

Enhancing English Language Learning Through The Use Of Multimedia

BY

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Abstract

In recent times, technology has become one of the most significant drivers of both social and linguistic change and this is particularly evident in the spread and development of the English language. Rapid advancements in science and technology which have led to the emergence of certain innovations such as the use of multimedia which is influencing not only the growth of English as a world language but also changing the very way we communicate and learn. The use of multimedia can bring about more equity in access to education and impact positively on the delivery of quality teaching and learning. It provides learners with opportunities to satisfy the needs for exploration, manipulation, stimulation, problem solving and self-enhancement as well as advantages that traditional teaching methods do not always offer such as learner control, instant feedback, and the use of authentic materials. This paper explores the characteristics of multimedia as it applies to language teaching and learning and the use of it to achieve communicative competence in English as second language.

Keywords: English Language Teaching, Multimedia Technology, Communicative Competence, Cognitive Learning, Interaction.

Introduction

The use of the English language is on the increase worldwide. At present, the role and status of English is that of a language of social context, political, cultural, business, education, industry, media, library and communication to mention a few. In many instances around the world, it has also become a crucial determinant for university entrance and for procuring well- paid employment. In Nigeria, it occupies a special place where it is not only a taught subject on the school curriculum but also serves as the language of instruction. However, here the teaching of English as a second language does not always emphasize the function of English as a tool for communication but instead focuses on the knowledge of grammatical forms and structures. As a result, students rarely develop an interest in English learning but rather simply concentrate on passing examinations on the subject so that even after many years of learning not all have the competence to communicate freely and appropriately in the language. Similarly, while information and communication technology (ICT) has within a very short time become one of the basic building blocks of modern society, and indeed, understanding ICT and mastering basic skills and concepts are now regarded as part of core education alongside reading, writing and numeracy, teachers at all levels of learning in Nigeria have been slow to embrace use of multimedia in the classroom. This is of particular concern in any country where the problem of large undergraduate class sizes has become a pervasive trend. (Locastro, 2001; Rhalmi, 2013). The use of multimedia technology can be offered as a solution to help teachers provide creative and dynamic teaching in such conditions (Zhang,2008).

Recent developments in information technology and social media are taking English language education in new directions. As Graddol (1999:12) notes, “technology lies at the heart of the globalization process affecting education, work and culture” and this is demonstrated by the way the internet has facilitated the growth of the English language. According to him, the English language is at “the leading edge of scientific and technological development, new thinking in economics and management, new literatures as well as entertainment” (Graddol, 1999:16). Therefore, in an age where English is one of the most important medium of communication, multimedia technology can be employed to create a favorable context for exploring and reforming English language teaching models. However, while some teachers feel the need to change their language teaching strategies, the majority in Nigeria still continue to use traditional methods. Yet the use of innovative teaching methods can increase the effectiveness with which teachers handle a subject such as English which is also often a second language for them as well. Certainly, the use of multimedia cannot completely replace traditional teaching methods but it has the potential of making teaching and learning more engaging and more productive.

There are number of definitions of what constitutes multimedia, but basically it is concerned with the computer-controlled integration of texts, graphics, drawings, still and moving images (video), animation, audio, and any other type of information that can be represented, stored, transmitted and processed digitally. It is dynamic, can be interacted with and accessed by using information processing devices. Employing multimedia content in the classroom is in effect using the computer to create a platform of exchanges and communication between teachers and students. Several studies show that when compared to traditional lectures, computer-based multimedia can improve learning and retention of material presented during a class or individual study period. This improvement can be attributed mainly to dual coding of information that multimedia technology present in two different modalities, the visual and the auditory leading to increased comprehension of the material during class session and improved retention at later testing times.

The most important aspect of English learning that is best facilitated by use of multimedia is communicative competence which is a vital aspect of language learning. The communicative language approach emphasizes communicative activities that involve the use of language. For many researchers who have helped develop the theory and practice of this approach to language teaching (Brown, 1987; Brumfit and Johnson, 1979; Richards and Rodgers, 1986), the underlying goal is not for students to simply learn linguistic structures and the rules of grammar, but rather to learn how to use the language to communicate effectively in daily life. McKay (2002) asserts that it is important to teach English in its authentic socio-cultural context. Hence, Kramsch (1998) sees the use of multimedia as an appropriate method to help students "get a sense of the socio-cultural context in which English is used" as well as to raise their awareness of different ways English is used around the world because culture is inscribed in the language used.

How does Multimedia Learning Work?

Teachers can use multimedia to help them realize the dream of bringing the English language and culture as authentically as it is possible to students in the classroom. The advantage of multimedia material is that it is broader in scope and provides a complex multisensory experience through the presentation of information in a combination of different content forms that include texts, graphics, images, audio and video stored on electronic devices. Access to a variety of technologies such interactive video, CD-ROM, internet, electronic mail and the World Wide Web will help learners strengthen linguistic skills. Indeed evidence suggests that a mixture of words and pictures increase the likelihood of them being able to absorb larger amounts of information (Zhang, 2006; Mayer, 1999; Kramsch, 1998). It is significant that multimedia English language teaching methodology can only work when it is student-centered and guided by teachers. One of the most important goals of multimedia language teaching is to promote student motivation and interest but this is can only be achieved by the way teachers incorporate multimedia learning into the classroom. For example, teachers could use multimedia to assist them identify the various learning styles of their students, match teaching methods to learners' difficulties, strengthen weaker learners by giving them easier tasks and drills as well as direct students to a selection of multimedia learning strategies that will help their learning. Effective use is achieved through careful utilization in ways that capitalize on the characteristics of each medium and extend the learning and teaching experiences.

The main promise of multimedia learning undoubtedly lies in its ability to promote students understanding by using a combination of the audio and the visual (words and pictures). It is important therefore that multimedia instructional materials are designed in ways that are consistent with how people learn. To explain further, Plass and Jones (2005) identified two instructional approaches that support language acquisition:

1. Structural approach- stress drill and practice as the best way to learn grammar and vocabulary. In this approach language is taught orally with emphasis on the learner responding to the spoken prompts.
2. Cognitive approach- this emphasize on how the learner interacts with language. Instruction is based on activating prior knowledge and allowing the learner to build the cognitive skills required to understand, process, and interact with the language. The focus is on making language acquisition a more active process.

Here, the cognitive theory about the nature of human learning can be adopted usefully for multimedia

learning. This is demonstrated by the three ways cognitive science research claims learning is acquired - the dual channel assumption (that humans possess separate information processing systems for verbal and visual representations, for example, animations are processed in the visual channel and spoken words, narrations, are processed in the verbal/auditory channel); the limited capacity assumption (that the amount of processing that can take place within each information processing channel is extremely limited); and the active learning assumption (that meaningful learning occurs when learners engage in active cognitive processing, that is, pay attention to relevant words and pictures and mentally organize them into coherent verbal and pictorial representations using prior knowledge). Instructional methods that enable and promote these processes are more likely to lead to meaningful learning than those that do not. Indeed the third assumption of active learning results in more meaningful learning outcomes that can be utilized further to support problem – solving. Hence the challenge for multimedia instructional design is to prime and guide active cognitive processing in learners so that meaningful internal representations can be constructed. Plass and Jones (2005) go further to explain the three stages in which the cognitive approach process unfolds:

Comprehensible input- Students need accessible materials, they need help identifying the critical features in “the wealth of the linguistic and nonlinguistic information they receive” (Plass and Jones, 2005: 470). This means that supports embedded in a multimedia instructional approach should guide what the learner notices in a word, sentence, passage, or image. The benefits of this strategy are accomplishable through immediate and focused teacher feedback. For instance, when a teacher highlights portions of an assignment that requires revision, the student's ability to evaluate and revise her work increases. In addition, such a strategy helps the student understand task directions and focus on pertinent information to comprehend or revise.

Interaction- In this second stage of the cognitive approach “information links that provide simplification, elaboration, clarification, definitional support, or redundancy” (Plass and Jones, 2005:469) advance comprehension. When considering how students might interact with new content, it is important to ensure that new information is linked to previous learning. The teacher therefore needs to use scaffolds and supports that will enable them process information. Similar to highlighting important information, student comprehension of content is aided by understanding facts, concepts, generalizations and the links between them. Consequently learners should be able to link multimedia glossaries or other supports that connect new information to background information provided. Their interactions with content will also be more effective when they have control over the mode of presentation which is possible in a digital environment. For instance, where some students may prefer to hear a text read aloud, others might prefer to read it on their own. If reading fluency is not the objective of the lesson, it is important to allow students to make these types of decisions.

Comprehensible output- Plass and Jones define this third stage as 'the need to use of language in meaningful contexts to develop learners' communicative competency' (475). Students need to be engaged in active learning. This means supporting learners' ability to self-correct. For example, text-to-speech programs enable the user to hear what he has written and to check if a sentence makes sense.

New multimedia technologies can enhance the ways in which a language is learnt as it especially promotes students' motivation and capacity to study. Also multimedia language teaching becomes the trend in English language learning, there is need for students to embrace technology (Graddol, 1999:12). Several studies show that computer-based multimedia can improve learning and retention of material presented during a class or utilized during individual study period as compared to traditional lectures or study materials that do not use multimedia. The pedagogical value of classroom media includes enhancing understanding through the use of rich media materials that boost student comprehension of complex topics and increase retention by enabling better encoding and easier retrieval. This improvement can be attributed mainly to the dual coding of information presented in two different modalities, the visual and the auditory leading to increased comprehension of the material during class session and improved retention at later testing times.

Using Multimedia in English Language Teaching

Multimedia language teaching is in many ways student- centered; it especially stresses the role of students and enhances the importance of the interaction between them and teachers. In context of second language

acquisition, multimedia helps to diversify English teaching methods and enables students' enthusiasm to come into full play with guidance from the teacher. The English context of the multimedia creation enables students to participate actively during the process by providing not only rich sources of authentic learning materials but also an attractive and a friendly interface, vivid pictures and pleasant sounds which to a large extent can overcome the lack of authentic language environment and arouse students' interest. Furthermore, not only can context be created in class, it can also be used out of class and in so doing promote students capacity to study on their own.

Developing an instructional strategy that includes the proper use of multimedia can also help solve many of the difficulties associated with large class sizes. For instance the use of Power Point in instructional delivery can serve a teacher well in getting her message to a large class. Or she may choose to adopt computer based testing for assessing her students. Similarly such a class may be better off with a blog or wiki where students and the teacher could meet. In the same way, emails make it easier for teachers to connect with students outside the class by allowing for instantaneous clarifications and feedback on progress rather than waiting until the next quiz or examination. All of this facilitates the process of learning but it is worth keeping in mind that the primary purpose of learning will determine the nature of the media used (Rhalmi, 2013).

Another advantage of multimedia teaching is the flexibility it offers. Through repeated use of multimedia material, students can practice by themselves as they are not restricted by time and space can therefore acquire a limitless capacity to learn. As Zhang (2006: 112) points out, "Multimedia and network –based teaching provides students with learning flexibility as far as learning materials, learning time, and learning pace are concerned". In circumstances where learning difficulties are encountered, students can use the new technology to exert some control over the way they learn.

Research on second language acquisition indicates a need for teachers to focus on both students' academic and affective learning by providing authentic, functional, interactive, and constructive language learning environments to aid learners' motivation and increase their confidence. A major requirement in language learning is to train and improve students' ability to listen, speak and to develop their individual communicative competence. The use of multimedia materials in second language learning can develop several core competencies that allow learners to communicate ideas, develop, and maintain social relationships by giving learners easy access to authentic video footage that can help provide a sense of the socio-cultural context in which the language is used. For such students culture is no longer just factual pieces of information that textbooks present but is produced and reproduced in under their very eyes, on screen, through what people say and how they say it and thus reduce their anxiety concerning learning the language. As researchers Zhang (2006) and Rhalmi (2013) have shown, the use of multimedia offers the possibility of developing the socio-cultural competence of language learners more readily than the pages of a textbook or the four walls of a classroom. However, teachers need to also be aware of the potential discontinuities between learning at school and learning at home but can address this by bringing socio-cultural and personal elements into the classroom curriculum and multimedia instruction.

However while multimedia material can raise the interest level of students, it can sometimes lead them to always expect a variety media to capture their attention and may sometimes be distracting. For instance, instead of bringing up course notes students would go onto face book and other social networking sites to check messages and so on. Hence it is necessary to make it clear to that multimedia learning is about taking responsibility for their learning and using it to successfully achieve their language goals. In addition, while multimedia teaching allows for more flexibility in teaching, it enables the teachers to understand the learning types and differences of students and promotes better interaction between teachers and student it does change the role of teacher from being the messenger of instruction to the operator of instruction.

Conclusion

While the majority of teachers in Nigeria still teach in the traditional method, advancements in teaching and learning cannot be ignored. It is therefore important for teachers to be aware of technological developments that help them be more effective in their efforts in the classroom. Using a combination of teaching methods to make classroom environment more stimulating and interactive is important and has been made easier by the emergence and development of multimedia technology. Its application to

teaching featuring audio, visual, animation effects can be utilized fully in the English language classroom and set a favorable platform for reforming the English teaching model in this era. However while taking into consideration the inevitable role of technology in pedagogy, the human aspect of teaching remains of vital importance. Multimedia can provide large amounts of instructional material to students but it cannot a substitute for a good teacher. During the process of using multimedia technology, the teacher's role as a facilitator is particularly prominent but she does more than just press a button. The capable teacher will also need to apply teaching methodologies accumulated from many years of teaching experience to convey information in appropriate ways but there is no doubt that the growth of multimedia has facilitated the growth of the English language to a great extent making the language teaching and learning experience more dynamic, stimulating and interactive.

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