

Demystifying the Teaching of Grammar to Young Learners of English as a Second Language in the Multilingual Nigerian Classroom: A Pedagogical Exploration

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Abstract

The teaching methods associated with grammar teaching are always characterized with exercises and drills in parsing, identifying parts of speech, clause analysis and other serious grammatical exercises and these methods have persisted in the average language classroom. These methods make young and adult learners alike dread grammar as an aspect of English. Increasing research findings have suggested that formal grammar teaching had little or no value on grammar teaching and learning. It is believed that formal traditional grammar teaching could, at best, improve students' ability to recognize rules and word classes, and these methods have fallen out of fashion. Grammar should no longer be taught as an arbitrary set of rules. The argument against this style of teaching is very persuasive: study after study has shown that it has little or no discernible effect on students' ability to use language effectively. It is in the light of the above that this paper embarked on a pedagogical exploration of some playlike, very unique and viable ways of teaching grammar to young learners of English as second language in a bid to demystifying this much dreaded aspect of the English language. Strategies examined included songs, rhymes, poems and games. The paper further illustrates their uses. It is concluded that these strategies contextualize a grammar lesson effectively as well as provide a non-threatening atmosphere for pupils, who usually are tense when speaking or learning English grammar in a formal classroom setting, to learn the same grammar seamlessly. A few recommendations are therefore made.

Key words: Demystifying, Teaching of English Grammar, Young ESL Learners, Multilingual Nigerian Classroom.

Introduction

At the heart of every language learning and use situation is grammar. In fact, proficiency and competence in a language is wrongly equated with knowledge of its grammar. In reality, however, competence in all language skills, be it oracy or literacy, hinges on competence in the grammar of the language. Specifically, how well a person performs in critical language use situations such as speech-making, composition, comprehension (listening or reading), summarizing, sentence formation and vocabulary use all depend on how well he or she understands the grammar of that language. Grammar gains its pride of place in language teaching, particularly in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) and English as a Second Language (ESL) because without a good understanding of the grammar of a language, the learner's competence in the language will be gravely hampered. The fact that the main purpose of learning a language is to use it as a means of communication makes grammar essential (Amore, 2018).

The study of grammar helps the user of the language to communicate more effectively. Quite simply, if users of English know how the language works, then they can make good use of it. Competence in the grammar enables them to evaluate the choices which are available to them in language use situation. If language users have good grasp of the relationship between the elements of a sentence, they can do away with many of the ambiguities and misunderstandings which often result from poor construction. In deciphering meaning from writing, as well, of grammar knowledge is paramount. The understanding of literary texts, for instance, is predicated on sound grammatical knowledge. Other forms of writing can equally be an uphill task to interpret if the reader does not have good grammatical knowledge. Understanding scientific and technical writings, for instance, may be difficult not just in the ideas they present, but also in their grammar. These types of writing can be herculean to understand readily without some good knowledge of how the parts relate to one another. Studying grammar enables a language user to go beyond instinctive, native-speaker knowledge, and to use English in the most intelligent manner. Doff (2000) said that by learning grammar learners can handle meanings in all grammatical structures. Long and Richards (1987) added that it cannot be

ignored that grammar has a great impact on the four language skills and vocabulary to establish communicative tasks.

Teaching of grammar is perhaps the most challenging task any language teacher may face in his/her language classroom. Many teachers shy away from teaching grammar explicitly even when they are aware that learners need an understanding of the grammar of the language to achieve competence fluency and accuracy. For many teachers, teaching grammar is an uphill task; while to many learners, learning grammar is a boring. Not many English teachers relish the thought of teaching grammar due to the complexity and irregularities in the grammar of the English language. A typical traditional foreign language class usually is characterized with teachers' direct instruction on grammar and vocabulary and the students' memorization on the language points. Most teachers find it difficult to make learners learn grammatical points and structures with facility. This becomes more compounded by the fact that grammar as an aspect of the English Language is incredibly boring to learners, so many of them get pissed off as soon as the grammar class starts.

There have always been debates on the best way to teach grammar. The debates have been along teaching grammar the old style with serious, discrete and explicit explanations of the grammatical items and teaching it the communicative and play-way. In what looks like an answer to the question of how best to teach grammar, Musumeci (1997) says that students should learn grammar explicitly but should also be given the opportunity to practise grammar points in communicative and authentic/simulated tasks. With the introduction of communicative language teaching, English language teaching and learning has become much more demanding for teachers and learners just like any other innovation poses challenges for its users. This informs this paper which explores how young learners could be taught grammar seamlessly and in a non-threatening atmosphere. The paper focuses on how grammar and structure can be taught and reinforced through songs and rhymes, poems and games.

Teaching Grammar through Songs and Rhymes

Since meaning is very important in teaching grammar, it becomes necessary to contextualize any grammar point. Songs are one of the most enchanting and culturally rich resources that

come handy in language classrooms. Songs provide a change from the usual customary classroom activities. Songs are great resources to enhance pupils' abilities in listening, speaking, reading and writing. They can also be utilized to teach a variety of grammatical items such as sentence patterns, word classes and pluralisation of nouns. Learning English through songs also provides a non-threatening atmosphere for students who usually are tense when learning English in a formal classroom setting.

Songs also give new insights into the target culture. They are the means through which cultural themes are presented effectively. Since they provide authentic texts, they are motivating. Prosodic features of the language such as stress, rhythm, intonation among others are presented through songs. Thus, through using them the language which is cut up into a series of structural points is perceived as a whole again.

There are many advantages of using songs in the classroom. Through using contemporary popular songs, which are already familiar to teenagers, the teacher can meet the challenges of the teenage needs in the classroom. Since songs are highly memorable and motivating, in many forms they may constitute a powerful subculture with their own rituals. Furthermore, through using traditional folk songs the base of the learner's knowledge of the target culture can be broadened.

In consequence, if selected properly and adopted carefully, a teacher should benefit from songs in all phases of teaching grammar. Songs may both be used for the presentation or the practice phase of the grammar lesson. They may encourage extensive and intensive listening, and inspire creativity and use of imagination in a relaxed classroom atmosphere. While selecting a song the teacher should take the age, interests of the learners, and the language being used in the song into consideration. To enhance learner commitment, it is also beneficial to allow learners to take part in the selection of the songs.

Teaching Procedure

There are various ways of using songs in the language classroom. The level of the learners, interests and age of the learners, the grammar point to be taught, and the song to be used are determinants of the teaching procedure. Apart from these, it also depends on the resourcefulness/creativity of the language teacher.

At the early basic school level, singing the song with the prosodic features of the language is emphasized. Whereas at the higher basic levels, where the practice of grammar points is at the foreground, songs can be used with other techniques. Some of these techniques are:

- GAP fills or close texts
- Focus questions
- True-false statements
- Put these lines into the correct sequence
- Dictation
- Add a final verse
- Circle the antonyms/synonyms of the given words
- Discuss

A teacher's selection of a technique or a set of techniques should be based on his or her objectives for the lesson. After determining the grammar point to be taught, the song to be used and the techniques to be used, the teacher prepares an effective lesson plan. Since songs are listening activities, they should be presented as listening lessons; however it is advisable to integrate all the skills in the process in order to achieve successful teaching.

When regarding a lesson plan, as a pre-listening activity, the theme, the title, or the history of the song can be discussed. By directing the students toward specific areas, problem vocabulary items can be picked up ahead. Before listening to the song, it is also necessary to let the learner know which grammar points should be studied. At this stage, pictures may also be used to introduce the theme of the song. In the listening stage, some of the techniques listed above can be used, but among them, gap filling is the most widely used technique. Through such gaps, the vocabulary, grammar, or pronunciation is highlighted.

This stage can be developed by the teacher according to the needs of the students and the grammar point to be studied. In the follow-up, integrated skills can be used to complete the overall course structure. Since many songs are on themes for which it is easy to find related reading texts, it may lead the learner to read a text about the singer or the theme. Besides, many songs give a chance for a written reaction of some kind. Opinion questions may lead the learner to write about his own

thoughts or reflections. Some songs deal with a theme that can be re-exploited through role plays. Acting may add enthusiasm to the learning process. Finally, some songs deal with themes, which can lead to guided discussion. By leading the students into a discussion, the grammar point could be practiced orally and, in a way, naturally.

Exploitation of songs for grammatical structures can be illustrated through several examples. For present tense '**Let It Be**' by the Beatles, for past tense '**Yesterday**' by the Beatles, for present progressive '**Sailing**' by Rod Stewart, for present perfect '**Nothing Compares to You**' by Sinéad O'Connor, for past perfect '**Last Night I Had...**' by Simon and Garfunkel, for modals '**Blowing in the Wind**' by Bob Dylan, and for conditionals '**El Condor Pasa**' by Simon and Garfunkel can be used. However, it should be kept in mind that songs which provide frequent repetitions, or tell a story, or provide comments about life, or introduce cultural themes are the effective ones, since they provide authentic and meaningful materials. The song below, for instance, can be used in early classes to teach singular and plural nouns, singular verb and plural verb as used in English concord:

Singular noun, plural noun
Singular verb, plural verb
Singular noun, I know
Plural verb, I know

Singular noun has no's'
Plural noun has an's'
I can tell you about them
Singular verb has an's'
Plural verb has no's'
I can tell you about them.

This song can be used to introduce noun-verb agreement (concord) to early English as Second Language (ESL) learners. Knowing that nouns without 's' are singular while nouns with 's' are plural. Whereas, verbs with 's' are singular and verbs without 's' are plural will go a long way in teaching the topic. This simple song would make the teaching of the serious grammatical point (concord) very much easy in a non-threatening atmosphere and manner.

Poems

Holmes and Moulton (2001) uphold that poetry is a viable means of learning and reinforcing the sounds and structures of a first or second language. Poems provide excellent opportunity for learners to practise structure and syntax in a natural way. Poems, like songs, contextualize grammar lessons effectively. It acts as an effective tool for practising a particular grammatical point. Through repeating and considering the poem, the grammatical structures become more deeply internalized. Thus, poetry not only provides a viable resource for structured practice of grammar, but also a proper basis for review. If a poem that exemplifies a particular structure is also a good poem, it engages the eye, the ear and the tongue simultaneously while also stimulating and moving us; this polymorphic effect makes poetry easier to memorize than other things for many students. Poetry can become an integral part of the language classroom promoting grammar to the learner with enjoyment, involvement and interest.

Like songs, poems fully display the rhythmic nature of languages. Therefore, it is an important aspect to be taught, since English is a syllable timed language with stressed syllables being spoken at roughly equal time pauses, even in everyday speech. Similar to songs, poems also have a great linguistic value as they provide authenticity and cultural views. The sonorosity of a poem which entertains the learners also increases its effectiveness as a teaching resource. When a poem or song has been learned, they remain fresh in the repertoire of learners for life, so do the rhythms, grammatical features and vocabulary of such a poem.

Poems may bring the use of creativity and rhythm into the language classroom, though they may also bring some difficulties. Poems are not constructed in a simple way and syntactically, they are at a higher level than prose, thus it might be very difficult for a foreign / second language learner to comprehend them completely. There are three main barriers for literature including poetry. They are linguistic, cultural, and intellectual barriers. Linguistic difficulties are the problems caused by the syntax or the lexicon of the poem. Cultural difficulties include imagery, tone, and allusion. At the intellectual level, the students should be intellectual and mature enough to understand the theme of the poem. These difficulties could be easily removed if the teacher provides a poem which is syntactically and thematically

appropriate to the level, age and the interests of the students. Thus, by removing or minimizing the potential problems, poetry can provide an enormously rich, enjoyable and authentic context for foreign language learners.

In the selection of a poem, the teacher should first consider the grammatical structure to be presented, practiced, or reviewed, then the level and the age of the students, next the theme and the length of the poem and its appropriateness to the classroom objectives. It is advisable to select a poem from 20th century poets. As older poems often provide a more difficult lexicon and syntax, and as they reflect some old-fashioned ideas, it is more convenient to use contemporary poems than older ones. Poems, which reflect cultural themes, universal features, humanistic values, or emotional aspects, will be more relevant to the foreign/second language learners. Finally, through taking the classroom objectives into consideration, a teacher should effectively benefit from poems as teaching aids.

Examples:

Phrase poem:

Teaching points: *Verb phrases, Verb, noun, and prepositional phrases, Clauses, Parallel structure.*

Poem 1 Floating in the air,

Gliding through the garden,
Drinking from the flowers,
Dancing on the leaves,
Landing on my finger,
Butterflies are free

Poem 2

Hot chocolate steaming,
Rich aroma rising,
White marshmallows melting,
Cold hands grasping,
Big cup waiting,
Cocoa in winter tastes good.

(Holmes & Moulton, 2001, p. 128).

Pattern:

Line 1: Specific phrase or clause
Line 2: Same type of phrase or clause
Line 3: Same type of phrase or clause
Line 4: Same type of phrase or clause
Line 5: Same type of phrase or clause
Line 6: Subject of phrases or clauses.

Teaching Procedure

At the teaching stage of a poem, it is not advisable to talk about the meaning of the poem ahead. Since they offer a reading and listening activity, poems could be presented through a reading plan. At the pre-reading stage, students might be motivated through some enthusiastic talks about poetry or the poet. Some necessary vocabulary can also be handled at this stage.

At the reading stage, in order to create images and stress the prosodic features, the teacher may want the students to close their eyes while he/she is reading the poem. After the poem has been read at least twice, it is better to elicit the primary responses of the students about the poem. Next, after distributing the poem to students, students may be asked to read it either loudly or silently. In order to practice the determined grammar point, students may be asked to paraphrase the poem. Through transforming the verse into prose students get acquainted with the structure.

After easing the grammar and understanding the vocabulary, students get an idea about the theme of the poem. Reading the paraphrased poem reinforces the grammatical structure under consideration. Asking questions about context may follow the reading. Through asking Wh-questions, providing additional information about the culture, and asking students to share their experience with the subject matter, the cultural content of the poem becomes more real and vivid. Words, pictures, and shared experiences can eliminate the gap that is created by different cultures, as no one can deny that poems cannot always evoke the same sound, sight, smell, and association for both native speakers and foreign language learners. After discussing the surface content of the poem,

students may again be asked to close their eyes and visualize the poem while listening to it.

As a follow-up activity a discussion may be held. After reviewing the plot of the poem and providing adequate artful questions, the students will eventually discover the deeper meaning of the poem. As being a facilitator, a teacher should always avoid telling the meaning. After each student grasps his or her own meaning, it is proper to discuss the depth of the poem. In this procedure, the teacher's aim is to support the students in their attempts to understand the poem and make it relevant to their lives. Once they have understood it and perceived its relevance, they will have no objection to practising the poem or even memorizing it, for it will have become special for them. At the follow-up stage, providing the determined structure, students may also be asked to write a poem about anything they want. In such a procedure the four skills are effectively integrated to practice or present any grammar point.

Since every class is different, teachers should creatively determine the teaching procedure. It is not advisable to apply one procedure too strictly. A teacher should adopt activities according to the needs of the learners. However, it might not be very useful to use poems for young students or for beginners. Instead of poems, using nursery rhymes or songs would be more helpful since they provide more joyful and easier contexts. From pre-primary to advanced levels, it is really beneficial to use either songs or poems. Several poems can be adopted or adapted from contemporary anthologies. The poems of the W.H. Auden, Robert Frost, Stanley Kunitz, Delmore Schwartz, Richard Wilbur, and Robert Lowell, David Diop, Niyi Osundare, J.P. Clark, Pius Adesanmi, Remi-Raji Akinlade, Francis Bebe et al. are suggested for the language teachers who want to use poems in their grammar lessons.

Teaching Grammar through Games

According to Haldfield (1999) "a game is an activity with rules, a goal and an element of fun... Games should be regarded as an integral part of the language syllabus, not as an amusing activity for Friday afternoon or for the end of the term." Haldfield stresses the effective use of games in language learning. Learners are always reluctant to do class work. Therefore, games can be

used easily in a manner that learners are led to engage in the games such that they can have opportunity to practice or use the new grammar item they have just learnt eagerly and willingly rather than forcing them to do the tasks forcefully. It is more effective in a way that learners can play and learn at the same time. They can gain maximally from language lessons through games and exercises that they find interesting. Haycraft (1978, p. 94), confirmed it in this submission of his “game is an agreeable way of getting a class to use its initiative in English.” However, games are described by Gibbs (1978; Quoted in Rixon, 1999, p. 3), as “activities carried out by cooperating or competing decision makers, seeking to achieve, within a set of rules, their objectives.” Games direct learners’ energy towards language learning by providing them with meaningful contexts (Wright, Betteridge and Buckby, 1984). Some games that can be used to teach grammar to young learners are:

Word Scramble

Young learners of English Language do love to play with the language. They often love puzzles that allow them to play with the language. One of such puzzles is what we tag *word puzzle*. The teacher writes a sentence, analyses the words into their basic forms, gives piles of these words to each group of learners and allows them to form sentences out of them. Learners may be required to identify all nouns and adjectives in their nominative form and all verbs in their infinitive form. The teacher can specify whether the verbs should be in the present, past or future tense; in addition the teacher may insert adverbs that give clues to learners as to the tense.

Charades

Charades is particularly useful for practising the present continuous tense. A learner is made to act out a verb and the rest of the class predict the action by forming complete sentences using the present perfect tense. To make the game more complex, the teacher may have a pair of learners act out verbs at the same time and make the guessing students use both progressive actions in grammatical sentences.

Four Corners

The teacher labels each corner of the classroom with answers labelled A-D, and have learners run to the correct corner. Then, he teacher asks the learners a question and projects the four answer choices (A-D). Learners run to whatever corner has the answer they think is right. Any learner who runs to the wrong corner is out of the game and stay out. If everyone is right, the last person to get to the corner is also out of the game. This is very apt for *verb tense review*, *prepositions* and *phrasal verbs* where each item has the same four answer options.

Jacobs classified games generally into:

- a. **Sorting, ordering or arranging games.** For example, students have a set of cards with months, and they have to arrange those cards in order.
- b. **Information gap games.** In such games, one or more people have information that other people do not, and they have to exchange their information to complete a task.
- c. **Guessing games.** These are a variation on information gap games. For instance, one student who has a flash card cannot show it to others but must instead mime it to others, and then other students have to guess the word from his or her performance.
- d. **Searching games.** These games are another version of two-way information games, with everyone seeking and giving information. For example, everyone is given a clue to find out who the criminal is. They have to ask and then reply to their partners to solve the problem.
- e. **Matching games.** As the name implies, participants need to find a match for a word, picture, or card.
- f. **Labelling games.** These are a form of matching game. The only difference is that the participants match labels and pictures.
- g. **Exchanging games.** Many card games fall into this category. In these games, students barter cards, objectives, or ideas.
- h. **Board games.** "Scrabble" is one of the most popular games in this category.
- i. **Role playing games.** Such games involve students in playing roles that they might not play in real life. They might also be employed to get students to practice set dialogues.

Yolageldili and Arikan (2011) explore the effectiveness of using games in teaching grammar to young learners from the view points of Turkish EFL teachers working in primary schools. Results point that Turkish EFL teachers recognize the pedagogical value of using games in their classrooms and agree that while teaching the grammar rules explicitly is still important, using games as a form of instruction is also beneficial. Similarly, the participants express that using games is effective in grammar teaching especially for young learners.

The fact that games are the most suitable instructional activities for young learners is obvious because they are naturally part of their existence. Nedomová (2007, p.17) argues that “young learners are not able to pay their attention for more than 10-20 minutes and after that they start to be bored and tired.” Especially when grammar teaching is too dependent on rules and memorization, they start to lose their interest and motivation. Games increase learners’ proficiency in practising grammar communicatively. With the help of grammar games, learners can develop their ability in using language as they are given the opportunity to use language in the contexts (Deesri, 2000). Celce-Murcia and Hilles (1988, p. 132) claim that when English language learners participate in games, the language they use is task-oriented and their aim is more than producing the correct speech. Therefore, games provide learners with an opportunity to practice grammar communicatively provided that games attract learners’ attention to particular grammar forms before the communicative practice.

Hong (2002), however, gives some suggestions to teachers about using games for teaching young learners by claiming that:

- a. When giving instructions to beginners, a few words in the mother tongue would be the quickest way to make everything clear. More English exposure is needed at a later stage.
- b. Games are best set up by demonstration rather than by lengthy explanation.
- c. It is very important not to play a game for too long. Students will begin to lose interest. It is best to stop a game at its peak. (p. 1).

Conclusion and Recommendations

Teaching grammar to beginners is not an easy task but it is not altogether impossible. Young learners have their ways of

learning new concepts. Playing is the most effective method for children. Teaching and explaining grammar rules or structures through songs, poems or games is definitely very effective and brings them amusement. Via playing, they interact with their environment, understand many principles of how things work and it is easy for them to remember lessons connected with pleasure, fun or amusement. Teachers need to find good methods and media to teach grammar, and some of these effective methods are using songs, rhymes, poems and games. Songs, rhymes, poems and games have become very important to both English language learners and teachers not only because they provide enjoyment and relaxation, but also because they encourage learners to use the language in a most creative and communicative manner. Thus, these are effective tools for practising specific grammatical structures. The language teacher can attain a major success by breaking the traditional view of grammar classes as dull and immensely boring. Furthermore, because to young learners, songs, rhymes, poems and games are naturally parts of their lives and are interesting to them, they tend to learn faster and better when reached through these strategies. Language teachers need to change their old ways of teaching and experiment newer ways of achieving better results in a changing world. For this reason, it is important for language teachers to be aware of some unique and viable ways of teaching grammar to young learners of English as second language in a bid to demystifying this much dreaded aspect of the English language.

Teachers should, however, be careful about choosing songs, rhymes, poems and games if they want them to be beneficial. The teacher should consider the benefits of such a song, rhyme, poem or game. They may seem appropriate and useful on the periphery but when their values are considered from the perspective of foreign/second language teaching, they may have little or no purpose.

Teachers must decide whether the level of the songs, rhymes, poems or games fits students' language level because they may become difficult when they are beyond the learners' level or it may become boring when learners find it too easy to carry on.

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