

Communicative Approach in Developing the Oral Communicative Ability of Igbo L₂ Learners at The Upper Basic Level in Ebonyi State, Nigeria

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ABSTRACT: *It has been observed that Igbo L₂ curriculum has not been promoting the major objective assigned to it, namely, to inculcate in Igbo L₂ learners' communicative competence in Igbo language. This study investigated the effectiveness of communicative approach on oral communicative ability of Igbo L₂ learners at the upper Basic level. The quasi-experimental research design involving non-randomized experimental research design. Two research questions and one null hypothesis guided the study. The sample for the study consisted of ninety (90) Jss II Igbo L₂ learners drawn from two intact classes in Ebonyi Local Government Area of Ebonyi State. Igbo L₂ learners were taught for six weeks (6) using the communicative approach. Mean and standard deviation were used to answer the research questions while t-test statistics was used to test the null hypothesis at 0.05 level of significance. The results revealed that L₂ Igbo learners taught with communicative approach achieved higher in their communicative ability than those taught with conventional method. The study, therefore recommends that teachers of Igbo as a second language should adopt a communicative approach in teaching. They should combine dialogue, games, contests, role play and songs so as to motivate learners and make their lessons very interesting.*

KEY WORDS: L₂ learners, communicative approach, Upper Basic level, Igbo language.

INTRODUCTION

It has been observed that the Igbo L₂ curriculum has not been promoting the major objective assigned to it, namely, to inculcate in the Igbo L₂ learners communicative competence in Igbo language. Classroom observations by the researchers showed that Igbo L₂ learners could not communicate in Igbo even when they were in their final class at the Upper Basic level. Similarly, Ohiri -Aniche (2008) observed that many children were no longer competent in their indigenous

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languages but often replied in English when spoken to in an indigenous language. Also, Nwigwe's (2000) findings show that this inability of Igbo learners to express themselves in Igbo was as a result of teachers instructing with difficult learning materials which did not provide opportunity for genuine communication among the Igbo L₂ learners, nor were they relevant to the needs, interest and aspirations of Igbo L₂ learners. In an attempt to seek for solution to this problem, Nwigwe (2008) developed and validated a communicative learning material that stresses communicative competence in methods, contents and sequence. Based on the recommendations of that study, the present work aims to find out the problem areas in Igbo for the L₂ learners and suggest how to improve on their oral communicative ability.

Communicative language Teaching methodology (CLT): Communicative language teaching has been an influential approach for decades now. The term “communicative” carries an obvious ring of the truth; we learn to communicate by communicating (Larsen-freeman, 2002). The fundamental intuition behind this approach is far from new. In the 4th century B.C, Aristotle, the great philosopher, wrote: “what we learn to do, we learn by doing”.

The beginning of the 1970's saw a shift towards teaching methods that emphasized communication. Initially, this was largely a matter of redefining what the students had to learn in terms of communicative competence rather than linguistic competence: ability to use the language appropriately rather than the knowledge of grammatical rules implied in the academic style or the ‘habits’ of the audio-lingual. Recently, communication is often seen more in the terms of the process that people use to carry out specific tasks that students use in the classroom. The goal of communicative language teaching is in getting students to interact with other people in the second language. Communicative language teaching make use of the real life situations that necessitate communication. The teacher set up a situation that students are likely to encounter in real life. The real life simulation changes from day to day. Students s' motivation to learn comes from their desire to communicate in meaningful ways about meaningful topics (cook, 1996; cargo, 1992).

Berns (2006), an expert in communicative language teaching, writes in explaining the view that, language is interaction; it is interpersonal activity and has a clear relationship with society”. In this light, language study has to look at the use (function) of the language in context, both its linguistic context (what is uttered before and after a given piece of discourse), and its social, or situational context (who is speaking, what their social rules are, and why they have come together to speak)”. Underwood (2000) described communicative methodology as emphasizing fluency before accuracy. It consists of several methods of teaching through together under the term communicative language teaching which include meaning rather than mechanical practice, priority of listening and speaking, exclusive use of the target language, implicit rather than explicit grammar, modelling instead of correction and creation of a low anxiety classroom. According to Underwood, more effective communicative language learning occurs if emphasis is placed immediately on getting one's meaning across rather than on grammaticalness and appropriateness of one's utterances.

Principles of communicative language Teaching method:

- (1) Teaching is learner-centered and responsive to learner's needs and interests.
- (2) The target language (Igbo) is acquired through interactive communicative use that encourages the negotiation of meaning.
- (3) Genuinely meaningful language use is emphasized along with unpredictability, risk taking, and choice making.
- (4) There is exposure to examples of authentic language from the target language community.
- (5) The formal properties of language are never treated in isolation from use; language forms are always addressed with communicative context.
- (6) Learners are encouraged to discover the forms and structures of language for themselves.
- (7) There is a whole-language approach in which the four traditional language skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing) are integrated.

Communicative language activities

In selecting activities for L₂ Igbo learners, Nwigwe (2008) advises that those activities should be within the L₂ learners' experiences. Their needs and interests should also be taken into consideration. According to Lindfors (1990), to plan communication for learners without their active participation and without reference to their interest and concern is to miss the whole point. Thus, activities must be meaningful and purposeful and so must the communication the learners are engaged in. Nwigwe maintains that during the initial stages of language development learners often have the desire to communicate but do not have the necessary skills. So by having a repertoire of ways to be communicative they will be able to communicate. The following are some of the activities which can be used; songs, picture description, poetry reading, dialogue, dramatization, discussion, games and contests.

Teachers' and students' Roles in the communicative classroom:

Teachers in communicative classroom will find themselves talking less and listening more, becoming active facilitators of their students' learning (Larsen-freeman, 2002). The teacher sets up the exercise, but because the students' performance is the goal, the teacher must step back and observe, sometimes acting as a referee or monitor. A classroom during communicative activity is far from quiet. The students do most of the speaking, and frequently the scene of a classroom during a communicative exercise is active with students leaving their seats to complete a task because of the increased responsibility to participate, students may find they gain confidence in using the target language in general. Teachers should serve as a source of guidance and help without unnecessary intervention, as a coordinator of activities and a classroom manager and as a co-communicator. The teacher should sometimes serves as an instructor and should monitor learner's strengths and weaknesses while using the latter as signs of learning needs to be catered for later.

Purpose of the study

The aim of the study was to determine the effectiveness of communicative approach in oral communicative ability of Igbo L₂ learners. Specifically, the study determined:

1. The pre-test means scores of L₂ Igbo learners in the experimental and the control group.
2. The pre-test and post-test mean scores of L₂ Igbo learners taught with communicative approach and those taught with conventional method

Research questions:

1. What are the comparative pre-test mean scores of L₂ Igbo learners in the experimental and control group?
2. What is the pre-test and post-test mean scores of L₂ Igbo learners taught with communicative approach and those taught with conventional method?

Hypothesis

HO₁: There is no significant difference between the pre-test and post-test mean scores of L₂ Igbo learners taught with communicative approach and those taught with conventional method.

Theoretical framework:

This action research is based on Krashen's Monitor Hypothesis cited in Nwigwe (2008). Krashen, an influential supporter of the innatist position, asserts that second language acquisition can occur by either consciously focusing on language, thus, a 'learning approach' or by being exposed to language, without a conscious attention to form, namely by an "acquisition process". In Krashen's view, acquired knowledge serves as the major source of initiating both the comprehension and production of utterances (Ellis, 1997). Krashen's hypothesis was taken into consideration during this action research: communicative activities could induce learners to adopt a more unconscious approach to language learning and therefore, account for more natural and fluent communication skills.

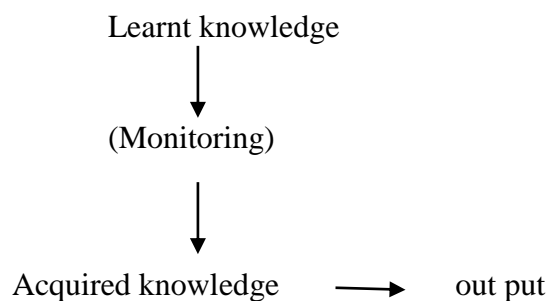


Fig I: Monitor Hypothesis (Krashen, 1981)

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The major research design adopted for this study was quasi-experimental research which involves using a non-randomized pre-test and post-test control group design. Two classes selected from two schools formed the sample for the study. A total of ninety (90) L₂ Igbo learners were involved using intact classes. Two research instruments- researcher-made tests were designed and administered as pre and posttests. The tests were taken from those developed and validated by Nwigwe (2008). The purpose of the pre-test was to find out the problem areas in Igbo for L₂ Igbo learners, while, the post-test concentrated on their communicative ability (achievement).

The experimental session was dedicated to the introduction and implementation of the communicative activities (picture description, games/ contest, role play, Igbo songs and dialogue to the experimental group, whereas the control group was taught with conventional method by the regular class teacher.

At the end of the experimental session, both groups were tested on actual communicative ability in Igbo language. According to weir (1992) language testing procedures have certainly moved beyond grammar testing.

The study lasted for eight (8) weeks. The first week was used to administer the pre-test measure on both the experimental and the control groups. Next, the experimental group was exposed to treatment session (communicative activities), while the learners in the control group were taught without communicative activities (conventional method). Both groups were subjected to post-test measure immediately after the treatment. Mean score and standard deviation were used to answer the research questions, while the null hypothesis was tested with t-test statistics at 0.05 level of significance.

RESULTS

Research Question I

What are comparative pre-test mean scores of L₂ Igbo learners in the experimental and the control groups?

Table I: pre-test mean scores for Experimental and control groups.

Group	N	Mean X	SD	df	t-ca.	t-crit.	Remark
Experimental	45	3.39	0.82				
Control	45	3.35	0.80	88	0.72	1.96	ns

Table I shows the mean achievement scores of the pre-test for experimental and the control group as 3.39 and 3.35 respectively, resulting to a mean difference of 0.4. The result is not significant. This shows that experimental and the control groups were equivalent before the treatment.

Research Question 2

What is the pre-test and post-test mean achievement scores of L₂ Igbo learners taught with communicative approach and those taught with conventional method?

Table 2: pre-test and post-test achievement scores of Experimental and control Groups:

Group	N	Pre-test		Post-test		Mean Gain scores	Remark
		X ¹	SD ¹	X ²	SD ²		
Experimental	45	3.39	0.82	5.40	0.80	2.01	
Control	45	3.35	0.80	3.20	0.81	-0.15	

Table 2 revealed that experimental group had a mean gain of 2.01 and the control group had a mean loss of -0.15. The result suggests that the use of communicative approach for L₂ learners is more effective than the conventional method.

Table 3: t-test comparison of the achievement scores of pre-test and post-test of Experimental and control Groups:

Group	N	Pre-test		Post-test		Df.	t-cal	t-crit	sig
		X ¹	SD ¹	X ²	SD ²				
Experimental	45	3.39	0.82	5.40	0.80				
Control	45	3.35	0.80	3.20	0.81	88	23.2	1.96	S*

calculated is greater than the t- critical (23.2>1.96) = significant at P>0.05.

The result of the t-test in the table 3 showed that t-calculated (23.2) was greater than the t-critical at 1.96 at 0.05 level of significance. Hence, the null hypothesis is therefore not accepted, meaning that there is a significant difference between the mean achievement scores of the experimental and the control group.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

Before the treatment, the experimental and the control group were equivalent in their achievement of Igbo L₂ in the areas tested, as the difference between the pre-test measures obtained from both groups was not found to be statistically significant. From the results, the findings of research question two showed that L₂ Igbo learners who were taught with communicative approach

Publication of the European Centre for Research Training and Development-UK performed better than their counter part in the control group taught with conventional method. The t- test analysis showed improvement in oral communicative ability of L₂ Igbo learners in the experimental group because of the use of communicative approach. It is clear that the use of communicative approach has enhanced the oral communicative ability of Igbo L₂ learners resulting in higher gain scores by the learners. The interpretation of this is that the communicative activities used during the treatment session had a differential effect L₂ Igbo learners. The finding agrees with Ugonna (2020) who found that the communicative ability of second language learners is possible if the right approach is used to handle them.

CONCLUSION

From the result obtained in this study on the effectiveness of communicative approach in oral communicative ability of L₂ Igbo learners at the upper Basic level, it was found the learners taught Igbo using communicative approach performed better than their counter parts taught using conventional method in the areas tested. Communicative approach provides an inhibition free, non-threatening and supportive atmosphere where learning goals are both challenging and attainable, and where content was specifically tailored to the learners' levels and interests.

Communicative ability can only be achieved in an interactive language classroom where students are not seen as subordinate but are given equal opportunity to express themselves and to relate to every other person in the class. As they participate in these activities they soon overcome their linguistic problems and inhibitions and become competent in the oral use of Igbo language.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations are put forward:

- (1) Teachers of Igbo as a second language should adopt communicative approach in order to make their lesson learner-centered.
They should combine role play, dialogue, games and contests and songs so as to motivate learners and make the Igbo lesson interesting, rather than concentrating on the explanation of grammatical rules and structures.
- (2) Government should out-law all discriminatory practices against Nigeria languages, such as those that ban their being spoken in schools or that impose punishment or fine on students speaking them.

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