

Taking English beyond the Classroom: Effective Utilization of Co-Curricular Activities in Schools and Colleges

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ABSTRACT One factor established to be responsible for the lack-luster oral performance of post-primary students, especially in most government-owned schools, is the lack of constant use of English in and outside the classroom. The attitude towards the spoken English by the key players in a school community—the school’s administrators, the teachers, and finally the students—is presently low key. This is a challenge to the teachers of English. One of the ways to turn round the situation is by using Co-Curricular Activities (CCAs) to liberate English usage from the stifling confines of the four walls of the classroom. However, this can be achieved only when such complementary activities are designed in such a way as to be relevant to the lives of the students. This paper reports the result obtained through the use of a modified debate, known as Dialogue Debate (DD), is closer to real life situation than the traditional debate which is courtroom-like.

Keywords: Co-Curricular Activities (CCAs), Dialogue Debate (DD), English, teachers, classroom

Introduction

According to Abubakar (2006), spoken skills are largely neglected in almost all the educational levels in Nigeria. He goes on to argue the post primary level is a crucial stage where this deficiency could be remedied. In a similar vein, Nok (2000:2) opines that since secondary education is the receiver of the products from the primary education, what happens at the primary schools has a direct effect on what happens at the secondary. It has become obvious to most educationists that the oral performance of students, not only in the post-primary institutions, but beyond, is a source of concern. This is

because most students find it hard to speak, especially in the company of other people. The major concern is that students generally do not use English as a medium of communication except in the classroom and even in this situation it is kept at a minimum. This situation is of course unacceptable to any teacher, more so those of English. This means that the situation is a challenge to such teachers and teachers of other subjects and school administrators inclusive. One of the ways that can be explored to get out of this difficult situation is through effective use of Co-Curricular Activities (CCAs). Hence, this paper aims to explore the use of Co-Curricular Activities (CCAs) as a vehicle to transport students to the world beyond the classroom. The paper will concentrate on the best practices in the debate tradition. The new trend is known as Dialogue Debate (DD), which has been observed to be closer to real life situations and therefore more relevant to the lives of students than the traditional type being practiced presently.

Spoken English and Post Primary Institution in the North

In a recent article, Abubakar (2006) has focused attention on the state of the oral performance of students in post-primary institutions with particular reference to those in colleges under the Science and Technical Schools Board, Kano State. He found out then that the poor reading culture among the students accounted for their lack of extensive use of English outside the classroom. However, he was quick to concur with Onyebuanyi (2004) who was of the opinion that much emphasis has been laid on written communication leaving other communication skills at mercy of the students. This means that all the other skills, apart from the written, are affairs more or less to be conducted privately by the students. Abubakar (2006) also noted that while other sections of Nigeria are concerned with the presence of pidgin in the speech and in the writing of students, in the north, especially the 'core' north, the concern is that of students' nonchalant attitude towards the use of English as a medium of communication. In a similar argument, Amayo (1986:316 in Ofulue, 2004) argued that pronunciation is central to intelligible oral communication in any language. He goes on to state that a person needs to be heard first in order to be understood, no matter how competent that person is in syntactic and semantic structures of that language. These arguments all point to one obvious fact and that is oral communication is important when it comes to the teaching and learning of English in Nigeria. According to Abubakar (2006), many of the students in the colleges under the Science and Technical Schools Board interviewed confessed that their speech is full of mother tongue interference hence probably their reluctance to speak publicly. In addition, they speak English mainly in the classroom. More revealing is the fact that English is not used in the playground, the dining-hall, and

in the hostels: prefects do not help matters as they use the vernacular for official announcements everywhere except occasionally on the assembly ground.

From the foregoing discourse, one can see the grim and bleak situation under which English is taught and learnt at least in one section of the educational institution! Therefore, the only way out is to release this vital academic language from its present shackles. This can be done when the whole school community is ready to confront the issue. This communal effort becomes paramount when one takes a look at the English column in either WEAC or NECO results. One thing should be borne in mind that a fail in English means an extra one whole year a student.

The Concept of Co-curricular Activities (CCAs)

For a more detailed discussion on the categorization of the concept of Co-Curricular Activities see Abubakar 2005. The recent introduction of the term Co-Curricular Activities (CCAs) as a replacement to the former term, Extra-Curricular Activities (ECAs), is a strong signal by educationists showing the importance of this complementary aspect of the school life (Abubakar :2003, Abubakar: 2005). This was probably done in order to emphasize the role of the school as a gateway to the world. However, in spite of this positive development, it is pathetic to realize that most schools are yet to take up this challenge of ensuring that schools do comprehend all the social levels, as well as ensure that students are exposed to the public environment. In other words, the school should be a 'safe bridge' for students into the world, away from the confines of the home, whether 'good' or 'bad'. It is essential for all those concerned, especially the teachers, to always consider the school first and foremost as the agent of the child. His needs, capacities and interests are to receive an independent professional assessment with a view to develop them so as to make the child realize his utmost potential. Abubakar (2010 (c):2) has this to say:

The school can be considered as an agent for clients, namely, the parents and the children. It is an agent for the former because it provides services, which the parents, unaided, could not provide. At the same time, it (the school) exists to further the children's interest. However, it should be noted that on the whole the school is first and foremost the agent of the child...

(Abubakar 2010(c):2)

The role of effective communication, especially within the school premises in establishing rapport in a face-to-face conversation, is essential: this conversation could be between teachers versus the school managers, teachers versus teachers, teachers versus students, students versus students and so on.

And when such a conversation is between an inspector, who is supposed to be a seasoned teacher in a particular subject and a classroom teacher be it at the primary or post primary school, such importance is brought into bold relief. English being the second language and the language of instruction in Nigeria, its usage, by especially those who are in the school community, is of paramount importance to the school system in particular and the society in general. Firstly, the teachers and the school administrators are mentors who can help to model the behavior – speech included – of their students. And these important segments of the school community can insist that all conversations be carried out in English, thus taking language use to beyond the four walls of the classroom. And to effectively do this, the school, according to Abubakar (2010), must offer a planned strategy of exposure to the world for the students, not only precariously through reading but by actual practice that has to be sustained. Taking the use of English in a school outside the stifling confines of the four walls of the classroom is one of the surest ways to ensure the enhanced performance of students in both internal and external examinations.

CCAs are activities that education organizations in some parts of the world create for school students. They serve to promote a variety of activities, which all school students must attend alongside the standard study curriculum. It is believed that extra activities for school students are a means to instill active social-interaction. The original initiative later came to include important qualities, such as leadership, healthy recreation, self-discipline and self-confidence. In higher education, CCA participation is even accountable for precious academic points. It is on record that some post primary institutions in Kano State emulated this practice due to the then belief in the importance of co-curricular activities. Another important aspect of the CCAs, especially for us in the northern part of Nigeria, is the opportunity the activities offer for students to use the language actively as a means of peer-to-peer communication amongst them.

The scope of CCAs is wide due to a nearly in exhaustive list of interests. Some of the major groups include the Literary and Debating Club, the Jet Club, the Computer Club, the Art Club, the Dance Club the Swimming Club, and the Basketball Club. Uniformed groups include the Cadet Corps, the Red Cross, the Girl Guides; Performing arts groups are also included. CCAs are held outside standard curriculum hours and the activities partaken depend on the nature of the CCA. For example, uniformed groups do foot drills and team-building exercises, while competitive sportsmen spend most of the time training and learning their respective sport techniques from their instructors.

In the first year, the students are required to pick one or more interest groups to join. While the choices available to them differ from school to school, national requirements for the different levels of education exist. In some Primary schools, students may choose not to join a CCA.

The Reality of the Nigerian Situation

According to Mai Bello (2004:1), Nigeria has spent much of its time since independence settling one conflict or another of varying degrees; some more violent than the others, others more widespread than others, yet some more avoidable than others and so on. He argues that certain uses of language are bound to create and sustain conflicts, especially if such language use is done by the print media in its effort to inform the public about such conflicts happening somewhere else. The potent of this certain language use lies in the style of writing where one party in conflict is shown to be innocent while the other is shown to be the aggressor. He claims that this method was used in reporting the July 1991 Shagamu communal clash between the Hausa and the Yoruba.

According to Albert (2001:274), Kano is one of the oldest indigenous cities in Nigeria. It was said to be founded around the seventh century as an Abagayawa settlement. Under the leadership of Bagauda, Kano witnessed tremendous development. In the fourteen century, Islam became the official religion in the city. Shortly after, Kano became a major centre of Islamic civilization. However, at different times, southerners tend to take over the economic prowess of 'Kanawa' (the Kano people) and this, of course, is not to their liking. The disturbances which later took place have resulted in a linguistic defense mechanism whereby the enemy is castigated through the use of language (see Abubakar, 2006(a)).

A part from the two crises explained in this paper, there were other crises or conflicts that took place in Kano. Some of these are:

- The 1953 ethnic violence
- The 1980 Maitatsine religious crisis
- The Akaluka Gideon political Crisis
- The 1995 Ethnic Disturbance at Sabon Gari
- The Shaiite religious (sectarian) Attacks of 1996 and 1997 (Albert: 2001: in Abubakar, (2006)

From the above scenario, one can deduce that something urgent needs to be done to avoid future occurrence of such mayhems. CCAs can be effectively used to curb the situation.

The Way Out: Using Dialogue Debate

The traditional style of debate is to train the students to memorize certain points in order to 'pour them down' in front of the audience. The whole atmosphere created is not only artificial, but courtroom-like. In addition, such a style is far removed from what obtains in real life situations to the extent

that such experience for the students becomes irrelevant. Similarly, the traditional method of debate is also unreal. This is because the whole affair is disjointed and sometimes confrontational in nature. After all, nowhere in real life situations does one find at the beginning of a discussion participants designated as first, second and third speakers. Also, no meaningful discussion takes place where individual participants are allocated time within which to say all he/she wants to say. Above all, the traditional method of debate is undemocratic in nature.

However, the modified method known as *DIALOGUE DEBATE (DD)* has been introduced to remedy some of the above observed anomalies of the traditional method of debate. This new method is referred to as Dialogue in order to emphasize the importance of dialoguing in resolving communal issues. In fact, dialogue is a cardinal principle of democracy. Encapsulated within the meaning of 'dialogue' is that of 'compromise', 'accommodation' and 'tolerance'. These are positive ideals that enjoy universal acceptance and thus, part of best practices in social interaction. The sharing of ideas is an integral part of the human socialization process. And these ideas need not be similar in both nature and perspective. Dialogue also presupposes freedom of speech as well as respect for other people's idea or ideas. Dialogue Debate is closer to a real life discussion taking place daily and every minute. It is educative because there is the allowance for one to learn from another and for issues to be discussed dispassionately.

Conclusion

Nigeria is multi-cultural in nature. Frequently, people are bound to have different and differing ideas about one another. Co-Curricular Activities (CCAs) can be effectively used to promote tolerance and harmonious co-existence through the promotion of Dialogue Debate (DD). This modified type of debate has taken care of most of the anomalies of the traditional type, which is courtroom like in nature.

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