Pedagogy in Beninese Traditional Convents: Using African Training Modes to Support the Teaching of Oral Skills in EFL Classes

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In most Beninese English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classes, students generally exhibit a poor level of oral proficiency. Despite the use of the communicative approach to teaching, and the considerable efforts being made by curriculum designers and teachers to promote the teaching of the oral skill in school manuals and class sessions, its effective acquisition remains a challenge for the majority of students. To look for solutions to the problem, the present study has tried to gain insights into the pedagogy used in Hounkpamin (Beninese traditional convents), to teach unknown languages to adepts. In fact, the African continent had its own system of transmitting knowledge. Inquiring into these traditional modes of teaching might provide hints or paths to solutions for the current problem. Using an ethnographic research method, this study has inquired into the training modes used in some of these traditional convents to approach the teaching of languages in order to determine whether or not such modes are adaptable in the formal setting of EFL classes to support the teaching of speaking. The findings indicate five major strategies used in these convents to teach unknown languages. Suggestions are made in the study towards a philosophy of education that places emphasis on cultural values.

Keywords: EFL teaching, traditional pedagogy, oral proficiency, traditional convents, hounkpamin

INTRODUCTION

A cursory look at the former ‘Danxome’ kingdom (Republic of Benin today) indicates that it had a wealth of cultural values that shaped the attitudes and life of its people. Its system of knowledge transmission or teaching was highly goal-oriented. It had clear objectives and purposes. It was functional as it emphasised the quick translation of theory into practice (Bogniaho, 2001). Adept’s way of learning languages in most Beninese traditional convents is an illustration of this system. In fact, adepts may not speak a language before. Once in the convent for two or three months they could speak that language fluently for the rest of their lives. This traditional value has guided us as researchers to investigate the method of using African training modes to support the teaching of oral skills in EFL classes. The African continent has a rich cultural heritage, which if well managed and exploited, would go a long way to bolstering the educational system of African countries. African educational curricula should be designed in such a way that students be given exposure to aspects of the home culture as well as those of the target language culture. This principle is neither taken into account in textbooks nor in teaching methods.

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As far as the specific area of language instruction is concerned, emphasis has so far been put solely on western approaches to teaching. The responsibility of the contemporary African educational system in promoting cultural awareness should aim at restoring African cultural values, including ways of knowledge transmission. The present research work is an inquiry into the language teaching methods used in traditional convents with the view to examining how they can be used to support the teaching of English in Beninese secondary schools where students experience difficulties when expressing themselves after seven years of EFL study (Atay, 2005). In this era of globalization, a good command of the English language is the key for access to the world, participation in world events, mobility, and better job opportunities. Educational institutions now recognize that English language competency is of paramount importance for students to progress and work within the international landscape. In West Africa, French speaking countries like Benin and Togo Republics have some neighboring English speaking countries. They share the same borders and, therefore, need to interact (Lamantchion, 2016). It is then crucial that some more effective approach be used to help learners to acquire the communication skill. For this purpose, data were collected through in-depth interviews to trainers and adepts of some convents in order to gain a deeper insight into the teaching method used. Next, the adaptability of the approach to EFL formal class context was discussed.

**How can normal adults learn a new language effectively?**

How can we speed up learning a language? How do we learn faster a language? How can normal adults learn a new language quickly, easily and effectively? These are queries many language learners and researchers have puzzled over for years. Saliger (1927) in providing answers to these questions invented Hypnopeadia, (Sleep Learning) to learn a new language. He showed that natural sleep is identical with hypnotic sleep and that during natural sleep the unconscious mind is most receptive to suggestions. However, the learning during sleep was impractical. Still, it opened doors to many research works on language teaching theories. The Audio linguistic Method proposes that students form correct language habits in English. For this reason, the use of the mother tongue in class is discouraged among students in English lessons. Dialogues are heavily used through imitation and repetition in order to present new vocabulary and structures to students. Furthermore, teachers rely on a heavy use of repetitive drills until the students are able to produce the structural patterns accurately and spontaneously (Larsen-Freeman, 1986). However, as time went on, experts in the field of language teaching realized that this approach was not the last word. According to the Direct method, the chief goal of English learning and teaching was to communicate in the language (Larsen-Freeman, 1986). Useful every day English was emphasized as the major content of English lessons. Students were encouraged to directly associate meaning with English; that is, they were required to think in English. To achieve this, teachers explained new meaning using realia, visual aids or gestures. They also intensely used English as the language of instruction.

The Grammar Translation method, which had long been the predominant English teaching method in Benin, became the foremost approach. With this method, the teaching of English is chiefly based on a teacher-centered transmission model with a focus on the reading and translation of literary works (Richards & Rodgers, 1986). Therefore, grammar and vocabulary receive a special emphasis at the expense of communication. Nunan (1987) views Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) as the most effective approach that can be used in EFL/ESL teaching. Most modern methods and techniques support this approach, and most textbooks and materials are designed for its implementation. In Benin, the current approach to language teaching is competency-based. This approach shares almost the same principles as CLT as it focuses attention on the learner and his/her ability to use the target language in real life situations for communication purposes. As a result, new English language teaching textbooks are produced for secondary schools to help learners achieve the goal of communicative competence. Those textbooks are in contrast to the traditional, structural, grammar-based materials which had been used in the country. Though the new syllabuses claim to be communicatively oriented, there seems to be a common acceptance that teachers' understanding and implementation of the principles of communicative language teaching are limited. Lonsdale (2013) identifies five principles to learn any languages in six months. Before elaborating on the five principles he nuances that talent and immersion per se are just myths in acquiring a language and what is important is the language content. So the first principle would like the language content to be relevant to the learner. The second principle advocates that the new language should be used as a tool to communicate from day one by the learner. The third language principle focuses on Krashen's (2014) comprehensible input. The learner has to first understand the message and then s/he will unconsciously acquire the language. Language is not about accumulating knowledge. It is about physiological training. The last but not least principle, views speaking the language every time as the quick and efficient way to learn the language. The assumption is that talking takes muscles and the more you talk the muscles get familiar with pains. The last principle has to do with psycho-physiological state. This rule means that a
language learner should be in a state of happiness to learn quickly. The learner’s mind should be relaxed and not full of worries. The implications of the five principles are that any language learner listen a lot, focuses on getting the meaning first before the words, be creative by using and mixing new words learned, focuses on the core and get a language parent and connects the new sound to its representation. The paradox is that the cultural identity of the learner is often neglected. The quest for improvement of the teaching of English as a Foreign Language has made the researchers of this study explorer of the African personality. This study appears as a pioneer work in that a proper African pedagogy is being examined to check its adaptability and integration to formal EFL classes.

Objectives of the Study

This research work explores traditional educational theories and practices developed in Beninese traditional convents to study how they can improve modern language teaching. The ultimate aim of this study is realistically unique. The search of value systems which are integral to the Beninese experience. There has been the fact that with increasing foreign ideological infiltration into Beninese society, Benin and her cultural heritage is vanishing into oblivion. It is the responsibility of the contemporary Beninese educational system to promote cultural awareness. Although, Benin may not be able to do without buying from foreign culture, the attitude however, should be appropriation of cultures. This study aims at synergizing the approach used to teach English Language in modern schools with the one used in Beninese traditional convents. To reach this purpose, the following research questions are considered:

- Which approaches are used in Beninese traditional convents to teach adepts a language to the extent that they quickly acquire the language in a short time?
- Are these approaches adaptable to EFL formal class context?

METHODOLOGY

The main source of materials for this research is primary. The study followed an ethnographic research design in order to uncover language teaching and learning practices in four traditional convents and examined their adaptability to EFL classes.

Participants

The participants of the study consist of two (2) Hounkpamin language specialists, one (1) Hounkpamin Chief and five (5) Hounkpamin adepts of Sakpata (the god of the earth) and Hevioosso (the god of the sky) (Verger,1954). The participants were chosen through convenient sampling, and years of Hounkpamin experience was the criterion for selection. Six female participants and two male participants took part in the study. Their Hounkpamin experiences ranged from five to sixty-two years. Two of the participants got University level.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TABLE1. Profile of the participants</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Participants (pseudonym)</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paula</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sena</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bignon</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dossou</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dossi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mewa</td>
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<tr>
<td>Vivi</td>
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<td>Visso</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Data Collection Instruments

Data were collected through in-depth interviews to the selected participants. The interviews were conducted in Fongbe or adjagbe, which was the spoken language of the participants. Each of them was conducted individually and took 30-55 minutes. They were tape-recorded with the permission of the participants. All the data were then transcribed and translated into English by the researchers. The translation has been done so as not to do violence to the original language into English. Lincoln et al., (1985) underlines that member checks ensure reliability and accuracy of a qualitative study.

Data Analysis

The transcribed and approved data analysis was done through employing categorical-content approach, usually called content analysis. This method of data analysis was deemed appropriate for analysis because it allows for proper examination of narrative extracts. Categorical-content approach focuses on separate stories responding to one research problem (Lieblich et al., 1998). The researchers first used colour coding to identify the views that indicated language teaching approach used in the convents. The researchers then looked at the different trends from different research participants and grouped them into common themes to be presented as findings.

RESULTS

Findings from the analysis of the interview data

From the data gathered from the informants’ accounts of the language teaching techniques used in the convents, the following five major themes emerged as being representative of the characteristic features of the
training mode used in the convents: ascetism, behaviourism, commitment, socialization, hypnotism. The table 2 provides a bird view of these techniques

**Table 2: Characteristic Features of the Training Mode Used in the Convents**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Language teaching techniques used in traditional convents</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Ascetism</td>
<td>A total immersion of the new adept in the language in the convent environment where they have no contact with the outside world.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Behaviourism</td>
<td>A technique consisting in miming, memorizing, and repeating language chunks, role plays, and patterns of behaviors that are learnt and reinforced with the use of stimuli like virtues of certain herbs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Commitment</td>
<td>Adepts are fully engaged in the learning tasks and to the overall training.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Socialization</td>
<td>Relationships are established with in-group members and adepts from other traditional convents with whom they share knowledge of the new language being learnt</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Hypnotism</td>
<td>Adepts are made to become unconscious during the learning process.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Fieldwork

**Ascetism**

Adepts are totally immersed in the new language through a permanent exposure to the language input provided by the trainer who involves them in memorization rituals and a constant revision of language forms learnt. The learning of the new language is carried out intensively in the austere environment of the convent where adepts are cut off the outside world and family life to enable them to focus on the realities of convent life and on their training.

**Behaviourism**

Language learning in the convent takes place following the patterns of behavioral psychology. Adepts are involved in miming, memorization, and repetition of language chunks, role plays, and patterns of behaviors that are learnt and reinforced with the use of stimuli used by the trainer. These stimuli are in the form of extra information offered by the trainer on the virtues of certain herbs to encourage and promote effective learning of the new language.

**Commitment**

In the convent, adepts should show commitment to the learning tasks and to the overall training. Encouragement to learning is carried out through the teaching of songs, proverbs, and traditional norms. Feedback, gift offering, and appellations are key to adepts’ engagement and commitment. Those who perform better are praised and are granted some life secret which reinforces their positive behaviour.

**Socialization**

As the adepts are cut off the outside world and family life, they are expected to establish relationships with in-group members and adepts from other traditional convents with whom they share knowledge of the new language being learnt as well as knowledge of cultural conventions. This socialization that takes place within the confines of the convent walls enables these adepts to enrich their knowledge of the vocabulary of the new language.

**Hypnotism**

This last theme relates to the conditions in which the learning of the new language takes place in the convents. Adepts are made to become unconscious, that is, they are hypnotized during the learning process. As a result, they cannot give any account of the learning process once they come back to the state of consciousness.

**DISCUSSION**

In Beninese traditional convents, there is a variety of approaches used to teach unknown languages. The ability to practice over and over again is at the heart of learning unknown language in traditional convents. Adepts are permanently exposed to the language input provided by the trainer who involves them in memorization rituals and a constant revision of language forms learnt. Beyond repetition and practice there is persistence which builds a sort of confidence in the learner to master and speak the language faster.

Language specialists in Benin traditional convents provide meaningful input through context and provide adepts with opportunities to use the language in real life situations by establishing relationships with in-group members and adepts from other traditional convents with whom they share knowledge of the new language through socialization. In the field of English as a foreign language, it has been recognized that for foreign language acquisition to occur learners must use English to construct meaning and interact with others in authentic contexts (Brown, 2001). The importance of learner interaction in acquiring the language has made the traditional teacher to mix adepts of many convents to enable them to enrich their knowledge of the vocabulary of the new language. This principle used in the convent is at the core of a student-centered
environment wherein students work in teams to construct knowledge and accomplish tasks through collaborative interaction. Cooperative learning provides a supportive, motivating context for speech to emerge. As a popular African rhyme contends: *We lean on people, life travesties are big. So we lean on people...* (Apedo, 2008).

Motivating adepts in learning the new language begins with the teaching of songs, appellations, proverbs, aphorisms, and traditional norms. These traditional tools facilitate adept learners’ quick acquisition of the new language as well as help traditional language specialists to achieve their language teaching objectives. Those authentic materials and cultural content used in the traditional convents are beneficial to the language learning process. Appellations or praise names help to laud the valorous deeds of learners and traditional songs help adept learners to create a non-tense atmosphere. Adepts are exposed to real language and they are learning the real language through proverbs and superstitions. Contextualizing language is the meaningful use of language for real communicative purposes. For effective and efficient language learning, teachers need to focus on the contextual aspects of language; the focus on function and the use of language in given situations. In traditional convents adepts are trained to become better in the new language. The language specialist focuses on appropriateness of language use, both situational, and cultural. He uses comprehensible input in the form of materials from authentic sources and teaches language that adepts are likely to encounter and use in real life.

Some of the language teaching approaches used in Beninese traditional convents seem hard to decode because there are some incantations accompanying this approach. An incantation has an open formula in the form of the appellations of the spirit that is being invoked (Apedo, 2008). This is then followed by a riddle. The riddle correlates to the effects that you want the ‘gbesa’ to achieve. Below is an incantation.

**Tomegidigi**

An elderly man goes to
Separate a fight but falls
*He stays but falls*
The struggle will end
*When he stands*
The struggle is fiercer (Apedo, 2008)

This incantation is used to revenge against an enemy who has incapacitated you through black magic. The riddle thus entails a coded message in the form of a short story or a proverb. These are symbolic messages. The decoding is done by the initiated people. In the traditional theory of hypnotism adepts are made to become unconscious during the learning process. This contradicts Krashen (2014) who advocates that learners’ psycho physiological state in language teaching and learning is of paramount importance. Still, hypnotism works very well in traditional convents. Could we say that the theory of hypnotism used in traditional convents lacks a human face or is not genuine? Surely, traditional convents language practices have some genuine pedagogy that we need to discover more. But we cannot shy away from the fact that traditional convents followers indeed have their way or the other towards the realization of heaven on earth. This approach of hypnotism will spur more research in comprehending traditional convents language teaching practices to attain its appropriation in EFL Classes (Quenum, 1998). Obedience to rules and respect of the sacred values are unquestionably recognized by adepts in traditional convents. Discipline is paramount important in learning a new language in traditional convents. Even some punishment is used to create order and facilitate learning in traditional convents. The learning is based on strict respect so that the aims of the lesson be attained. Discipline in the convent includes creating and keeping rules and requires establishing limits that must not be transgressed. This perception of discipline influences a quick assimilation of the unknown language.

**Implications of the Study**

This research brings about some difficult-to-access theories used in traditional convents. It is an invaluable resource for policy makers in Education and for students and researchers specializing in language teaching and learning. The focus therefore is not to throw away traditional values but to produce authentic, sensitive, humane and ideal cultural practices conducive to accommodating all and sundry without tension and regret. We have to systematically assimilate these practices to the extent that it becomes compatible with and suitable to our educational system (Alptekin et al., 1984). Perhaps these practices have served well in the society at certain times but society is dynamic, hence these practices do not make the same impact. Thus they should be improved upon.

It is a pity that the formal system of education gives little or no priority to the appreciation of cultural beliefs. Finding an ideal method of African pedagogy is a necessity then to meet the yearnings of many Africans. The starting point of this is seen as the introduction of indigenous culture in education’ (Apedo citing Anyidoho, 2008). Although Africa may not be able to do without foreign languages the attitude however, should be a critical examination of these. The independence of Africa is not on the dependence of the heritage gained from colonialism. But takes into account our traditional values and inserts African values in foreign languages (Okara,1964). Garvey (1925) even emphasizes on the necessity to look at the world through our own spectacles.
A proper African pedagogy to revitalize our esteemed cultural pride is needed. This research work is not a call for anarchonism but for the contemporary African to synthesize traditional values and modern upright values. This work is to spur more research in revamping our cultural heritage. We need today an orientation which places the interest and needs of African people at the center of education. Every human person is shaped by his culture, and he also contributes to the shaping and transmission of this culture. We do not passively participate in our culture; we actively participate in re-shaping it. In every respect the relation between culture and human being is analogous to that between fish and water. It is then incumbent on every person to work hard to sustain his or her culture (Apedo, 2008).

A cross-cultural perspective is therefore a better approach to culture. This cross-cultural approach should not be equated with indiscriminate and voracious copying of "other cultures". It is vital to maintain one’s cultural identity for that is where one gets true meaning as a human person. The adoption of an Afrocentric conceptual system is a necessity in our education. Although several models of social work that can better assist African people have emerged, the cultural value of this population generally have not been used as a theoretical base to develop new practice models. Our collective duty is to see to the introduction of African cultural values in education to “redeem” our cultural practices and to review the thinking of modern students with regard to their denigrating perspective that forms their picture of anything that is termed “traditional”. Therefore, we need the appropriation of African heritage in our education.

Political will is quite commendable in the African struggle for authenticity. Politicians must know that our rich cultures are a product of hard work. We should not ignore or reorient our collective duty to salvage the African continent. Shadrack (2006) reports the golden age thinker, Plato, “It is better to be unborn than untaught, for ignorance is the root of misfortune." African educational curricula must confront the child with social activities, ethical aspirations and appreciation of the culture of the past. This will be realized we recognize that culture is only a weapon that man uses to carry out certain exploits that will make or mar him. Thus, our salvation consists in adopting a critical approach, which will constitute a springboard from which the welfare of the African is realized. (Shadrack (2006) citing Pope John XXIII). Educational Theories and Practices from traditional convents probe the elements of culturally appropriate for people in Benin. Man is essentially the product of his culture. Culture has a lot to say about a people. It is high time Africans began to trace the root of their Africaness. African identity should not be sacrificed at the altar of a total compromise.

CONCLUSION

This study has tried to gain insights into the pedagogy used in Beninese Hounkpamin to teach unknown languages to adepts to support the teaching of oral skills in EFL classes. The research came up with the cultural misunderstanding of language approach used in Beninese traditional convents and the secret nature of teaching languages in such convents. Although there are some difficult-to-access theories in traditional convents, (Dasen et al., 2008) school based on the good cultural practices of the education and practices typical of Hounkpamin should be promoted. Pedagogy used in traditional convents has many beneficial aspects. It provides a sense of identity and profound understanding. With global opportunities on the rise, having a multilingual workforce has become a critical market success factor. To meet that challenge, there is a need for the country to provide an effective language training plan based on traditional marks. There is a need to develop clear linkages between all levels of education and to overhaul curricula in order to make education relevant and empowering. As Morrison (1984) opines, “Education should help create a whole human being”. And Educationists and politicians should always bear in mind the message that Nwoko(2005) is conveying through a poem entitled “Call Me an African” Call me whatever you want/ but always remember I am an African. If I speak the language of Europeans/ African I was born and I shall ever be.

REFERENCES


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