

Using Soccer Related Text to Facilitate English Language Learning Among Students in Nigerian Secondary Schools

Mallam Adamu Babikko
Zainab Noor bt Abdul Razak
Abubakar Sulaiman

Universiti Teknologi
Taman Skudai, Johor Bahru
Malaysia

Abstract

This paper aims at emphasising the use of Soccer related issues in texts as technique for teaching basic language skills in Nigerian secondary schools. Given that learning relies on readiness, and readiness is achieved through positive motivation the soccer related texts is believed to ignite active participation of learners in the English classroom and beyond. Soccer is the most popular sport in Nigeria and has become part of the young and the young at heart due largely to Nigeria's participation in International both male and female soccer for ages. In view of the dwindling poor English proficiency among students which has affected their performance in examinations for ages, this paper suggests that Teachers of English language should explore all means to encourage learning and learner participation, one of which is integrating soccer related text and issues into English instruction to encourage learner participation. Sadly, the Intensive English textbooks used in teaching English language had only a passage, 'Africa and Olympics' in SS2 and none in SS1. The learner becomes very excited about learning and attempts to contribute if issues of interest are discussed. Interest in the content of the text is believed to influence and facilitate participation which facilitates effective understanding. Through integrating soccer-related topics in comprehension exercises Teachers of English language could facilitate debates, interaction and activity based classrooms which would lead to vocabulary learning, reading and writing as well as communication practice within and outside the classroom.

Keywords: Soccer, English language, teaching, learning

1.0 Introduction

One of the current educational issues in Nigeria is the rate at which poor results are being continuously recorded every year in public examinations, especially at the secondary school level. The Senior School Certificate Examination (SSCE), a preparatory examination which qualifies a secondary school graduate to be admitted into tertiary institutions is yearly written in May/June, and Nov/Dec, with virtually no satisfactory outcome. A maximum of nine and a minimum of seven subjects are registered for the examination by each student with Mathematics and English Language taking as compulsory subjects.

The mass failure has attracted and generated concerns, criticisms consequent upon that, some have pointed that one of the possible factors responsible for the unsatisfactory performances is the poor English proficiency among the students due largely to poor reading culture. Falayajo (1997) and Akinnaso (2001) argue that poor English foundation right from the primary level could be responsible for the poor secondary school performance. Others, (Ubahakwe 1991; Ohia 1997; and Oglan 1997) extend that aside the problems with English poor proficiency over-populated classrooms, and lack of motivation as a result of poor socioeconomic background among others are also contributing to the poor performance.

However, as much as over-populated class is a negative factor in teaching and learning, poor motivation among the students poses more damage. Learning relies on readiness, and readiness is achieved through positive motivation. In view of that it is expected that Teachers of English language should explore all means to encourage learning and learner participation.

The ESL learner should be a very active and not passive participant in the exercise. However this can easily be achieved if the subject matter is of interest to the learner. We should realise that second language learning could be complex and frustrating, hence the need for appropriate motivation. According to Lee and Bill, (1997) & Gardner, (1985), L2 acquisition is psycholinguistic in nature and is dependent upon the application of various strategies to ensure effectiveness. In fact Gardner (1985) and Nwogu and Nwoke (2002), hold that learning a second language is a socio-psychological activity involving habit formation which is achieved through very active participation, adopting various learning strategies to effectively achieve a favourable performance of the learner in the production of the target language.

It is important to state that the situation of English language in Nigeria is such that a student must be proficient in English not only to pass the English language as a subject but to facilitate his understanding of other subjects in the curriculum. Except in teaching any of the three Nigerian languages (Hausa, Igbo & Yoruba), Arabic or French, all the subjects in the curriculum are taught using English as a vehicle of transmission.

As a medium of instruction almost throughout the levels of education, English in Nigeria serves both integrative and instrumental needs. It is therefore crucial to have both oral and written competences to avoid the consequences of poor academic performance. In fact, the Poor SSCE results' being recorded has put the educational system of Nigeria into a serious turbulence denoting a sharp fall in the educational standard. Not only that, achieving the ideals of Nigeria's much targeted Vision 20.2020 may not be achieved due to the sharp fall in education. Vision 20.2020 is a Nigeria's postulated vision in which Nigeria aims at becoming one of the 20 leading economies of the world by the year 2020. The Nigerian youths are football enthusiasts and are so engrossed about it that often times their discussion among their peers delves more on football clubs, football stars and football leagues. It means therefore, if football issues such as, its origin and development, roles in uniting people, biographies of the football stars, their clubs etc. are made part of the English comprehension exercises, students will be more motivated to try to answer questions (written/oral) arising from such passages thereby improving their proficiencies. The support soccer and its stars enjoy among the Nigerian youths is so glaring that in virtually all corners of the Nigerian streets, home or groups you find soccer enthusiasts discussing soccer clubs especially the Europe-based. In fact it could be said that in Nigeria the youths know the names of the prominent international soccer stars and their clubs even more than the names of their neighbours.

According to Ryan *et al.* (1990), it is easier for the learner to retrieve information from a text whose contents are of interest to him/her compared to the one he/she has less interest. The tendency is that in the class for example students will be more focused and determined on how to produce words in English to tell the teacher about their football clubs and football stars, rather than feeling anxious to talk about abstract things such as astronomy or nuclear weapons. No doubt learner interest leads to more elaborate and deeper processing of expository texts. It means therefore, individual interest is an important and critical in academic motivation and learning.

It is the common belief among Nigerians that, the acquisition of English is a stepping stone towards achieving good grades in school subjects. This is because except in teaching the local languages all subjects are taught using English as the medium of instruction. Munkaila and Haruna (2001) rightly add that, the ability competently communicate in the language of the colonial master is appreciated so much as it carries with it some privileges, power and prestige. This is presumed to impact positively the learning of the English among all, especially students. The knowledge of English is therefore important for educational, national and economic development of the individual as well as the country at large. English language is the global language of science and technology and essentially the official language of educational instruction and polity administration, improving the quality of spoken and written English language among school children is therefore, paramount.

2.1 The Problem Statement

In a study by Olapoo (1998) carried out to assess the English language performance of secondary school students in Nigeria between 1988 and 1996, it was revealed that the percentage of failure was between 53.36% and 72.71%. This is indeed a serious setback both educationally and socially. The consistent mass failure in public examinations among the secondary school students is attributed to their inability to effectively express themselves (as such could not attempt exam questions satisfactorily) orally and in written English language. Sometimes even at University level only those who are admitted to study English and related subjects such as linguistics and literature in English find it a necessity to crave for proficiency.

According to Agwubike and Okumbor (2010) soccer is the most popular sports in Nigeria with a long history of international participation. The enthusiasm in soccer among Nigerians is so glaring that images of European clubs such as Man U, Chelsea, Barcelona, Real Madrid and stars such as Ronaldo, Kanu, Drogba loom in houses, cars, and business premises. Although there is no exact statistics of football supporters in Nigeria it could be said that soccer in Nigeria is making a big impact, socially, economically and physically. Okeke (2009) observes that soccer in Nigeria has captivated the minds of the young and the young in heart. Maintaining that, the support Nigerian fans give to especially their European clubs and footballers come in many brands ranging from mere support, to entertainment, gambling and legal economic gains. The proliferations of commercial football viewing centres in almost all cities, towns and villages do doubt attest to the acceptability of soccer in Nigeria.

There is no doubt that, soccer enthusiasm among the Nigerian youths is high and even school going children are often times seen discussing football more than their school subjects. In fact, sometimes when a league is played fans even become fanatical as celebration results to injuries and even death of supporters. This support and special interest which the youths attach to soccer and its related issues could be beneficial if the English teachers and English curriculum in Nigerian secondary schools integrate more of such issues as comprehension exercises so that it will provide the needed motivation that could stir useful and constructive debate among the ESL learners especially at the senior level of secondary school. Based on the strategic role English language Proficiency play in the academic success of secondary school students and beyond, this paper envisages that, in order to build their interest and motivate proficiency through active class participation and interaction, there is need to integrate more football related passages in English comprehension exercises and as subject matters in school debates and press clubs. Guild and Gerger (1985) maintains that ESL learning is complex and is greatly influenced by many factors such as interest, readiness, as well as cultural variables. This is indicative that to stimulate positive reactions among learners ESL teachers and curriculum planners should design more effective learning activities, such as integrating more soccer related topics in comprehension and debating exercises.

3.1 The Relationship between Interest in Texts and Comprehension

It is essentially true that, one of the objectives of ESL teaching is nurturing the learner into comprehending information contained in text as well as internalizing the messages and improving language proficiency. A learner who comprehends therefore should be able to interpret, criticise, synthesise and often times infer on ideas presented in target language texts or passages. Studies (Schraw *et al.* 1995; Ryan *et al.* 1990; Schiefele and Krapp, 1996; Harp and Mayer, 1997 & Wade *et al.*, 1999) have revealed the relationship between interest in the text information and comprehension level. Schraw *et al.* (1995) for instance reported that college students, who experienced situational interest while reading, demonstrated improved text recall. Similarly, Goldberg (1994) identifying with motivation in pupils as a determinant of effective learning reports that, children with intrinsic motivation in academics have higher self-perception in academics compared to children without intrinsic motivations. This implies that the interest a learner has in the information contained in the text has the potentials of influencing him/her to understand, analyse and make inferences compared to texts that he/she has no interest in. It means therefore the learner tries to really understand what information the writer wants to transmit and it gives him more satisfaction also to evaluate his level of success when the text is of interest to him.

However, Pressley (2002), active and effective learner employs variety of strategies to facilitate learning comprehension. Pressley further maintains that, reader can read a variety of materials with ease and interest, can read for varying purposes, and can read with comprehension sometimes even when the material is neither easy to understand nor intrinsically interesting. The fact still remains that, when we teach comprehension we are bringing forth to the active and effective learner to gain from the text, a process that should both be deliberate and thoughtful and targeting specific language learning objectives. However, there are many ways that students demonstrate their understandings of comprehension texts. These may involve locating and recalling information, drawing on the knowledge of text structures or writing short reflective responses, completing multiple choice questions, thinking deeply or verbal expression of ideas as contained in the text. According to Cain and Oakhill (1999), learners with poor comprehension generally are poor at making inferences and integrating text information as they tend to read superficially and are less likely to participate in constructive processes and are unsure of when to apply their prior knowledge during reading. It means in order to assist such learners teachers should ensure active class participation. Graham & Bellert, (2004) posits that in order to help the learner to comprehend or to learn to comprehend the teacher should also acquaint the learner with explicit instruction in comprehension strategies to help them overcome difficulties in understanding texts.

Similarly, Duke & Pearson (2002), believe that, if the comprehension text is explicit or is in line with the interest of the learner the likelihood is that the learner will make significant gains in comprehension. As learners become more competent and confident of their comprehension, the less support they require from the teacher. Hidi *et al.*, (1982) maintains that learners' comprehension, inference and retention is essentially influenced through personally having interest in the text information. This further confirms that, interest was related to deep-comprehension questions, recall of main ideas, and to a higher degree of cognitive organization in college students' knowledge structures. Krapp, (1999) acknowledges that, interest in a reading passage does not only enhance the cognitive and memory chances of the learner, but could also influence on the overall quality of learning. Where the learner has interest in the learning task the tendency is for the learner to take charge of his learning thereby fostering autonomy.

4.1 What the Teacher Should Do

The teacher has a very important role to play in integrating soccer-related passages to facilitate active learning in his class. According to Murat (2005) ESL teachers should be dynamic and learner-centred in both approach and instruction in order to influence active classroom participation. If carefully selected and integrated soccer related texts could motivate the learners to want to read, act; argue within and outside the classroom. Suitable soccer topics will no doubt make a classroom lively, active and fun because of the underlying familiarity of the learner to the issue since it constitutes his/her interest and experience. As the learner will be keen to discuss about their clubs and football stars of interest, the teacher uses that to evaluate their proficiency so as to help them improve on their weak skills. In doing that, when selecting the text to teach, the teacher should be mindful of the diverse interest groups among his students. He could form study groups and evaluate performance as done in football leagues. Group assignments or debates could be used in this regard (strictly in English) to stimulate active participation.

The teacher plays a neutral position so as to give confidence to his students that no club or football star is of personal interest to him. Where presentations or group debates is fixed it should be assessed and graded appropriately. Where the groups in the class represent their individual soccer clubs the interest among students will be high as no one would like to discredit or under-perform his club. It is believed that this type of activity will further strengthen the communality and interaction among learners. When football clubs and stars form topics of discussion in the class it has the potentials of inculcating the dying reading culture among secondary school students in Nigeria.

According to Sage (1987) when group activities is encouraged it enhances unity of purpose as well as ensuring sharing of ideas among members and allows for all to participate. Individual member in the groups is allowed equal opportunity to bear his mind and give his contribution without any hindrance. The general motive is to motivate the learner to learn to make contributions through activity-based instruction, which essentially may give the opportunity to form reading habit. More energy will be garnered in attempt to defeat those on the opposing side since the pleasure is often high when we win over an opponent.

5.1 Conclusion

So far this paper has attempted to share some of the problems associated with poor English proficiency among secondary school student in Nigeria. Furthermore, since the Nigerian youths are soccer enthusiasts, the paper argues that, English language teachers could use it as a motivating ground to facilitate their learning especially if such topics are integrated in the classroom situation and as topics to be argued in debates. Through this, the time and energy been used in watching and discussing soccer and its related issues are positively channelled to a meaningful exercise of developing the intellect of the youths. Teachers should be trained on instructional strategies so that their teaching would be interesting, active, vibrant and effective due to more learner interest and activity in the classroom.

6.1 General Recommendations for ESL Teaching in Nigeria

Given the discussion put forward by this paper on the need to integrate more soccer related texts while teaching English comprehension so that the learner as a fan and soccer enthusiast can actively participate in classroom and even outside, the following recommendations are suggested:

- Teachers of ESL should be trained on how best to integrate topics of interest to learners in order to facilitate and stimulate vocabulary learning, speech practice and communicative interaction.
- High intensity language training that emphasises on both oral and written competences of the ESL learner should be carried out in a form of extra-curricular activities, such as in English debate, drama and press clubs in our secondary schools.
- Government should encourage English camps and provide adequate funding of such camps during long vacations so that secondary school students from different schools and levels could meet and interact strictly in English language for weeks.
- Teachers as a strategy should also share their learning history with their students to serve as motivation and provide useful guides to learners.
- More researches should be carried out to ascertain the learners' attitude towards ESL learning with a view to finding better ways of solving it.
- English language curriculum especially at the senior level should be redesigned to emphasise learner activity rather than grammatical mastery devoid of communicative proficiency.
- In collaboration with the PTA schools should build and equip language communications rooms for language practices and other related exercises.
- Teachers should allow more class participation and interaction so that learners cultivate the habit of free discussion in English among themselves even outside the classroom.
- Although English language retains its dominant position in the education delivery system, efforts should be made by the national education authority towards ensuring that instructional delivery in the public schools is improved through regular training of ESL teachers on more effective and current teaching strategies such as incorporating topics that are interesting, less abstract and beneficial are taught and discussed in an attempt to facilitate proficiency in both oral and written aspects of English.

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