
Language Awareness and Critical Literacy in 21st Century Nigeria: Challenges and Prospects

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Abstract

This paper aims at sharing common academic breakthroughs in the field of language awareness and critical literacy in the 21st Century Nigeria. The study notes that success in the 21st century will be available only to those who have global literacy and fluency in the diversity of thoughts process, language and systems of social relations. The study further identifies the challenges of language awareness and literacy to include mother tongue interference, inadequate teaching aids and lack of qualified teachers. Distraction and shallowness in learning were also viewed as negative consequences of social media on literacy while social constructivism, increase in breadth of knowledge and promotion of technological literacy seem to be positive impacts. It was therefore recommended that all stakeholders in education should put in place strategies to secure the negative impact of social media through putting the platform in to positive use. Close and prompt examination of the structure of classroom interaction and discourse leading to good teaching practices should be carried out to create awareness on language and critical literacy in the 21st century.

Key words: *Language awareness, Critical literacy, Digital space, CLIL, TKT.*

Introduction

It is expected that literate consumers of texts of all forms adopt a critical and questioning ability with competence in the understanding and discussion of contents including television, movies, web pages, music, arts and other means of expression in science and technology (Hagood, 2009). This paper aims at sharing common academic break through(s) in the field of language awareness and critical literacy. The concern also includes the aspiration to use what is popularly known as the ‘first language of the 21st century’ – the ICTS for research and classroom teaching. If that is where the world is going to, then it requires by all terms and purpose that language in all its offers certainly remains the only essential grammatical process of rendering syntactic, morphological, phonological and semiotic systems for communication- still regarded as the exclusive reserve of human beings (McArthur, 1995). By the same scale of emphasis, Jowitt (2012) expurgates the extended string of language as essential to literacy- this time around with the same analogy that integrates its formation into literary studies. Literature is then seen as the fulfillment of language by which knowledge is recorded and expressed even in science and

technology. Seeking to put the two operational terms (language and literature) in context, definitely, reiterates how social relations, thought process and knowledge of science and technology are harnessed in terms of functions (Fowler, 1970; Carter and Nunan, 2009 and Awonusi, 2012). When put in place, the whole world of learning gets on doing things with signs, words, and sentences. How then are current trends in language awareness and critical literacy conceptualized for consideration in the 21st Nigeria?

Statement of the Problem

In order to reconcile the problem area of this study with the general objective which is set to find ways of improving both the contents and methodologies of language teaching in formal classroom situation, it is not wrong to bring in scope a thesis statement that connects the key terms of language and literature to science, technology and the ICTS. In this problem area, sharing the concerns and needs of language awareness and critical literacy, Rosetta Stone (2016), an education resource consortium, states as follows: *... that success in the 21st century will be available (only) to those who have global literacy and fluency in the diversity of thoughts process, language, and systems of social relations.*

This statement to a commendable extent harps more on the where and how the entire world of language awareness and literacy is moving, thereby forcing, Nigeria in the community of nations to catch up. The same declaration by Rosetti Stone emphasizes how businesses and higher education have encircled the world and that the need for both local linguistic specialization and global language fluency have gone from the needs of diplomats to those of the general citizens. This perspective only gives the assurance that at the centre of nation's development is an apology that continuously "begs" to improve the larger contents of global literacy out of which language occupies the space and even holds the ace.

Defining the Premise of Language Awareness

Language awareness generally and by the terms of the context has been conceptualized in very diverse ways. DonMatt (1985) defines it as 'a person's sensitivity to and conscious awareness of the nature of language and its role in human life'. Van Lier (2009) most appropriately sees it as understanding of human faculty of language and its role in thinking, learning and social life. Both definitions attend to interpretation and practices subjected to various contentions: the survival of first language L1 and the acquisition of second language L2 often used in both pedagogy and androgogy (Schachter, 1989, Fakaude, 2004 and Gbeyonron and Gbeyonron, 2012). At the barest level however, language remains essential and accurately functioning to create feelings, improve insight and enhance understanding. So, it is in place to emphasise that languages spoken by various people exist to serve different socio-cultural purposes.

Halliday (1976) in his prelude to systemic functional linguistics, proposes to the general 'gist' of language as a hub in learning, thus 'in order to be taught successfully, it is necessary to use language to learn...that it is critical in providing advantages to whole sale provision of learning'. Broadening his take on the pedagogical import of language, Halliday, still underscores how language and literature serve as requirements for every kind of learning- most distinctively found at the centre of every educational system and literacy. For this and other purposes language is found therefore to be a bridge connecting and facilitating communication for development.

In Nigeria for instance, where multiethnic diversity of over five hundred spoken languages are minimally protected by the national policy on education, several of the languages are already threatened. Fakuade (2004) ascribed the threat for extinction and burden on the education system

as rather a minus. However focusing on the a perspective that advances need for protection of all indigenous languages, Fakuade (2004) in the same inaugural lecture, sounded an extra alarm, this time around to linguists in general and language teachers in specific on how the protection and harnessing of such 'native' first language(s) L1 can enhance learning. This concern is shared within the relative scope of how pedagogy at early learning age can be promoted particularly when applied to the context of indigenous languages. It explains how the remedial connection between the L1 and L2 is significant to the acquisition of content and language integrated learning (Ngamsa and Jauro, 2013).

Hawatt (1984), Harmer (2006) and Ngamsa and Jauro (2013) similarly offer concerns over developments and trends in English Language Teaching (ELT) generally. Their concern addressed issues of common consideration, noting pitfalls in the second language acquisition and teaching. This concern is therefore part of the main problem associated with the larger learner needs and thereby becoming the thrust of language awareness and critical literacy. At pedagogical level, this concern also notes remarkable difficulties of both learners and teachers of language across curriculum in Nigeria (Olaoye, 2013).

This situation of language learning across the curriculum in Nigeria is found to contrast with those in Britain, U.S.A and Australia where English language is native to them and therefore better at learning levels. While in these countries reviews are periodically made to upgrade the standard of reading and learning across the curriculum, Nigeria and other countries using English as a second language for pedagogical purposes, keep experiencing downfall due to a number of factors. Ogunsiyi (2012) places such factors as encumbrances found to be largely due to the manner of acquisition, socio-cultural difficulties and functional application. On a specific note, identification of problems like mother tongue interference, inadequate use of teaching aids/materials and lack of qualified and sufficient teachers in Nigeria, are cases at hand that call for the attention of teachers, learners and linguists alike. There seems to be no single known attempt by government to review the standard language teaching in Nigeria, not even the language policy in the past years of teaching English and Literature and at the tertiary levels of instruction.

Literature in Language: A Case for Critical Literacy

To start with, it is good to note that literature has a long pedigree of existence within the confines of language. It was and is still a fundamental part of every language teaching- a paradigm where the understanding of culture and thoughts expressed align with the basics of literature at all levels. Maley (2006), Anyachonkeya and Anyachonya (2011) and Alaoye (2013), differently but similarly opine that literature provides the best means of improving literacy. It is used and studied in many different ways and contexts. Maley (2006:181) categorically identifies one of them as: Focus on teaching language versus focus on teaching literature – *that there is a clear difference of objectives: on one of the scale literary texts being used as one among the many texts. While in the other, literary texts alone are the object of study, more for their literary qualities (literature)...*

Even at this time when genres have proliferated and there are graphic novels, rap, realistic fantasy, music videos and novels in verse sitting along the explosion of informational books, interactive books, and the to- be- expected range of fiction, the study of literature is not left out- it has been constricted instead to set a standard to be mastered. Literature remains and is even found within the confines of modern development of the digital text as a 21st century skill.

Billows (1961) and Carter and Long (1991:2) however cap importance of literature to teaching on the three models: cultural, language and personal benefits. First, Billows (1996) decries all forms of attempts to renounce effective teaching of literature. To him, 'it reduces the opportunity to harmonize and warm what may also be a very dry and chilly traffic in words and information negating important and powerful aid in engaging pupils (learners) mind for a favourable mental set'. Billows stand point upholds the benefits of literature in language. Carter and Long (1991:2) rather harps on the cultural benefits of literature, better cited in their words that: ***Teaching literature within cultural model enables students to understand and appreciate cultures and ideologies different from their own in time and space, and to come to perceive traditions of thought, teaching and artistic form within the heritage and literature of such cultures...***

From the apologetic views expressed by Billows (1961) and Carter and Long (1991), reading process generally 'although' diversely is found to provide an avenue of reaching required information and aesthetic content where the reader himself interacts emotionally and experientially with the text. Still found resourceful is the motivating power of literary texts in terms of their universality and non-triviality. Billows' commentary also emphasises the benefits provided by how literary texts invite multiple interpretation, thus providing reading materials for discussion and study in the science and technology (Meley 2006:182).

There is definitely an established rationale for incorporating literature in all forms of learning even though it does not go entirely uncontested and challenged. Edmondson (1997) on the role of literature in foreign language learning and Toolan (2007) on language in literature have argued on the fact that many of the assumptions that underpin the use of literary texts in language teaching cannot be sustained. Like others who differ, they also argued against the use of such texts on grounds of linguistic complexities and cultural remoteness from learners. Toolan (2007) particularly, prescribes rather a linguistic stylistic consideration for defining the premise of language learning – where necessary to be left at the level of word(s) choices, clause-patterns, rhythms and intonation, contextual implications, cohesive links, choices of voice, perspective and transitivity.

Placing the apologists and antagonists of literature on the scale –due to its' importance to knowledge in general, Beers and Probst (2011), in contention to Toolan (2007), advance a much practical consideration. The duo, uphold literature as a 21st Century Skill –set to improve the scope of multicultural diffusion through analysis and synthesis of comparable and diverse experiences. They also add that 'reading literature itself is the most important 21st Century Literacy Skill itself, 'not learning to navigate the web' as speculated by others. On a more philosophical note, in support of this opinion, Beers and Probst (2011) state entirely, that ***...whatever we are not, literature lets us become. We become part of the characters and through their lives learn more of our own.*** Good enough for us to note that reading literature, as 'quaint as it might be' is a needed skill of 21st Century world' even across multiplicity of multi-semiotic genres provided by the internet – e-books, facebook discourse(s), twitter, e-mails, whatsapp etc.

Digital Space in Learning: a Blessing or Curse...

There is no better way of saying that the 21st Century is the age of digital civilization and a placement in the mid of which nearly all of us are either **digital natives** – persons who have familiarity with computers from young age, or **digital immigrants**- those that are transiting into the use of ICTs even though they are the inventors. Simple as the 'digital civilization' is, the

divide keeps getting wider, not of generational difference(s) but of sufficiency and availability in terms of computer penetration to citizens. Even in so- to- mention academic institutions, the best part of the utilitarian aspect of ICTs for academic purposes, are yet to be fully harnessed. Bad enough without electricity (light) and the internet, the proliferated availability of mobile phones systems is over engaging on the entire learning system causing more distraction through social media. The over patronage is found to be against the desired goal of getting the ICTs into classroom learning.

Abrams (2012:1) decries the robust social media use by students as a major challenge to learning in general and thereby list out the following as negative impact:

- i. Distraction: from intellectual pursuits and legitimate opinion –rather students are found to be interested in connecting with peers more and not with the learning environment and for better utilisation.
- ii. Shallowness: promotion of the culture of shallowness that could have long-term negative impact and consequences for learners e.g. twitter, text messages, other media tools that focus on brief, quick and “shallow” interactions that do not encourage either deep social engagement or intellectual exploration.

The positives of social media for students equally acknowledge the benefits to be utilized as a balancing measure to the negatives. Reiner (2012) writing for the ‘Chronicle of Higher Education’ in the United States of America, prescribes benefits that educators can embrace to convert disruption and shallowness into breath of knowledge and basis for positive technological literacy. He further identifies the three aspects of social media in tune with advantages that match both learner and teacher-centered expectations to develop the 21st century Skills needed in global academic world of learning. The positives are:

- i. Social Constructivism – where in this age of Wikipedia, knowledge is increasingly becoming a social construction rather than the domain of individual expectation. It helps students to work together, to create their own academic subjects, social context or work environments. Therefore, supporting the development of this skill for students, definitely prepare them for real working experiences.
- ii. Breadth of Knowledge – where “shallowness” of knowledge and corrections was mentioned as a negative of the social media, the other side of it is broadness of knowledge and connectivity that students experience through it- social media. It provides all that the students require with depth in nearly all that is enquired. The most commendable advantage is that students can be connected to broader base of opinions and world view through instant global access to knowledge.
- iii. Technological Literacy – by this advantage all social media rely on provisions and offers of advanced information and communication technologies that seamlessly provide an easy way of building and supporting technological literacy. Simply put that one cannot be engaged in deep and meaningful uses of technology without developing the only available resource for information evaluation and mediated platforms to connect the end point users in education, security or business. It provides the basis then for all that is required in the 21st century learning – in science, technology or digital arts.

Following the negative and positive offers of the ICTs with social media as a challenge and basic skill of the 21st century, this study therefore suggests gainful ways in instruction and learning. All stakeholders in education, teachers and students at all levels must learn to put in place strategies not only to secure and decry the negatives of social media, but also to learn, acquire

and effectively put the platforms to positive use.

This can only be done when mandates are secured for resourceful utilizations of the ICTs in any given school environment. Abrams (2012) thereby suggests some ways of control for effective utilization of the ICTs:

- i. Secure a **guided connectivity** – encourage students to use the social media to connect to experts outside the classroom in order to conduct first hand research to be shared in the class.
- ii. **Encouraging Silent Reflection** – through social media platforms, where every student can have the opportunity to express their opinion, share insights or counter arguments for academic purposes.
- iii. **Lessons Rewind** – instructors to post record of lectures online and circulate them via social media, share links to relevant platforms or posts to twitter, facebook and other social networks. All to support deeper learning and ‘support to those who learn at different pace or require remediation’.

Applying these mitigation techniques against the negatives of social media, definitely will provide steps ahead to proper profiling of ICTs as necessary tools of enhancing learning in the 21st Century. These steps are to be seen as part of the larger ascription of technology to the needs of 21st Century where technological literacy remains a fall back doubling as a field and an enhancement to communication simply tagged as ‘first language of the 21st Century’.

Methodology in Language Teaching

Perspectives earlier mentioned by Beers and Probst (2011) and Olaoye (2013) show how language and literature will forever, and for the rest of human history hold and preserve contents of every aspect of human knowledge. Even science and technology by their terms are found to exist in the given expressions of language and literature – content and the medium of expression. It requires no contention therefore, that technicalities of delivering content through language integrated learning will gainfully remain accountable for best practices in language awareness and critical literacy.

Dubin and Olshtain (2000) on Course Design, Harmer’s (2006) perspectives on ‘how to Teach English’ and Richards (2009) on the methodology of TESOL all support tenable approaches to the subject under review - Language, Literature and the ICTs as support to the 21st Century instructors and Learners. Dubin and Olshtain (2000:07) whose perspective specifically focuses on language content in a communicative syllabus – brought in the aspect of methodology mentioned as ‘three applicable ways of teaching form and use’ – content and expression (Eskey 1983). By their terms, course designers/instructors in language and literature including English across the curriculum should accordingly adopt the following:

- i. Presentation of linguistic forms and structures to enable learners express the basic notions of language. Furthermore, special emphasis needs to be placed on intellectual difference relating to the realization of notions.
- ii. Use of communicative context to allow learners to interact within a wide range of communicative language functions. Here again emphasis must be placed on socio-cultural language specific features in order to produce utterances appropriated to the cultural setting.
- iii. Use a variety of text-types both in the oral and written form in order to develop

communicative proficiency in all language skills, unless a specific course calls for emphasis on one or two language skills rather than on all.

Harmer (2006:25-26), further identified elements necessary for successful language learning. By terms, ESA as an acronym for **Engage, Study and Activate** is prescribed not only as compatible method but also a necessity that should be used 'in all – or almost all– classes' to:

- i. Engage: A point in a teaching situation, where teachers try to arouse the students' interest thus involving their emotions. By this practice, when students are engaged, they learn better than when they are partly or wholly disengaged.
- ii. Study: study activities should be applied to where students are asked to focus on language (or information) and how it is constructed. This aspect includes the process of getting students discover for themselves – by working individually and in groups to discover aspects of the language in focus.
- iii. Activate: this element in teaching describes exercises and activities which are designed to get students using language as freely and communicatively as they can. Thus, activate exercises offer students a chance to try out real language use with little or no restriction – a kind of rehearsal for the real world.

On more pragmatic level, Richards (2009:213) summarizes how learning is facilitated by exposure to authentic language through using language for genuine communication. Out of this submission, the principle permeates the entire spectrum of language learning and critical literacy seen in:

- Approaches to grammar beyond the sentence to the study of discourse and text
- Use of authentic spoken and written texts, including literature.
- Sources for reading, writing and other language learning activities.
- Use of corpora of authentic language as a basis for understanding lexical and Grammatical usage; and
- Focus on communicative methodology such as communicative language (CLT) And task based approaches.

The concerns arising from approaches mentioned by Richards (2009), are considerably based on the assumption that the style of communication within the language classroom must be as close as possible to the style of communication that occurs in a natural setting. This therefore, requires prompt and close examination of the structure of every classroom interaction and discourse leading to good teaching practices and strategies which must seek to create authentic use of language.

Conclusion

From the theories, perspectives and highlights on methodology in language awareness and critical literacy reviewed so far, there are a number of issues identified as both good and challenging which are generally applicable to teaching and learning. Except that the challenges in 21st century Nigeria are not good enough to allow good practices in the teaching all subjects and courses across the curriculum compared to other parts of the World. That is largely found to be due to lack of adequate attention not given to the issues and urgency of content and language integrated learning. To conclude therefore, it behooves this study to suggest a number of possible ways to address some of the problems relating to:

1. The need to contextualize the language learning environment for effective language teaching.
2. Putting in place a mechanism for monitoring and evaluation of the use of language and literature across the curriculum as a support for improving competence and performance of learners in general.
3. Consideration of practical and workable means of improving the bad and ugly aspects of the use of information and communication technologies ICTs –(ills of social media inclusive) which require positive steps. ***Language instructors and learners must be seen to adhere strictly to the positive and resourceful uses of the ICTs*** in and outside the classroom.
4. The need to adopt the best practices in methodology of the teaching of language and literature for pedagogical and social development...a number of such methods are acquired in training packages by the British Council as Teaching Knowledge Test (TKT) for teacher of English and the most popular Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) for teachers of all subjects.
5. The need to improve both quality and sufficiency of learning aids and materials for students, teacher and researchers in this area.
6. Above all, the needs just like the proverbial Biblical statement highlights – ‘the harvest is much and the laborers are few’- the expectation here demands for more teachers and better training, particularly at refresher levels in order to meet up with the challenges of content and language integrated learning in the 21st century.

So, it should be as found from the beginning that context is the most basic educational superstructure upon which language as an infrastructure is situated. Language therefore is the only critical resource for literacy and awareness and as reviewed in this context. Language cannot therefore be separated from literature- there is distinction without difference, inseparable but still responsible for the quality of even the language expressing the knowledge used in science and technology... That cannot be without literature. Anything short of this is only going to be an exercise in futility.

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