

An Analysis of Early Childhood English Grammar in Selected Private Schools in Rivers State

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Abstract

This study provided an analysis of early childhood English Grammar in Rivers State, adopting results and findings from selected private in Rivers State. The study found out the strategies needed to enhance proper Grammar learning in English Language among early childhood learners with the recognition of effective cognitive and pedagogical styles. Piaget (1983) theory of cognitive development guided this study. Data was collected by use of questionnaires for English Language teachers and observation methods on pupils. Data retrieved from research conducted were compiled, edited and designed according to the theme of the study. It is hoped that the understanding of these concepts could lead to more insights in order to understand the various changes observable in children at early age as they nudge to achieve their potential in their literacy development.

Introduction

In recent times, it has come to the knowledge of educators that the prime concern in educating early childhood learners is fixed on the style initiated and developing emotional sentiments for positive achievements. In the past half-century, trends in learning theory have seen a shift toward the recognition of learners as diverse, multicultural individuals whose complex cultural identities impact the way they interact with the world and, ultimately, learn. With this has come a deep interest in the psychological states within each learner, specifically their beliefs, attitudes, and perceptions toward themselves, the emotional impact of people around them, and their experience of their learning, as well as the confluence of the internal and external motivations they experience at home and at school.

According to Bruner (2009), Students interact with the world by exploring and manipulating objects, wrestling with questions and controversies, or performing experiments. Discovery learning is an inquiry-based, constructivist learning theory that takes place in problem solving situations where the learner draws on his or her own past experience and existing knowledge to discover facts and relationships and new truths to be learned. In response to behaviourism, people are not “programmed animals” that merely respond to environmental stimuli; people are rational beings that require active participation in order to learn, and whose actions are a consequence of thinking. Changes in behaviour are observed, but only as an indication of what is occurring in the learner’s head. Cognitivism uses the metaphor of the mind as computer: information comes in, is being processed, and leads to certain outcomes.

Looking at the word “learning” we mean to reason, understand and assimilate using the brain. This basic concept of learning is the main viewpoint in the Cognitive Learning Theory (CLT). The theory has been used to explain mental processes as they are influenced by both intrinsic and extrinsic factors, which eventually bring about learning in an individual. Research suggests that learners from a very young age make sense of the world, actively creating meaning while reading texts, interacting with the environment, or talking with others. Even if students are quietly watching a teacher speak, they can be actively engaged in a process of comprehension, or “minds on” work, as many teachers describe it. As Bransford, Brown, and Cocking (2000) wrote, “It is now known that very young children are competent, active agents of their own conceptual development”. In short, the mind of the young child has come to life. This cognitive turn in psychology is often referred to as a constructivist approach to learning. How a young child is able to reason and understand a word in language is not achieved by struggle or forceful impartation but by allowing the child take his or her time in recognising the letters first, reason along with the arrangements, make funny mistakes and recognising it’s a mistake which will lead to an upright desire to achieve a goal. At this young age, for a child to have a desired goal, learning must be made to look like a joke as well as attaching its importance in the mind of a child and make the child understand that an award is placed for a better performance.

Statement of the Problem

Early childhood education is so important for young children because much of what they learn prepares them for the next stage of their lives. The human brain undergoes rapid growth during this period; it is at this stage that a child builds cognitive and character skills. Cognitive skills are the core skills the brain uses to think, read, learn, remember things and pay attention; while character skills are self-skills such as openness to learning, conscientiousness, teamwork, resilience, self-control, etc. When we acknowledge that

students interpret and do not automatically absorb the information and ideas they encounter in the world through the experiences and theories they bring to school, the links between learning and teaching become more complicated. Rather than appearing as a natural result of teaching, learning is seen as inherently “problematic.” Teachers might create opportunities for students to learn, but teachers cannot control students’ interpretations. Teachers become responsible for diagnosing students’ interpretations and helping them alter, edit, and enrich such interpretations.

An early childhood classroom should look, sound, and feel different from an elementary classroom by understanding the value of quality education, embracing an emergent literacy philosophy, which is the point when literacy begins; it is a continuous process of learning. High-quality preschool gives children a strong start on the path that leads to college or a career. Research shows that all children benefit from high-quality preschool. A substantial number of studies demonstrate the benefits of high-quality preschool programmes.

When employees are underpaid, it affects the quality of their work. Furthermore, a qualified teacher may not accept a low paying job, even if he/she has a passion for teaching. This pushes some preschools in Nigeria into cutting corners by hiring unqualified teachers that may not be suitable for the job. This ultimately affects the quality of education being delivered to children. Many preschools in Nigeria are left unsupervised and this creates a poor running structure. Some of the teachers employed to teach children in preschools in Nigeria lack the requisite training and knowledge in handling young children.

However, it has been observed that children in primary schools do not demonstrate basic grammatical competence as they ought. This certainly arises from inadequate teaching strategies applied by teachers at the pre-school level. This study is therefore informed by the poor teaching strategies in early childhood education.

Aim and Objectives

The aim of this study is to analyse early childhood English grammar in selected private schools in Rivers State.

The objectives of this study are to:

- i. identify the teaching approaches that grammar teachers’ use that motivate learning among early childhood learners.

- ii. determine the perspectives of grammar teachers' on poor learning performances in early childhood education.

Research Questions

The following research questions were formulated for the study:

- i. What are the teaching approaches grammar teachers' use that motivate learning among early childhood learners?
- ii. What are the perspectives of teachers on causes of poor learning performance?

Review of Related Literature

Early Childhood Education

Pre-primary education is the education given to younger learners before the age of entering primary education (6 years). Early childhood education or pre-primary education is defined by the National Policy on Education (FRN, 2012) as education given educational settings for children aged 3 through 5 years in preparing their entry into primary school. These types of education settings are currently provided by private entrepreneurs. Early childhood education can be traced to the efforts of prominent European education experts like: John Amos Comenius (1590-1690), J. J. Rousseau (1782 – 1788), Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi (1748-1827) and Friedrich Froebel (1782-1751). These experts championed the right of children to early education. Many educationists and scholars including Maduewesi (1992) and Fafunwa (1967) support and advocate for the views held by these earlier educators that there is need for good early childhood education to help students develop their full potentials.

Nigeria realized the need for pre-primary education in the country and gave official recognition to it in the National Policy on Education (1977) and revised 1981, 1998; subsequently revised again under elected civilian governments in 2004, 2007, and 2012. The operational objectives of pre-primary education as stated in the National Policy of Education (FRN 2012) includes:

- i. Effecting a smooth transmission from the home to the school;
- ii. Preparing the child for the primary level of education;
- iii. Providing adequate care and supervision for the children while their parents are at work;
- iv. Inculcating in the child the spirit of enquiry and creativity through the exploration of nature and environment, art, music and playing with toys, etc.;
- v. Develop a sense of co-operation and team spirit;
- vi. Inculcating social norms;
- vii. Learn good habits, especially good health habits; and

viii. Teaching rudiments of numbers, letters, colours, shapes, forms etc. through play.

Cognitive Pedagogical Style

Cognitive theories include areas of knowledge that are related to cognition, thinking, information-processing and problem-solving. Cognitive research focuses on perceptual-motor experience of reality and symbolic mental representation. There are valuable elements of the theory and research in the history of pedagogical thought, which are drawn upon by the contemporary cognitive science. As early as in the early 20th century, Maria Montessori (2005) emphasised the role of the training of senses in pupils' acquisition of both concrete and abstract concepts. She saw the role of the peripheral nervous system in the recognition of external stimuli. According to her, "spiritual life develops in connection with the central nervous system" (Montessori, 2005, 132). She also emphasised the social nature of learning. A concept by Albert Bandura, belonging to a group of learning theories inspired by behaviourism, adequately describes this aspect of learning (through observation and modelling). It emphasises the role of cognitive interaction between humans and the surrounding environment (Bandura, 2011). Attention that learners must direct towards their behaviour and activity constitutes an important element that is emphasised by Bandura, who also stresses the role of repetition and motivation in the process. Studies on new-borns confirm that imitation-based learning skills are found in babies as early as between 12 -21 days of age (Gardner, Kornhaber, Wake, 2011). Children can imitate mimic behaviour such as opening the mouth, tongue protrusion, provoking guardians to nonverbal behavior (Trempeła, 2011). Other studies have also recognized that infants have a sense of objects and can make references to them (Spelke, 1991). Six-month-olds are able to differentiate between previously known and new objects (Trempeła, 2011). Children also have a sense of numbers, detect changes in them (Gardner, Kornhaber, Wake, 1990; Starkey, Gelman, Spelke, 1990; Wynn, 1992), as well as combine numbers with words (Gardner, Kornhaber, Wake, 1990). They also discriminate between classes of objects (Gardner, Kornhaber, Wake, 1990). Already 4-6-month-old infants differentiate phonemes in native and foreign languages (Trempeła, 2011), prefer to listen to speech of joyful character (Trempeła, 2011). It is postulated in pedagogical literature that pedagogical scrutiny should encompass children within the period up to 3 years of age (Wenta, 2016). The results of tests on new-born indicate that they recognise geometric patterns reminiscent of the shape of face (Johnson, Morton, 1991; Trempeła, 2011) they also scan objects vertically (downwards), also the phenomenon of emotional synchronicity (Trempeła, 2011, 174) was detected; in the course of interactions with adults, 3-month old infants make use of visual contact (react smiling) (Farroni, Csiba, Simon, Johnson, 2002). It was also noted that six-month-olds direct their attention by means of following the gaze of adults (Moore, Dunham, 1995). Observations gained in the course of research, point to

early emergence of adaptive mechanisms that provide orientation in important stimuli coming from the environment. These stimuli maybe divided into visual and verbal. The learning process occurs in the course of information-processing within information channels, followed by the merge into a comprehensive verbal or visual model, and concluded with the final phase of the creation of new knowledge. This process is well described in *Nine ways to reduce cognitive load in multimedia learning* by Richard E. Mayer and Roxana Moreno(2000, 2003), who emphasis that the text-and image-based layers of messages merge with each other at the level of meaning. Integration of images and narratives impacts effective storage of information and facilitates the process of learning.

Research findings also point to varied developmental paces that are characteristic of every individual and attest to the development being dependent on innate characteristics, on the basis of which active construction of knowledge based on language, numbers, understanding of the physical and socio-psychological world occurs. It may therefore be presupposed after David Ausubel (creator of the Theory of the preceding factor organising the material and learning activities—also known as a theory of assimilation) that the insofar acquired knowledge is an important part in the building of a hierarchy of concepts that facilitate orientation and construction of knowledge about the world. Interaction and understanding of the relationships between objects play an important role in the process of learning, i.e., we respond to the importance of what we observe and make its synthesis in our minds. The theoretical positions presented above, together with conclusions based on research findings, may constitute a departure point for the presentation of research areas relevant to cognitive pedagogy.

Theoretical Framework

Piaget's theory of cognitive development deals with the mental development of an individual. The objective of this theory was to change human ideology on how individuals think as we grow and learn. Piaget describes the problem to be that individuals do not know the basic elements and goals of education. Most times learners are taught based on what is already known by the teacher and their environment putting aside their innovations and creativity which should be their core learning skill. At the early childhood stage, learning should be from their discoveries. Piaget emphasised that at the early growth age every child must go through the states of development and the development of a child's brain is affected by his/her interaction with an environment.

In learning grammar, every child is influenced more by his/her environment; at home, in school, at religious places, etc. The language a child first adopts will affect every aspect of

his/her grammar proficiency. Piaget mentioned the three components of the theory that affects a child's development.

Firstly, the schema is the continuous knowledge an individual has about an item. A child has a basic idea about a word from home and now teaching grammar in school is exposing him/her to knowledge about the same word. It is normal that the child has both knowledge of the same word and will take time as he/she grows to accept and adapt to the accepted knowledge. Secondly, the assimilation process comes next whereby the child tries to take in what is told and is guided by two complimentary processes of assimilation: every child must go through the stages of mental development and each child has their different length of time and experiences to complete their learning development. After assimilation, the child accommodates what has been accepted and strikes a balance (equilibrium) between the old knowledge and the new knowledge.

Learning is an ongoing process; hence, the purpose of applying this theory is for a grammar teacher to be aware of factors that leads to a child's learning at this stage of education. Also, to analyse those specific strategies that will enhance adequate and impactful knowledge to the early childhood learners.

The links clearly shows from the earliest period of language learning up to 18 months, relating to the development of what Piaget called sensory motor" intelligence, in which children construct a mental picture of a world of objects that have independent existence. During the latter part of this period, children develop a sense of object permanence and will begin to search for the objects that they have seen hidden (Clark, 2009). The outcome of cognitive development is thinking, "the intelligent mind creates from experience generic coding systems that permit one to go beyond the data to new and possibly fruitful predictions" (Bruner, 1957, p. 234).

In other words, cognitive thinking is therefore concerned with the mental changes in a person's mind and these changes are as a result of the cognitive processes. The processes involved in learning are outlined by Wilburg (2010) namely: observing, categorizing, forming generalizations, decision making and problem solving which allows the learners to make sense of the information provided. This theory also deals with the nature of knowledge itself and how humans come gradually to acquire, construct and use it. Cognitive theories facilitate the improvement and growth of children.

According to the cognitive theorist all aspects that are learnt by an individual are as a result of what learners have constructed or discovered their own mental process and not through observable behaviour (Warren, 2012). Wilburg (2010) asserts that children

/learners come to school with knowledge, skills and related experiences to the learning situations and this make them actively involved in their learning process. Therefore, several studies has shown that children growing up in polyandry situations are taking part in multi-party conversation from an early age and in many of these cultures adults have particular interactional techniques to help them do so.

Methodology

The researcher observed individuals and phenomena in their natural setting (Ranney et al, 2015). Procedures the researcher used as instruments for data collection in this study include: direct observation, direct interaction with learners, direct interaction with teachers, direct interaction with learners as a focus group and questionnaires for teachers.

Data Analysis

1. What are the teaching approaches grammar teachers' use that motivate learning among early childhood learners?

During the observation process, the researcher recorded the motivating approaches teachers employed that encouraged pupils in grammar lessons.

Table 1: Teacher's motivative approaches for learners during grammar lessons

Approaches	Active	Very Active	Poorly Active	Not Active
During activity, teachers sing to learners first	43%	50%	2%	5%
For learner response, teachers interact with learners one on one	50%	40%	5%	5%
Before a topic is introduced during a grammar lesson, teachers involve pupils in painting exercise	30%	40%	20%	10%
Stories are told when a new grammar topic is introduced	40%	50%	5%	5%
Pupils are taken outdoor during a grammar lesson to identify objects disclosed in the lesson	35%	45%	10%	10%
Pupils watch videos over and over again to understand a lesson better	50%	48%	0	2%

Teacher's approaches applied in the table above, reads out the performance of learners at this stage. The performance of learners at this level depends on the style teachers employ during lessons.

Effectiveness of Approaches employed by Teachers in Grammar Lessons

According table 1, every approach applied is affecting for more than half of the class. Moreover, these approaches should be alternated and this includes introducing more approaches to learners because children at this level get bored with anything frequently used to embrace new things. Hence these approaches are not to be forgotten but put aside from time to time to involve learners in entirely new approaches, this they find really interesting.

2. What are the perspectives of teachers on causes of poor learning performance?

The researcher at this point involved the teachers of their opinion on the causes of poor performance after subject lessons in early childhood study. The table 2 presents the results in percentage.

Table 2: Teachers perspectives on causes of poor performance

Response	Percentage
Distractions	20%
Little or no assistance from parents	20%
Poor teaching approach	5%
Lack of motivation	10%
Fear & anxiety	15%
Ratio of teachers to pupils	10%
Underage/immaturity	20%
Total	100%

Table 2 shows that majority of teachers believe that the most significant causes of poor performance by learners after subject learning are distraction, little or no motivation from parents and underage/immaturity of learners. Most teachers believe that parents are not supportive when pupils are at home, they claim that pupils return to school the following day forgetting almost all they are being taught. Also, parents are eager to enrol their immature children in school for reasons best known to them and teachers are saying that this under age pupils struggle to assimilate what they are taught. These pupils need extra effort from the teachers for maximum productivity. At this young age, children are faced

with lots of distractions especially when they get bored during lessons. That is why the researcher made room for the existence of new approaches that can enhance effective input and output process during and after lessons.

Learning difficulties and problems found in early childhood learners

Although the Piaget's (1983) cognitive theory emphasised that every child goes through their stages of mental development and each child has their different length of time and different experiences to complete their learning development, some children still have learning problems.

Learning problems happen because of the way the brain absorbs and processes information. Learning process happen differently for every child and as a result, some learn differently and this has a lot to do with their environment. Unfortunately, at this stage of learning, these children may not identify the problems they have in learning, this will require the help of their teachers to identify these problems and help them out.

Common errors found in pupils at this stage includes: spelling errors, poor reading proficiency, poor writing skills and language presentation.

Teachers are able to identify these problems if they discover the following in pupils: If the learner struggles to understand subject lessons, if they know that the learner should be doing better, if the learn is slow in writing, reading and response. Some problems learners face includes; attention difficulties, dysgraphia (difficulty in writing), dyslexia (difficulty in reading, spelling and writing).

Pedagogical style teachers apply to enhance learning in early childhood education

The researcher highlighted pedagogical learning styles from observation and interaction with the teachers. According to teachers, these styles are effective and have been applied during grammar lessons. These styles already adopted include:

- i. Story telling by teachers to introduce a subject
- ii. Teachers engage pupils with painting exercise during a lesson
- iii. Cartoons and animated series on subjects are played during lessons
- iv. Display of charts and teaching aids that describe grammar subjects
- v. Rhymes and songs are learnt and sang on subject taught
- vi. Teachers involve pupils in drama and playlet on subject taught
- vii. Classwork activities after lesson
- viii. Group work activities after lesson
- ix. Different classroom settings are applied

x. Games are introduced on subjects taught
Although these styles are productive, the researcher advised that in as much as these styles are working, new styles should also be put in place because children at this level are excited when new things are brought to them.

Conclusion

This study was chosen to analyse the learning style teacher's use in early childhood education. In chapter one, the researcher pointed out that the study deals on teachers interest in childhood education and how much impact made in teaching and learning derived by the pupils. This study deals on teacher's teaching skills, styles and strategies and how impactful they are in this field of education. This chapter broke down in details, the background to the study, statement of the problem, research questions, the purpose, significance, aims and objectives, scope of the study, limitations and delimitations of the study.

Early childhood education is not a role played only by teachers; parents and family members should engage their children in basic ethics at this stage of growth. This stage of education is basically a time to get children prepared for the journey of education. Although children at this stage are tender and should be handled differently; learning for them should be fun all the way. Education at this level must be done in a conducive and happy environment. In applying cognitive and pedagogical style in grammar, children need support in language development. Children at this stage should learn aspect of language as it concerns this stage to be applied in various subjects at school.

In a grammar classroom, it expected that pupils are there to acquire knowledge and the earl childhood learners are not exempted. It is the duty of parents to ensure that their children are given basic and early education to help prepare them for other stages of education. Also, it is the duty of their teachers to examine their learners mentally at this stage and apply necessary approaches to aid in assuring them with quality education. At this stage, teaching grammar grows with basic ethics a child should develop before getting to other stages of education. For effective teaching and learning, necessary cognitive and pedagogical approaches should be in place to enable pupils acquire the grammatical knowledge they need to use in their day to day activities.

At this stage, this may seem difficult and time consuming but of good advantage to the early learners when they evolve to other stages. It can be concluded that child centred pedagogy has the potential for promoting children's creativity, problem-solving skills, critical thinking skills, learning dispositions and socio/emotional/behavioural

development skills. This can be achieved when relevant and varied activities with available resources are used and when interaction and communication is encouraged during the teaching-learning process. The use of pedagogic styles and skills are important because such knowledge can be used to inform us about the benefits of developing a child's learning repertoire.

All in all, teachers need to be given ample grammar theoretical knowledge as to prepare them for the challenges they are expected to overcome once they enter a real language classroom. Although, grammar theoretical content is full of historical summary on language development and revolution, it also offers approaches and useful knowledge to be transformed to pedagogical skills and knowledge for teachers to manipulate in a language classroom. Teachers may be more confident and creative in making choices in lesson planning and teaching in a second language classroom. The grammar revolution gives an overview on the overall development of grammar theories and researches done by linguists all over the world and leaves a grave impact to the direction and approaches of language learning. The knowledge on prescriptive, descriptive, generative and functional grammar could equip teachers with useful knowledge as guidelines and tools to be applied in the language classroom as a self-preparation tool or a suitable approach to enhance students' understanding of the language and overall language proficiency.

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