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ENHANCING THE TEACHING AND LEARNING OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE THROUGH THE MASS MEDIA

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Abstract
Language occupies a pride of place in the life of a nation. It is a powerful instrument of thought and very vital in a people's way of perceiving the world. This paper examines the contributions of the mass media towards the development of language in Nigeria. The study is anchored on the mentalist/innate theory propounded by Jean Piaget. The theory argues that children are born with an innate capacity for language development. This Language Acquisition Device (LAD) only needs to be stimulated through qualitative programming. The result of this project clearly indicates that the mass media still have a lot to do in terms of promoting language usage in Nigeria. Language based programmes are largely not given attention and many of the print media lack qualified language experts. This, therefore, causes doubt about the acceptability of the information emanating from these media. The paper recommends that if the mass media are to retain their role model status, the regulatory agencies must be alert to their responsibilities by ensuring that standards are maintained.
Keywords: language, media, development, model, acquisition.

Introduction

Experience has shown that human life, in its present form, would be impossible and inconceivable without the use of language. In fact, one of the basic distinguishing characteristics of man from other animal among other animal is language. Man is the only animal among other higher animals that uses language.

Language is an important tool for social development at both individual and communal levels. Indeed, the use to which language can be put cannot and should not be underestimated and anything that can be done to facilitate easy communication should not be spared.

Basically, all languages perform certain functions - communication, emotional, expression, social interaction, rational logical, critical and learning functions. Man is an important animal for his ability to influence his environment through the use of language. Afolayan (1989) described language as an important instrument in the development of human beings and no meaningful development can take place in a human community without language. As an instrument of communication, language makes it possible for the people in an environment to interact and co-exist: it paves way for continuity of society. Human beings get equipped for maximum self-realization and self-development through the use of a language. It is the only road to acquiring education in a meaningful way.

Language occupies a pride of place in Nigeria's educational system. Language policy may be seen as government's statement of intention on the issue of language(s) for the nation. This may include the role of specific language(s) in the society and the assignment of different functions to different languages, commitment of languages to the present with projection for the future.

The experts who fashioned the national policy on education realized that language is fundamental to the education of the child. Therefore, in the national policy on education (2007), it was stated:

> *In addition to appreciating the importance of languages in the educational process and as a means of preserving the people's culture, the government considers it to be in the interest of national unity that each child should be encouraged to learn one of the three major languages in Nigeria: Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba.*

The above statement is one of government's policy statements on the language of education in Nigeria. In addition, the 1979 constitution gave recognition to the English Language as its paragraph 51 states. "The business of the National Assembly shall be conducted in English Language and in Hausa, lgbo and Yoruba when adequate arrangements have been made thereby".

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The issue of falling standard in the quality of both the spoken and written language in Nigeria is one that has, over the years, engaged the attention of parents, teachers, employers of labour and the various tiers of government. Specifically, there is a growing concern for the nagging problem of student's dismal performance in languages, especially at the school certificate examination level.

It is against this backdrop of continued decline in the standard of language that the researcher has chosen to investigate the role of the mass media in language development in Nigeria. It has often been said that the mass media exist to fulfill certain social functions to their beneficiaries, one of which is educational. How effective have the media been in discharging these roles? If language, as encapsulated in the language policies is such important, then the media through their educative function, must prepare adequately through qualitative and educative language-based programming to influence changes in the standard of language usage in Nigeria. The society regards the press as a model. In fact, many people consider anything seen on the pages of the newspapers as indisputably correct. Thus, the press should, at all times, be concerned about the quality of expressions allowed in their editorials.

Theory

From the available linguistic evidence, we gather that children are not born with a predisposition to learn any one language rather than any one other. All children, regardless of race, culture and perhaps parentage are born with the same built-in ability for learning languages tagged Language Acquisition Device (LAD).

This is the argument of the mentalist/innate theory as propounded by Jean Piaget. This theory assumes that the complete act of thought follows a fairly common sequence in this order: arousal of intellectual interest, preliminary explanation of the problem, formulation of ideas and verification of the suitability. The mentalist theory is related to the innate theory of language acquisition. The argument is that children are born with an innate capacity for language development. These natural

language principles make up a child's "Language Acquisition Device". This is an amplification of the innate theory of language acquisition which holds that the child is pre-programmed to effectively internalize and operate language.

According to Chomsky, language acquisition device is biologically in-built in the human organism hence the acquisition of a first language as distinct from the learning of a relatively short period from birth. Crystal (1987) observed that the child uses its LAD to make sense of the utterance heard around it, deriving from this "Primary Linguistic Data", hypothesis about the grammar of the language what the sentences are and how they are constructed. This knowledge is then used to produce sentences that, after a process of trial and error, correspond to those of adult speech.

Given that children are born with in-built language acquisition device, the role of the mass media should be to activate this biological endowment through qualitative language programmes. In presenting programmes on language, the media should ensure that approaches capable of stimulating reader's interest are carefully chosen. This is followed by vivid and illustrative explanations of the language topic. Only good models with mastery of the target language should be engaged by the electronic media as programme presenters.

Definition of Terms

Mass Media: The term mass media, according to Mc Quail (2000) is shortened to describe means of communication that operate on a large scale, reaching and involving virtually everyone in a society to a greater or lesser degree.

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The word 'media' is the plural of medium which means a channel or vehicle through which something is carried or transmitted. This implies that the mass media are channels of communication in a modern society, primarily the print and the electronic media. Mass media are the organized means for communicating openly and at a distance to many receivers within a short space of time. Murphy (1977) asserted that media of communication keep the world running smoothly by helping individuals adjust to the reality of lives. They keep society on and healthy suggesting solutions that are socially acceptable.

Classification of The Mass Media

The mass media can be broadly classified into two- the print media and the electronic media. The classification is carried out according to the mechanism involved in the process of conveying massages

The Print Media

The print media have a mechanism that depends on printing items of information. These include newspapers, magazines, pamphlets and comics that carry message to the populace by appealing to the sense of sight. One common thing about the print media is that they involve the pressing of ink on paper using plates and blocks and special machines.

The Electronic Media

The electronic media use devices that can transform or change sound or light waves into electrical signals, which are reconverted to things that can be heard or seen on radio or television (Ate, 2008). Ike (2002) remarked that through the electronic media people are generally introduced to new knowledge and made to fully comprehend what they partially know.

The electronic media, according to Daramola (2003) include:

i. Radio and audio recording that appeal to the sense of sound.
ii. Television, motion pictures and video recordings that appeal to both sense of sound and that of sight

Akpede (1994) described the electronic or broadcast media as the most powerful in the world today for affecting the minds, emotions and even the actions of mankind. This suggests that they have the power to build and destroy an individual or an institution as the case may be.

Differences Between Print and Electronic Media

According to Daramola (2003), broadcast media differs from print media in the following ways:

i. Print media appeal to the eye, while broadcast media appeal to both the eye and ear.
ii. Print is always in written form, while broadcast is always in oral form
iii. Broadcast news are forgotten easily and cannot be kept as reference work while the print media serve that purpose.
iv. Print media are more detailed than broadcast media
v. Print media are more permanent than broadcast media which are ephemeral.

The above differences in the characteristics of the mass media should be noted, while making a choice of presentation technique to the reading or listening public; otherwise, the essence of communication, which is understanding may be grossly undermined.

Mass Media and Language Development in Nigeria.

Many reasons have been advanced for students' consistent poor performance and lack of interest in language. One of such reasons is the lack of adequate and relevant teaching materials.

Added to these problems, according to Ajayi (2002) is the seemingly absence of enrichment materials in the school nowadays. In the words of Garette (1993) cited in Ajayi:

> *Newspapers are among the most relevant texts available for the classroom. Students like them because they can always find something they can care about inside the newspaper.*

Thus, the newspaper has a luring catch on readers. This contrasts sharply with textbooks, which in most cases, are stale, irrelevant, uninteresting, unappealing and out of students' immediate experience.

Since the content of newspapers/magazines are always current, students develop language and academic skills within a real and relevant context. Due to its immediacy, students easily relate what they read in the newspaper with what goes on in the society. In this way, the content of learning is within the learners' experience and this invariably motivates and develops student's interest. In fact, the newspaper can be a great language enrichment material, particularly in writing and reading classroom. For instance, it is easy to adopt; it can be marked, cut, pasted, coloured and discarded easily and new issues appear daily. Photographs. paintings, drawing, graphics, maps, cartoons and sketches serve as comprehension aids because they provide context clues to students working with newspaper. Umoh (1991) succinctly summarized the value of the newspaper and magazine:

> *Newspaper and magazines are excellent media for reading instruction because they are readily available and they treat a wide variety of subject matters. Newspapers and magazines are highly motivating for students because they focus on the present. They are interesting to students who have been turned off by formal reading materials. Newspapers have added advantage of providing a fresh set of materials each day.*

Writing on the role of the newspaper on language development, Ike (2002) stated that it uses standard language, especially in the editorial and features columns which along with every other thing on the pages of the newspaper, do no less than educate the man by brushing up his grammar and or familiarizing him with proper or effective word usage in the language generally. This makes the newspaper an important model for language acquisition and development.

The language of the newspaper is generally formal, and depending on the audience can be high formal, mid formal or low formal. Sometimes, it is cast in vernacular or even pidgin English. In all, the writer is conscious of his spelling, for if he misspells, he mis-informs. He is also concerned with proper usage of words which only cnables him to make desired impact on the audience.

Like the print, the broadcast media has a lot of contributions to make in language development. The radio, for instance, is different from newspaper in that it is a mouth-to-ear medium. As such, vocalization is its most valued asset. Here, extensive and rigorous training is required to produce good radio broadcasters and commentators.

The language of the radio can be formal, informal, vernacular, pidgin etc depending on the programme and desired effects. In each variety, it strives for perfection in word usage so as to effectively play its traditional role of being model for other language users.

The television is a mouth-to-ear or a face-to-face medium, relying on gestures, facial expressions and other bodily actions to facilitate effective communication with the audience.

The aim of language here is to communicate with, rather than confound audience. To this end, the television uses simple, exact language such that average educated person in the society will find no problem in understanding. The language usually is devoid of words or expressions that can make the audience scamper time and again for the dictionary or such words that impress rather than simply communicate effectively. This makes television an excellent medium of language learning. The language here as in other media, thrives on essential grammar and effective word usage.

Recommendations

If the mass media are to contribute meaningfully to language development in Nigeria, provision of adequate and qualitative language - based programmes in their editorial is necessary. Emphasis should be laid on

treating specific language lessons. To effectively do this, reporters on education beat must be thoroughly grounded in the language of reporting.

Again, the question of qualified and adequate proofreaders must be addressed. The media, especially the print, should engage highly experienced and qualified proofreaders to ensure that the papers are free from grammatical blunders, which could mislead the reading public.

Teachers and educators should encourage and motivate their students to cherish the importance of newspapers and broadcast media as vital channels of language acquisition and development. It is common knowledge that students attach importance to the entertainment role of the mass media, while ignoring their educative functions. This calls for attitudinal change on the part of language learners.

To stimulate learner's interest, the language of presentation should be simple and exact and the sentences so well structured that the points are made in the most effective way possible. As part of being exact in sentence structure, word selection and punctuation, the language should omit unnecessary details, condense unimportant ideas to their essentials and eliminate vague or unnecessary words.

As already stated in this paper, vocalization is the most valued asset of the broadcast media. This underscores their importance in the development of the spoken aspect of language. Thus, only presenters with good pronunciation skills should be engaged to avoid misleading the public. Extensive and rigorous is training required to produce good broadcasters and commentators.

Conclusion

Against the backdrop of continued decline in the standard of language usage in Nigeria, the researcher has chosen to investigate the contribution the mass media make in language development in Nigeria. The mass media should be repositioned to discharge their educative functions to the society, especially in the area of language learning and development. To influence changes in the standard of language usage in Nigeria, qualitative and educative language programming is required.

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