

Addaiyan Journal of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences

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(An international Publisher of Research & Academic Resources)

Journal Homepage: <https://aipublisher.org/projects/ajahss/>

ISSN : 2581-8783 (Online)

DOI: 10.36099/ajahss.3.6.13

Oral Expression as A Tool Towards the Teaching of Literature in French at The Secondary School Level in Nigeria**Mary Effiong NYONG (Ph.D.)**

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Article History

Received: 17.06.2021

Accepted: 23.06.2021

Published: 30.06.2021



Abstract: The position and roles of the language teacher have changed a lot in the globalised world of Information and Communication Technology (ICT). This is to say that with the upsurge of ICT the relevance of the teacher is threatened. Thus the language teacher needs to change from the stereotype methods of teaching and apply all available resources to achieve his goals. It is the intention of this paper to present a discussion on how oral expression can be used to effectively teach literature in French at the Secondary School level in an Anglophone set-up.

Keywords: Communication, Oral Expression, Literature.

INTRODUCTION

The West African Examination Council (WAEC), SSCE syllabus changes from time to time. The general trend is that each change is accompanied by greater demand from the learners, including learners offering the French language as one of their subjects. These same learners read very little because they have not, perhaps, formed the habit of reading, or because they do not know how to manage time and therefore spend too much playing with their phones. It is interesting to note that many of the learners encounter French for the first time at the secondary school level. Learners who live in urban areas may have better luck as they may have started learning French at the primary level. Nevertheless, teachers of literature in French still find it difficult to communicate with their students effectively. Luckily, the new SSCE syllabus of WAEC does not expect students to be able to write or speak on literary themes of the books recommended for French. Emphasis is rather on comprehension of the text and other complexities in the text. This paper intends to show teachers of French how to apply oral expression in teaching literature in French at the Secondary School level.

CLARIFICATION OF TERMS

Communication

Communication is all about human interaction, the transfer of information to effect or influence, and mutual understanding between communities (Craig: 2017). According to Nyong (2021:810), there can be no smooth interaction or mutual understanding between parties who do not understand each other. In his contribution, Ajiboye (2003:4) asserts that for communication to be effective in achieving the objective of bringing men together, participants in the communicative event must be prepared to employ the tactics of verbal give-and-take.

Oral expression

Ordinarily speaking, oral expression is the ability of an individual to express himself through the use of words. Oral language is the means through which an individual expresses his ideas, feelings, beliefs, thoughts, opinions, etc.

Literature

Literature, a word whose origin is traced to the Latin word "Literaturae", meaning "writings" has been used to designate fictional and imaginative writings - poetry, prose fiction, and drama. In an expanded use literature, according to Abrams (2005: 152-153) refers to:

any other writings (including philosophy) history and even scientific works addressed to a general audience) that are especially distinguished in form, expression and emotional power.

THE PLACE OF ORAL EXPRESSION IN THE STUDY OF LANGUAGE

The essence of learning any language is for communication. It is for this reason that the major purpose of the language arts programmes in the school is to help develop each child's ability to utilize his skills in oral or written expression for effective communication (Ruddel 1972:294). This brings into focus the development of the receptive as well as the productive facilities of language skills towards effective communication. The learning and teaching of a foreign language like French in an Anglophone environment like ours make oral expression very crucial at all levels of the educational system.

In the past, literature, composition writing, and comprehension in French were taught in separate language situations. However, with the current method of teaching French, that is the communicative method, which has been expanded to include action (la Methode Actionnelle), emphasis is laid on the ability of the learner to communicate with the teacher and vice versa. As a result, all aspects of language: literature, comprehension, composition writing, orals, translation, and so on, can be taught in the same language situations. This method merges together the various components of language to show that they are also inter-related.

Oral expression helps in the intellectual and mental development of the learner (Horworth 1972:283). It also enhances the ability of the child to think logically. Infact Uwatt (1996:99) opines that:

Oral language is the vehicle used in expressing thoughts, ideas, feelings, concepts etc. Such expression which is verbally done is often called oral expression. Unlike the written language

situation, oral expression conveys meaning through stress, pitch, intonation and the rise and fall of the voice.

It is no gainsaying that a child who is encouraged to express himself orally will have a wider vocabulary than the child whose tendency to express himself is stifled. Oral expression helps the child to coordinate his thoughts and subsequently communicate them to others. Speaking of oral expression, Hennings, (1986:9) says:

Oral language is the thread that should run through all classroom activities from the earliest grades onward. Children talk out ideas about life, language and literature, prior to, during and after reading. Through talk, children make connections between what they are reading and what they are writing.

Every learner irrespective of age, is a “child” as far as the domain of learning is concerned. By extension to what Hennings asserts above, it can be said that oral expression improves the imaginative power of the learner. It, therefore, becomes imperative that oral expression lessons be well planned in the educational system. Facilities that enhance early planning, development and coordination of oral expression materials must be carefully considered in curriculum planning.

Every human being has an innate capacity for language acquisition. This capacity, however, will remain dormant if the human being in his childhood stage, is not exposed to language. In other words, this capacity, though innate, needs to be activated for it to begin to function. This activation is usually done by adults and the child. When adults speak the child listens. Later on the child begins to reproduce what he heard. However, at this early stage, the child’s first contact with the language is with spoken words. Through the use of these newly learnt words, the child is able to express his needs and desires. It is also through words that he is able to communicate his feelings to others. Thus oral expression is a very important aspect in the study of language.

QUALITIES OF THE LANGUAGE TEACHER

For a teacher to be an effective language teacher, he must possess some distinct qualities. First of all, the language teacher must be well versed in the language he is to teach. Thus the French language teacher must be linguistically competent in French. A teacher who intends to teach literature in French through oral expression must be knowledgeable in the different forms of literature as well as their differences and similarities. Infact, Uwatt (1996:100) is of the opinion that such a teacher must also be at ease with the use of language, that is, his vocabulary, articulation, pitch, information, stress, pause and voice quality must be remarkably good. With the advent of Information and Communication Technology (ICT), a teacher, at whatever level, who does not possess or acquire more knowledge may eventually become redundant. Aborisade (2006:9) puts this fear of redundancy in the face of the changes accompanying the ICT succinctly by asking:

Are we as language teachers in Nigeria aware of these changes in their ramifications? How have these changes affected our place and roles? what can we do to remain relevant and move on to the cutting edge of research and development?

The teacher of literature in French must possess a sense of aesthetics which is above average. He must be able to identify characters in a literary work and what is remarkable about such characters. More importantly, he must be able to project the same through visual and auditory aids in order to capture the interest and attention of his young learners. This is in consonance with the submission of Ruddel (1972:309) that evidence seems to indicate that the teacher is the simple, most influential factor in any programme attempting to realize or guide creativity within the classroom. The example set by the teacher in showing creativity in others is of utmost importance. Therefore the literature teacher must be actively involved in the characters in a given literary work. Uwatt (1996:100) says:

He should be talented in identifying and understanding images and utilizing them to stir up the tactile sense, the gustatory sense, and the kinesthetic sense in the child. He should also see the usefulness of vocal pause to help the children take time off to feel, hear, smell, taste or experience the movement of each image. He should manipulate vocal pause to create suspense and excitement.

ORAL EXPRESSION IN THE TEACHING OF LITERATURE

It is already known that literature is divided into three genres namely prose, drama, and poetry. However, our discussion is going to centre on prose and drama since it is these two genres that are specified in the secondary school syllabus. Poetry in French is usually studied at a higher level.

Prose

Prose, in simple language, is telling of stories. Children like storytelling and at the secondary school level, French learners are already conversant with the study of prose in the English Language. However, when it comes to the study of literature in French the problem of the language barrier comes in. The greatest challenge the teacher faces at this level is how to motivate the students. The first step towards doing this is to keep the class animated. Animation does not necessarily mean rowdiness. The teacher must give himself a stated objective, that is, what he wants the learners to achieve at the end of a given lesson. He must then plan how to achieve this goal. Quickly following the planning stage is the acquisition of instructional materials to be used in class. These include cuttings from magazines and newspapers, pictures drawn on cardboards, paintings, cartoons, flash cards carrying new and difficult words, and so on. Having planned and acquired the instructional materials, the teacher is now ready to begin the teaching properly. Naturally, the first step, as in all teaching situations, is the introduction.

This introductory step is very crucial because it is the introduction that can make or mar the whole teaching exercise. The way the teacher introduces the lesson can capture the attention of the learners or make them lose interest in the whole lesson. Loss of interest will make the learners' minds wonder away from the classroom. The teacher could start with a discussion of the particular text to be studied. Let us at this stage use a specific literary text to make our discussion clearer. The novel entitled *LeMandat* written by Sembene Ousmane can be used here as an example. The teacher should ensure that the introduction is very brief. Then the teacher summarizes the story in a manner that will whet the appetite of the learners for more about how the story is going to end in order to create excitement and suspense. He can adopt the question-and-answer method. This must be done in very simple French to ensure comprehension as follows:

Teacher: Est-ce que c'est bon d'avoir beaucoup d'argent?
(Is it good to have a lot of money?)

Learners: Oui (Yes)

Teacher: Dans notre texte nous allons voir que quelquefois il n'est pas bon d'avoir beaucoup d'argent. Est-ce que vous êtes prêts pour l'histoire? (In our novel we are going to see that sometimes it is not good to have a lot of money.

Are you ready for the story?

Learners: Oui (Yes)

The teacher now summarises the story in simple terms. After the summary the teacher can continue by introducing the major characters in the story to the class using, still, the question and answer approach:

Teacher: Maintenant, voici les personnages principaux dans histoire (Now here are the important characters in the story). Ibrahima Dieng, le heros (the hero), Abdou, son neveu (his nephew), Bah, le facteur (the postman), Metyet Aram, les femmes d'Ibrahima (Ibrahima's wives), Mbarka, le commerçant avaricieux (the greedy trader), Mbaye, l'arriere cousin de Dieng (Dieng's distant cousin), Maissa, un voisin de Dieng (Dieng's neighbor).

After the introduction of the main characters, the teacher could immediately follow up with the following simple questions to give the students the chance to repeat some of the newly learnt words. Before this he should make sure his flash cards bearing these new words are handy.

Teacher : Comments'appelle le facteur?
(What is the name of the postman)

A student: Bah

Teacher: Qui sont Aram et Mety (who are Aram and Mety<)

Another Student: Les femmes d'Ibrahima

Teacher: Qui est Ibrahima? (Who is Ibrahima?)

Another Student: Le heros (the hero)

The teacher shows flash cards bearing the words: *facteur*, *femmes* and *le heros* to the class after each response by the speakers, and so on.

The teacher continues:

Teacher: Combien de femmes a Ibrahima ? (How many wives has Ibrahima?)

Student: Deux femmes (two wives)

Teacher: Est-ce qu'il est monogame ou polygame? (Is he a monogamist or a polygamist ?)

Student: Il est polygame (He is a polygamist).

If the teacher notices that some of the students are not paying attention, he would recapture their attention by showing them a cut-out showing a man and two, or more women (his wives) and another picture showing a man and only one wife to explain a polygamist and a monogamist respectively. It is important that a foreign language teacher be alert and observant all the time. He should avoid monotony in activity.

Another oral expression activity in a class of literature in French is story reading. The teacher need not necessarily read every line in a novel that is as voluminous as *Le Mandat*, the example we are using. Having summarized the story chapter by chapter, he can then direct the children to the relevant portions in each chapter. He will then motivate the children and get them ready to listen to him as he reads these portions. He then allows them to choral read while he observes and listens.

DRAMA

The introductory stage, planning and acquisition of instructional materials as already highlighted are the same in the teaching of drama. However, with drama, character identification takes pre-eminence Uwatt (1996:102) states clearly that:

In drama, the characters, what they are, what they do and what they say are the life wire of role playing. The children this time will want to do it the way the characters in the play do and not be told how they did it.

The teacher should be able to bring out to the notice of the students any unique or remarkable features in the characters. This will help in assigning roles. Role-playing is another fertile area where oral expression is very useful in a literature class. The interesting thing about role-playing is that every student sees himself in the character he is representing. He tries to think like the character. He then tries to interpret his given role according to how that particular character is expected to act. The role of the teacher at this stage is that of an encouraging guide. If it is an imaginary play the teacher should explain clearly what is expected of each role before the acting itself begins. The teacher should choose concrete and familiar situations. A situation is suggested here: A man takes his aged grandfather who is ill to see the doctor. The doctor has a nurse and an attendant to assist him. The teacher should help the students to use key word pattern and plan the story taking into consideration the sequence in the story. Finally, the teacher will let the students know that the expressions and movements will all be theirs.

In realizing the situation given in the example above the class can be divided into groups. Each group could act the same drama in turns to see which group performs best. This will give all the learners the chance for free, spontaneous, and individual expression in a lively, cordial but educational setting.

CONCLUSION

This paper had attempted to remove the boredom and disinterest that usually plague literature in French classes at the secondary school level. The paper has suggested numerous ways through which the adoption of oral expression can ease this problem. It is not enough to preach to our young ones the importance of learning French language. We should also motivate them to develop interest in studying all aspects of the language. Regular and persistent application of oral expression in all domains of the language will help eliminate, gradually, the phobia of self-expression among our young learners at the secondary school level.

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