



Effective Teaching of Composition: A Foreign Language Experience

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ABSTRACT: *Teaching and learning are indeed a serious business. The classroom is a complex situation because effective teaching and learning do not just occur. They are carefully planned and worked out. In any language learning situation, four skills are required. Listening, speaking, reading and writing have been widely received as the four basic language skills in the order we have listed them. In this article, our interest is focused on writing, the fourth component of language skills. The paper attempts to offer notes on strategies on how teaching and learning of this “daily-need” facet of every human language can be made easy and productive. The greatest achievement of a teacher/lecturer is the practical attainment of his/her set instructional objectives at all times and the permanent change in behavior of his/her learners for positive societal development in the long run.*

Keywords: *Subject-matter, context, vocabulary, mechanics, learner, target audience*

I. INTRODUCTION

This paper is a review of the teaching and learning of composition, particularly in a foreign language situation. The issue of foreign language acquisition should not be treated with a pint of salt considering its contributions to the societal developments of countries like Nigeria. French language has significant role to play in ensuring socio-cultural, economical, political, geographical and religious developments. Those who studied a foreign language such as French in an Anglophone country like Nigeria can perform many functions. They can work as linguists, teachers/lecturers, translators, interpreters, journalists/reporters, bilingual secretaries, administrators and sociologists, only to mention just a few.

Ogundokun (1997: 32) [1] writes: “Composition is an exercise of composing, which concerns bringing ideas, experiences, imaginations, observations, findings, feelings and suggestions, among other things, on a given subject-matter.” As its purpose, composition can be to inform, entertain, educate, persuade, indoctrinate or warn a particular target audience. As a piece of art, a man-made entity, composition could be based on real life or imaginary character, actions and events.

There are various types of composition ranging from simple descriptive essay, narrative composition to more complex ones like expository essay, debate, argumentative writing, speech and article writing. Letter writing is equally a form of composition.

Besides peculiar features of each of these composition types, there are three structural elements which they all have in common. Every good composition should have an introduction, body of the composition and a conclusion. The introduction gives an in-sight to what is to be discussed. It normally begins with a topic, title, heading or caption; that is, a group of words, with or without an action word (verb), which summarizes the theme of the discussion. From the topic, the writer/composer may move on by defining the most important noun called the headword; explaining it (the headword) in his/her own best words or giving a kind of historical background which can open-up his/her intended message to his/her readers. Sometimes, an appropriate strong statement such as a proverb/ maxim, an adage, an idiom or a quotation from a holy book can be used in the

introductory section of a composition to arrest the attention of the readers as well as arouse their interest in what the writer is to talk about.

In the body of a composition, a writer is expected to present his/her points on the topic under consideration whether as a detailed description, a picturesque narration, a rational argument or an explanatory exposition as the case may be. Expressing his/her position, at least three major points or arguments must be properly developed. Each of the points should take its own paragraph. A paragraph is a unit of a composition where a main idea is developed with the aid of both the topic sentence and the illustrative sentences.

The length of a given paragraph depends on what a writer has to say on a particular point. A good composition should have *at least* five well developed paragraphs; one for introduction, three for the content and one for the conclusion.

The conclusion marks the end of a composition. It sums-up the main ideas discussed, suggests solutions to some problematic issues raised in the course of the composition or open a new door for further discussion on the subject-matter by questioning the existing/current trend of events or actions as regards the on-going dialogue.

Teaching composition becomes necessary in a foreign language learning situation because it is a testing ground for learners to experiment their language capacity. Composition writing helps learners at different levels to consolidate their tempo of creativity since they learn and demonstrate how to blend various language components such as sentence constructions, appropriate use of words in different situations and the use of basic mechanics of good Writing: correct spelling, punctuation marks and good hand-writing, which of course is an asset to a writer.

II. DISCUSSION

Before one begins to write on a particular topic, one needs to ask this question: How much do I know about this subject-matter? There is a serious need for one to brainstorm. This pre-writing exercise will help a writer to think out relevant points on the topic by searching his/her mind. Ideas, experiences, imaginations, observations, findings from studies, feelings and predictions come to play a role at this juncture.

Points are jotted down and re-organized for orderly presentation of materials in the course of actual writing, possibly in the order of their significance. Understanding the subject-matter in any composition writing also takes into account an adequate knowledge of the target audience(s) as well as the purpose of the writing in itself; which may include to inform, entertain, persuade, move to action/mobilize, warn, initiate into a belief or ideology, re-orientate or educate.

The complexity of any composition writing begins with determining the appropriate words and expressions to be used in painting, describing or discussing a specific subject-matter. Diction, which means a writer's choice of words, concerns both the denotative and connotative use of language. When words are used the way they are in the dictionary, it is denotatively applied; that is, overt/open meaning. But, when words are used figuratively to mean more than their dictionary interpretations, we say, it is connotative language and the meaning is covert/hidden. Literary devices/figures of speech, idiomatic expressions and proverbs are typical examples of connotative use of language.

There is a need for a cordial relationship between the content (information) and the context (language) for a proper understanding of a given subject-matter since the principal aim of any communication is comprehension/understanding.

A writer's good vocabulary pool paves the way for flexibility and suitable selection of words and expressions to convey his/her intention and intended message on a specific topic. A good writer or composer must be knowledgeable or informed on various registers which reflect the diverse nature of human endeavors. Different callings, professions or vocations have uncommon terminologies which are peculiar to situations or contexts of events/actions.

Composition is a display of language or better still, it is language in action. Just as in literature, language is the vehicle which drives any form of composition writing.

Context is linguistically seen as a Systematic Functional Grammar, an element which is employed to rationalize correlations/relationships between the socio-situational determinants or variables of communication and linguistic materials. Ajayi (2004: 138) [2]citing Freeman identifies two classifications of situational context in linguistics viz: context of culture and the immediate context, which describes the particular circumstances in which communication takes place such as time and event. To a large extent, a language in operation depends on context and it carries out some peculiar functions within the given context. Language has a link with the situation it describes and that is regarded as context. Sinclair (Ajayi, 2004: 139); The production of any written text (composition, a literary or non-literary material) is a social process, both in the sense that it represents the

interaction between a writer and a reader and, Halliday & Hassan (1989) [3] observe that the text performs a certain function in a particular social system.

The text, of course, is indeed written or prepared to be understood with the context of a specific ideology since social systems incorporate ideologies (Hunston Susan, 1993: 57) [4].

No written text, not even one, can be a closed entity on its own. Ayeleru (2001: 30") [5] submits that since context gives the "*raison d'être*" for the choice and use of language, and gives a clear picture of the situation, a literary text (any composition too) cannot exist in isolation from the context of situation and even the context of culture.

Halliday (Beaugrande, 1992: 7-25) [6] sees register as "a tendency to select combinations of meanings with certain frequencies..." When we observe language activity in the various contexts in which it takes place, we find differences in the type of language selected as appropriate to different types of situations.

The concept of register is connected to a specific situation or context because the primary objective of a peculiar diction; choice of words and, or expressions is to situate an information, a message or an argument in line with the environment that produces it. A lawyer uses the word "client", a medical doctor says "patient" but a banker prefers the word "customer" to those used by the lawyer and the medical doctor in painting the same person because of the different types of situation that have come to play. The court hall, the hospital and the bank hall are three distinct situations, which invite different types of language selection or coloration. Every proficient writer must be well informed about all of these so as to produce a good work.

Grammar is the foundation of every good communication. The teacher of composition needs to crave the indulgence of his/her learners on the essentials of good mastery of grammar of the language in use. Grammar helps us to appreciate those rules, principles and norms which guide the usage of a given language. Apart from having a thorough understanding of the various parts of speech, which make-up a particular language, it is important to be informed about the grammatical organization/arrangement of words in sentences. In other words, students should be able to demonstrate the correct sequences or word orders in which those classes of words can be combined to generate/form meaningful sentences. This is technically called syntax. In a foreign language situation, for instance, French language, students should learn how verbs are conjugated in different tenses and moods, the applications of the tenses, concord/subject-verb agreement in terms of gender, number and person, direct and indirect speeches and active and passive voices among other things.

Let us consider the following pairs of sentences for example:

1 a. Monsieur Bankole est grand (m.).

b. Madame Bankole est grande (f.).

2 a. Il est petit (m.).

b. Elle est petite (f.).

3 a. Azeez est vendeur (m.).

b. Azeezat est vendeuse (f.).

4 a. Ousmane est sénégalais (m.).

b. Mariama est sénégalaise (f.).

5 a. Voici un beau garçon (m.).

b. Voici une belle fille (f.).

6 a. Les hommes sont partis à Paris (m.).

b. Les femmes sont parties à Paris (f.).

7 a. Mon père est allé en Europe (m.).

b. Ma mère est allée en Europe (f.).

8 a. Je tue le serpent (Active voice).

b. Le serpent est tué par moi (Passive voice).

9 a. Mon père a puni ma sœur (Active voice).

b. Ma sœur a été punie par mon père (Passive voice).

10 a. Jacqueline dit: « Je suis fatiguée » (Direct Speech).

b. Jacqueline dit qu'elle est fatiguée (Indirect/Reported Speech).

11 a. Jean a dit : « Ma famille est contente » (Direct Speech).

b. Jean a dit que sa famille était contente (Indirect/Reported Speech).

For the application of tenses, let us take a look at the uses of imperfect tense (l'imparfait). We shall identify six ways by which imperfect tense can be employed in sentence constructions in French language.

i. To express a state in the past. Nous **étions** fatigués après quatre heures de travail. [We were tired after four hours of work].

ii. To make a polite request.

Je **voulais** vous demander une question. [I would like to ask you a question].

- iii. To express a continuous action in the past. Quand j'**étais** à l'école secondaire, j'**habitais** à Lomé. [When I was in secondary school, I was living in Lomé].
- iv. To express two actions, that happened simultaneously in the past. Fatimah **faisait** son devoir tandis que Bola **regardait** la télévision. [Fatimah was doing her home-work/assignment while Bola was watching the television].
- v. To express an on-going action interrupted by another event/action in the past Les voleurs sont arrivés quand les villageois **dormaient** [The thieves arrived when the villagers were sleeping].
- vi. To indicate habitual action in the past. Quand Yemi et Bunmi **étaient** étudiants, ils **allaient** à la bibliothèque tous les jours. [When Yemi and Bunmi were students, they used to go to the library every day].

Composition is an exercise for training purposes. Hence, a good display of mechanical accuracy is another feature of an acceptable composition. Correct use of punctuation marks, capital letters, correct spellings and the required orthographical accents remains outstandingly significant in composition writing. Especially in a language like French, there is a need for the use of certain orthographical signs on some letters for the purpose of clarity.

The following signs are to be used when situations demand:

1. L'accent aigu e.g. bébé, café, clé, été, étudiant, école, télévision, éléphant, etc.
2. L'accent grave e.g. après, frère, mère, père, très, etc.

Note that « à » (to/in/at) is not the same as “a” (has), without the sign on it. The “à” is a preposition while “a” is a verb. E.g. Il va à l'école = He goes to school. Il a deux enfants = He has two children. Là (there) is an adverb while La (the) is a definite article for feminine singular nouns. E.g. Elle habite là-bas = She lives over there. Voici la voiture = Look at the car.

Attention! “où” (where) is an adverb but, ou (or) is a conjunction.

3. L'accent circonflexe e.g. âge, bâtiment, mânes, bête, être, fenêtre, tête, boîte, apôtre, crêpe, etc.
4. La cédille e.g. garçon, français, façon, leçon, maçon, etc.
5. Le tréma e.g. Noël, naïve, poêle, les aïeux, etc.

In French language, it is a grammatical blunder and indecent when a writer refuses to use those symbols/signs identified above as required.

By and large, to achieve unity and coherency of all that is discussed in a composition, a writer must use appropriate coordinators, which are popularly known as transitional conjunctions. It is also advised that writers should go over their work so as to correct any form of petty mistakes present in their write-up. This proof-reading exercise will enable writers to make assurance double sure.

Wellek and Warren (1973: 104) [7] comment: “Only a person who has knowledge of a society from other sources than purely literary ones is able to find out if, and how far, certain social types and their behavior are reproduced in the novel (and other arts, including composition writing)”.

It is evident too that only those who understand the art of good writing can arrive at producing an impressive piece of writing which will capture all the required ingredients of bringing together views, opinions, thoughts, emotions, imaginations, experiences, findings, observations and recommendations on any socio-cultural, economical, political, geographical and religious issues for certain functions. Good training therefore, brings good product and, or service.

III. CONCLUSION

In this essay, we have attempted to demonstrate that in teaching composition effectively, the teacher or the lecturer should explain the various components of a good composition to his/her students particularly how to select an appropriate register, use good sentences and strike basic technical accuracy. It is also evident that language has to be situated in line with the information or message content, which a writer/composer has to set before his/her audience(s). A teacher/lecturer of composition should always set achievable instructional objectives at a given time. Emphasis should be placed on practice. Practice makes perfect (*C'est en forgeant qu'on devient forgeron*).

It is hoped that this piece of writing will help both teachers and students of composition to consolidate their knowledge on the technical know-how of producing an impressive write-up and by extension, a work of literature, or music since they all belong to the art family.

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2. « *Le Bistouri des larmes* de Ramonu Sanusi : Une dénonciation d'une tradition bêtifiante », 2013.
3. « Cultural and Political Alienations in Sembène Ousmane's *Xala* », 2013.