants, one week for administering pre-test and questionnaires, eight weeks for treatment and the last week for post-tests. The researchers visited the school/classes during each treatment session to ensure that the teachers complied with the instructions given in the manuals. Specifically, the procedure for each treatment is summarized below:

Experimental Group: Prior Language Experience Based Instrumental Strategy (PLEBIS).

1. The teacher states the learning objectives and explains the concept of the study.
2. The teacher rearranges the classroom to recreate the traditional storytelling environment and to facilitate interaction among the students.
3. The class shares story ideas, encouraging the students to narrate at least five stories per lesson.
4. The class chooses a common theme, and each student is asked to write about it (i.e. concluding a particular story, write about a character in a particular story, give a different conclusion to an otherwise concluded story write another story, etc).
5. The teacher monitors class discussions and provides assistance and clarification when needed. He or she also gives writing assignments.

Control Group: Conventional Strategy

1. The teacher writes the topic on the board and explains it to the students.
2. He/she asks questions from the students about the topic and uses this to develop an outline.
3. He/she asks students to write a composition based on the outline given.
4. Students submit their composition for marking.

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using Analysis of Covariance (ANCOVA) at $P < 0.05$ level of significance in order to observe the post-experimental differences in the writing achievement and attitude of the subjects in the experimental and control groups.

Results

The effects of treatment on students' achievement in and attitude to composition were determined through analysis of covariance (ANCOVA). The results are presented in tables 2 and 3.

Table 2: Analysis of Covariance of Subjects' Posttest Achievement Scores According to Mode of Instruction

Source of variation	Sum of squares	DF	Mean Squares	F	Sig. of F.
Covariance PRE-ECAT	19356.554	1	19356.554	917.039	.000
Main effect TRT	2932.031 2931.379	5 3	586.406 977.126	27.782 46.292	.000 .000*
Explained	22544.200	16	1409.012	66.754	.000
Residual	4073.781	193	21.108		
Total	26617.981	209	127.359		

*Significant at $P < 0.05$

Table 2 shows a significant main effect of treatment on students' mean achievement scores ($F_{(3,209)} = 46.292$, $P < 0.05$). Simply put, the use of Prior Language Experience Based Instructional Strategy was found to have contributed significantly to the higher achievement scores of the subjects.

Table 3: Analysis of Covariance on Subjects' Posttest Attitude Scores According to Mode of Instruction

Source of variation	Sum of squares	DF	Mean Squares	F	Sig. of F.
Covariance PRE-ECAT	1434.127	1	1434.127	16.234	.000
Main effect TRT	83.034 37.353	5 3	16.607 12.451	.188 .141	.967 .935
Explained	1888.115	16	118.007	1.338	179
Residual	17049.866	193	88.341		
Total	18937.981	209	90.612		

The summary of ANCOVA as shown in Table 3 above indicates that Treatment was found to have no significant effect on subjects' mean attitude scores ($F_{(3,209)} = .141$, $P > 0.05$).

Discussion

The results indicate the use of prior language experience; in this case the use of folktales, in the teaching of composition has brought about significant higher achievement post-test scores among the students. Oxford et al (1993) and Thompson (1993) noted that the use of appropriate language learning strategies often result in improved proficiency or achievement. The result is a positive indication that when learning is based on what learners' already know (prior experience), it facilitates the learning of new materials and by so doing enhances performance. Through the use of folktales, the learners are operating within a familiar territory. There was an active involvement of the students; as the curriculum content as well as the classroom management and arrangement was taken from their linguistic and social backgrounds, learning was as natural as possible. This finding agrees with Tudor's (1993) observation that learning is often smooth when there is interaction between a given teaching method and the socio-cultural context of learning. Other researches (Campos & Keatinge, 1988; Cummins, 1989; Willig, 1985) also discovered that the extent to which students' language and culture are incorporated into the school programme is significantly related to students' academic success. In programmes which students' first language skills are strongly reinforced, students tend to be more successful (Cummins, 1984). Brooks and Grundy (1990) also observed that writing outside the classroom is often casual and relaxed, as writers do not strain to produce a perfect final product; hence it is crucial to build an atmosphere that considers writing to be an ordinary task. According to Johan (1989), involvement in meaningful and communicative use of language is central to the development of oral and written language skills for second language learners. Through conversations and discussions in class with both teachers and other students, learners develop their English language skills as they broaden their knowledge and understanding of the subject matter (Brisk & Harrington 2000). The conventional way of teaching composition by imposing unfamiliar topics on the learners make them dread composition, a situation that leads to poor achievement. On the contrary, the use of folktales makes composition an interesting and worthwhile experience. The love for narration/storytelling naturally arouses the students' interests. It also provides them with ideas and necessary linguistic structures demanded by composition.

Students' attitudes were not significantly affected by the instructional strategies. This may be due to the short period of the whole instruction as, since, according to Mansaray (1991), attitudes change over a long period of time. Also, according Gardner and Lambert (1979) and Grosjean (1982) attitude towards a language will determine to a large extent how well the students would perform in such language. Besides, for an individual to truly learn a language, he/she must identify with the speakers of the language, find the learning situation to be rewarding, and must be motivated (Gardner, 1985). Attitude towards English has been observed to be very low (Sandra, 1982) and before one can expect attitude to specific areas of English to be positive, there is the need

for one to critically address the issue of general attitude to English Language. It is for this reason that Obemeata (1995) contends that the utilitarian purpose of English has not been fully accepted.

Conclusion

Based on the results of the study and the discussions, the following conclusions were drawn:

- (1) The use of folktales in composition writing process was more effective than the conventional methods;
- (2) The rigidity associated with the conventional approach renders it ineffective in the teaching of composition in English as a Second Language (ESL) situations;
- (3) Teachers should utilize the abundant linguistic resources contained in folktales and other forms of traditional oral literature to enhance the teaching and learning of composition.

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